

Hawai'i's Public Schools Are Battled But Working to Recover

STEADY GAINS BY STUDENTS HAVE ERODED
AFTER TWO YEARS OF UPHEAVAL.
CAN TEACHERS, PRINCIPALS AND ADVOCATES
ARMED WITH \$690 MILLION IN FEDERAL
PANDEMIC FUNDING TURN THINGS AROUND?

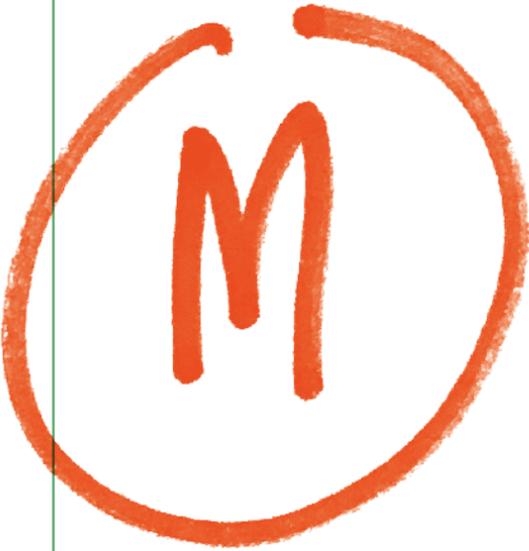
by **CYNTHIA WESSENDORF**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHAVONNIE RAMOS AND AARON YOSHINO

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Kaimuki High
struggles compared to
neighboring schools
like Kalani High.



eryl Matsumura often starts her workday in the dark, at 6 a.m., and doesn't head home until the hot Waipahu sun retreats after 5. In the long hours in between, the interim principal of Waipahu High School is responsible for keeping 2,800 teenagers safe and on task.

The past two years have been a wild ride. Most teachers and students are relieved to be back in person this year, she says, but fallout from the mass experiment with online learning and a shaky reentry to the classroom still lingers.

“Coming back on campus in fall felt like we had two freshman classes. Half the campus was completely new,” says Matsumura. Normal start-of-school jitters were worse than usual: Social skills had frayed after 16 months mostly spent at home.

“The isolation impacted everyone,” says Maverick Yasuda, a junior who is on track to earn an associate degree through the school’s Early College program, which was launched more than a decade ago. “You lose motivation, you overthink things.”

While Yasuda is a serious student and does well even if school is on a screen, many of his peers have floundered. “There are a lot of struggling students – it’s not a small group anymore,” says Matsumura. “Online is not the greatest way to teach.”

Classrooms have remained open since August, though a late summer Covid surge threw reopening plans into disarray. Once it subsided, students slowly settled into routines and “start-

ed making gains reconditioning themselves to the grind,” says English and drama teacher Thelma Madriaga. That progress was disrupted when infections peaked again after Christmas break

Through January, the phones kept ringing in the administrative office, with families reporting 40 to 60 positive cases a day. Matsumura and her team tracked down close contacts at school and kept unvaccinated students at home for five days. “We joked that we were the Department of Health,” she recalls.

“We had 30 to 40 teachers out at one point, and half the students. It was a revolving door,” with substitutes hard to find. She says many absences were caused by Hawai’i Department of Education rules that suddenly required teachers, staff and students to have booster shots to stay on campus after an exposure. The booster rule was removed shortly afterward, and the quarantining of close contacts ended in March.

Matsumura says two strategies helped the school cope: One was re-issuing 1,700 Chromebooks in fall 2021 to students who didn’t have their own laptops, part of the DOE’s \$31 million technology purchase made in 2020 with fed-

eral CARES Act funds. Like the previous year spent online, teachers continue to post assignments on Google Classroom so students can do them from home.

The other strategy was to impose seating charts in classrooms, an old-style arrangement that helps with contact tracing but limits the more interactive approach that many teachers and students prefer.

Waipahu High can be deceptive. From the outside, the campus looks like a typical Hawai’i school: utilitarian, with two-story blocks of classrooms separated by unshaded stretches of parched grass. It’s one of the state’s 193 Title I schools, out of 257 public and 37 charter schools. The federal designation is used when at least 47.2% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches; at Waipahu, that comprises slightly more than half of the student body.

But the school is famously plucky and innovative. Under longtime principal Keith Hayashi, who in August became interim superintendent of the state DOE, Waipahu partnered with UH West O’ahu and Leeward Community College to offer free college courses to students.

The school also developed a suite



of National Career Academy Coalition “model academies” in health and sciences, natural resources, arts and communication and other areas, all soon to be housed in a modern facility now being built. The academies help make a large school seem smaller and funnel kids into appealing electives and potential career choices.

“We have students on all ends of the spectrum, but our teachers and counselors try to build everyone up and support all students,” says Matsumura.

That striving extends in unexpected directions. In the arts program, for example, Madriaga’s drama students created online performances from scratch in the spring and fall 2021 se-

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Meryl Matsumura is interim principal of Waipahu High School

mesters – funny, offbeat original works that dealt with the intense experience of being a teenager in an unsettled world.

Mentors Mike Poblete and Katherine Rothman, current and former UH graduate students who run Corpus Productions, say more traditional theater programs turned down their offers to guide the students’ creative processes, but Waipahu jumped at the chance to do something experimental.

