

2022 HawaiiKidsCAN Action Fund Candidate Survey

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1. What does Hawaii do well with regards to K-12 public education?
The Hawaii Dept. of Education is distinct and unique among public education systems across the United States in that it's a true statewide school system, which offers the State an advantage of setting and providing uniform standards of achievement, opportunities and financial support.

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2. What should Hawaii do better with regards to K-12 public education?

Act 51 SLH 2015 represented an earnest effort to allocate more funding to schools with the neediest pupils, and an attempt to resolve issues of socio-economic inequity in our public school system. While I support the DOE as a statewide system, I would further suggest that we encode teacher and principal decision-making authority into the systemic DNA of our state public schools so that teachers can instruct and principals can administer with the primary focus on their students, rather than on compliance with the DOE's various bureaucratic rules.

3. How should Hawaii prioritize our spending on K-12 public education (for example: teacher salaries, programs to address learning loss, technology, community partnerships and projects, computer science education, charter schools, distance learning options, etc.)?

Hawaii public schools have long tended to be underfunded across the board. By all rights, public education should be a banquet for its primary beneficiaries, who are our children and grandchildren. Teachers need to be much better paid if we hope to retain their services for the balance of their careers, otherwise they'll go elsewhere. But honestly, those salary increases should not have to come at the expense of current DOE programs and services. The DOE is where it is today because we lack the drive and initiative to undertake comprehensive system-wide reform, which first and foremost includes the provision of adequate funding for our school and students. The status quo regularly prevails because as inadequate as the system is, the people in charge are still comfortable with it and change tends to unnerve them. To re-imagine a mid-20th century education system as a 21st century model that prepares its students to cope with and address current needs, we're going to have to get out of our comfort zones. What concerns me the most about these conversations about Hawaii public schools is that so much of it is the same discussion that was occurring when I was in high school. So, what I propose is that we stop talking ad nauseum about it, and instead actually commit ourselves to making public education the top priority in this state. Then let's determine the steps necessary to make it a reality and enact a plan to achieve it, including its funding. Funding public education is our long-term investment in the State of Hawaii's future. It's our legacy to future generations. When we shortchange public education like we've been doing, we're basically mortgaging that future in order to pay for the presently existing (and declining) status quo, in which a relative few are made comfortable at the overall expense of the many. That's an extraordinarily foolish bargain which nobody should ever have to accept. And right now, our kids certainly aren't accepting it. In 1975, between 75-80% of all public high school graduates in the State of Hawaii either remained in the islands or returned to live after they completed college on the mainland. That percentage is currently down to 53%. Our students are showing us with their feet their confidence in Hawaii as a place to call home.

4. Hawaii should require all students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid before graduating from high school, or complete a waiver.

No

4.a Comment

Per federal statute, the submission of the FAFSA is entirely voluntary on an applicant's part. While I will certainly support a public initiative to encourage Hawaii high school students to complete and submit the FAFSA, which would include explaining to those students and their parents / guardians why it's in their best interest to do so, I am not willing to make it a requirement for high school graduation.

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5. The Hawaii State Constitution provides for the “establishment, support and control of a statewide system of public schools,” but does not guarantee quality education. Should the State Constitution be amended to provide quality education as a fundamental right? Should Hawaii students have a constitutional right to a quality education? Please explain your answer.

Any attempt to amend our State Constitution should never be undertaken so cavalierly. Unlike statutes or ordinances, constitutional amendments require public approval at the ballot box and once accomplished, they are not easily undone. While I wouldn't oppose such an amendment per se, its purpose needs to be much more clearly delineated than it is at present. Moreover, were such an amendment to be placed on the ballot and subsequently ratified by voters without a corresponding definition of “quality education,” the obligation to provide such a definition would default to the State Legislature with, of course, obligatory input from the DOE. Voila! We'll have come full circle, right back to where we started. Therefore, unless and until we can properly define the aforementioned term of “quality education” to most everyone's satisfaction, I cannot support a constitutional amendment decreeing such as a fundamental right.

6. What will you do to improve the relationship between the Hawaii State Board of Education and legislature?

Other than advocate for high quality nominees to the Board of Education who possess actual real-world experience as educators, or offer to facilitate public discussions with board members and state legislators on the present state of public education in Hawaii as a means to address problems and arrive at solutions, there is very little that a lieutenant governor can do regarding the relationship between the Board and the Legislature. Members of both institutions need to figure out that relationship out for themselves. I can and will support those efforts.

7. What leadership actions will you take for the Hawaii Department of Education, University of Hawaii system, and employers to work more effectively together?

Optimally, the primary purpose of primary, secondary and higher public education is to prepare students to realize their own full potentials, rather than that of any prospective employers. From my perspective, most local businesses and entrepreneurs tend to support public education because they see the inherent value of a well-educated workforce in their communities, and not because they expect some sort of quid pro quo. To the extent that UH can further support DOE's efforts, I would consider increasing funding to its College of Education so that it can produce more qualified teachers for our schools.

8. College going remains flat, with roughly 50% of recent Hawaii public high school graduates going on to college (2 or 4 year). How do you propose to raise these levels so Hawaii is more competitive with states like California, which has a nearly 65% rate?

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First of all, we can start by increasing the overall capacity of the University of Hawaii system so that all who desire higher education can actually access it. The UH-Manoa College of Continuing Education's present offering of evening classes for those who work during the day is anemic at best. A public institution of higher learning like UH needs to meet the needs of its prospective student body. Another means of expanding capacity and accessibility, without necessarily building additional campuses and facilities, is to develop and offer a robust online education program and / or an online hybrid model, such as what's currently offered at Arizona State University and Purdue University. This can also be a lucrative source of revenue to UH, by attracting those students who otherwise can't necessarily relocate to Hawaii, or who live in Hawaii but can't necessarily attend classes on-campus. And most importantly, we need to commit to making higher education affordable for everyone who seeks it. In 1980, the undergraduate tuition per semester at UH-Manoa was \$250. Today, it's \$5,650, and that's not including \$441 in additional student fees. That's well above and beyond the rate of inflation. If that \$250 tuition in 1980 was actually pegged to the rate of inflation, then it would only be \$810 today. So, what accounts for that nearly 700% increase? Well, in part, the State Legislature slashed funding to UH by 26% during the 2008-09 economic downturn, and that former level of funding was never restored when times later improved. And honestly, that wasn't the first time this happened. In 1975, 70% of the cost of an undergraduate student's education at a public university was underwritten by state taxpayers because once upon a time, citizens saw a well-educated workforce as an investment in their own future. Not anymore, apparently. Today, that percentage of public funding has fallen to about 25%. So basically, repeated cuts in public funding have compelled UH to balance its books on the backs of its student body by raising tuition. Not surprisingly, undergraduates at UH can incur about \$40,000 in student loan debt over four years. We've effectively put them behind the proverbial eight-ball before they've even entered the workforce. So, we need to restore equitable funding to UH, and stop mortgaging our society's future to such shortsighted effect. At the high school level, the DOE can take proactive steps to deepen the relationship between upperclassmen and guidance counselors. At some schools, that may mean providing more counselors who, according to research, are actually a key influencer in directing prospective undergraduates to a particular college. And more significantly, we need to take proactive steps to increase high school graduation rates. At 3.9%, Hawaii's high school dropout rate is already among the lowest in the country. But in some economically challenged communities, it can reach double digits.

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