Poblete says it worked so well because “we went into an environment that was very positive. Clearly there’s a lot of trust, there’s admiration for the teacher. We couldn’t have asked for a better group of students who were enthusiastic and supportive of one another.”

It’s lunchtime in late February when I visit and Madriaga has opened her air-conditioned classroom to students, who sit quietly chatting. “A lot of us teachers, we want to control everything with the curriculum, but if you let the students go, with big bumpers, leadership just emerges organically,” she says.

The campus is packed and lively, and everyone is still masked. Reported cases nowadays are in the ones and twos, if there are any at all. And in a mark of normalcy, the first senior lū’au in two years had just taken place.

But after so many interruptions through his sophomore and junior years, Yasuda was taking a prudent approach: “Hope for the best but expect the worst.”

The following week, all the juniors were scheduled to take the national ACT test, which made him a bit anxious. So were Matsumura and Madriaga, who steeled themselves for potentially disappointing news.

Despite free online summer school in 2021, extra summer counseling, months of in-school learning and teachers’ individual efforts to get kids up to speed, the juniors were behind compared to March 2020, says Madriaga, having lost much of their formative sophomore year.

“I don’t think it’s realistic to do catch-up. That’s like saying, ‘I’m taking away a year of your life and you have to jump this high,’ ” she says, raising her hand. “I assist them to grow as far as

they can, with depth and critical thinking, but requiring every student to make up an entire year would set them up for failure. Instead, I'm looking for active progression."

FALLING TEST SCORES AND FEWER COLLEGE-GOERS

Standardized tests are imperfect measures, and they can be the bane of teachers and administrators, who are in the spotlight when scores are weak. But they can also point to stubborn problems and worrisome trends.

It's no surprise, but across the U.S. test scores have slipped dramatically during the pandemic, particularly in math and science. For context, the Brookings Institution reported in March that national math scores in grades 3-8 had fallen more by fall 2021, compared to 2019, than they did among evacuees who fled New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

In Hawai'i, the newest assessments happen in spring 2022, with results reported months later. But for the previous 2020-21 year spent mostly online, overall scores had dropped significantly, as measured by the state's Strive HI Performance System:

- Language arts proficiency fell 4 percentage points to 50%.
- Math proficiency fell 11 points to 32%.
- Science proficiency fell 9 points to 35%.

A few bright spots emerged, including rising literacy rates among third and eighth graders. But now some states are reporting that young children who missed kindergarten are severely behind in early reading skills, which could have long-term effects on literacy rates.

On-time graduation rates held steady at 86% in 2021, but that positive news also comes with caveats. For the class of 2019, 55% went on to two- and four-year colleges. The rate dropped to 50% among 2020 graduates and was at 51% in 2021, according to data collected by Hawai'i P-20, a partnership led by the Executive Office on Early Learning, the state



→
Waipahu
High junior
Maverick
Yasuda

GOING TO COLLEGE College-going rates for public school graduates fell during the pandemic.



Source: Hawai'i P-20, College & Career Readiness Indicators Report (CCR) for Class of 2021, March 2022.

pandemic, it's affecting folks in our society differently. For Native Hawaiians, the college-going rate dropped pretty precipitously, more than 5 percentage points."

Among the 11,333 public school graduates in 2021, only 5,733 went on to college – which includes everything from two-year training to be a welder to a four-year degree in biology. That leaves 5,600 young people heading straight into the workforce and missing out on higher education's lifetime income boost.

RECOVERY EFFORTS UNDERWAY

Hayashi, the DOE interim superintendent, stepped into his role on Aug. 1, 2021, just two days before students returned to classrooms. At the time, according to Schatz, "I think it's fair to say that the department did not have a fully implemented statewide initiative to catch kids up."

Hayashi has faced a steep learning curve, but he's upbeat about students being back in classrooms this year and programs being rolled out across the school system. But he says a full recovery will take time.

"If the expectation is that students will come back and it's only going to take a year for them to catch up, I think that's a fallacy," says Hayashi. "Our teachers and everyone are committed to help accelerating that learning for our students as much as possible, but it is going to be a process."

Step one of that process has been keeping the vast majority of campuses open through two surges in the 2021-22 school year. He says the overwhelming majority of teachers and students he met during his fall listening tours said they wanted to be back in school. Most of the two dozen people I spoke with agreed.

"It's been a night and day experience for me as a teacher," says Liam Arnade-Colwill, a special education teacher at Wahiawā Middle School who is finishing his second year with Teach For America. "Last year, it was really

kind of heartbreaking because I was teaching to a screen and oftentimes students wouldn't turn on their cameras. No one would respond in the chat or on the microphone, and I wasn't sure if I was reaching anybody.

"Now I'm able to form those relationships, and what I've heard from students overwhelmingly is that they're glad to be back in school. ... I think they really felt not only the loss of learning but also the loss of social connections."

The verdict, then, was to open and to stay open "because we knew that if we were to close and transition again to distance learning, that our students would be the ones to suffer," explains Hayashi.

Many parents, however, were critical of the approach. During the omicron surge in late January, a polling firm hired by the Honolulu Star-Advertiser found that only 40% of public school parents agreed with staying open, and 68% gave "fair" or "poor" ratings to the DOE's efforts to keep kids safe.

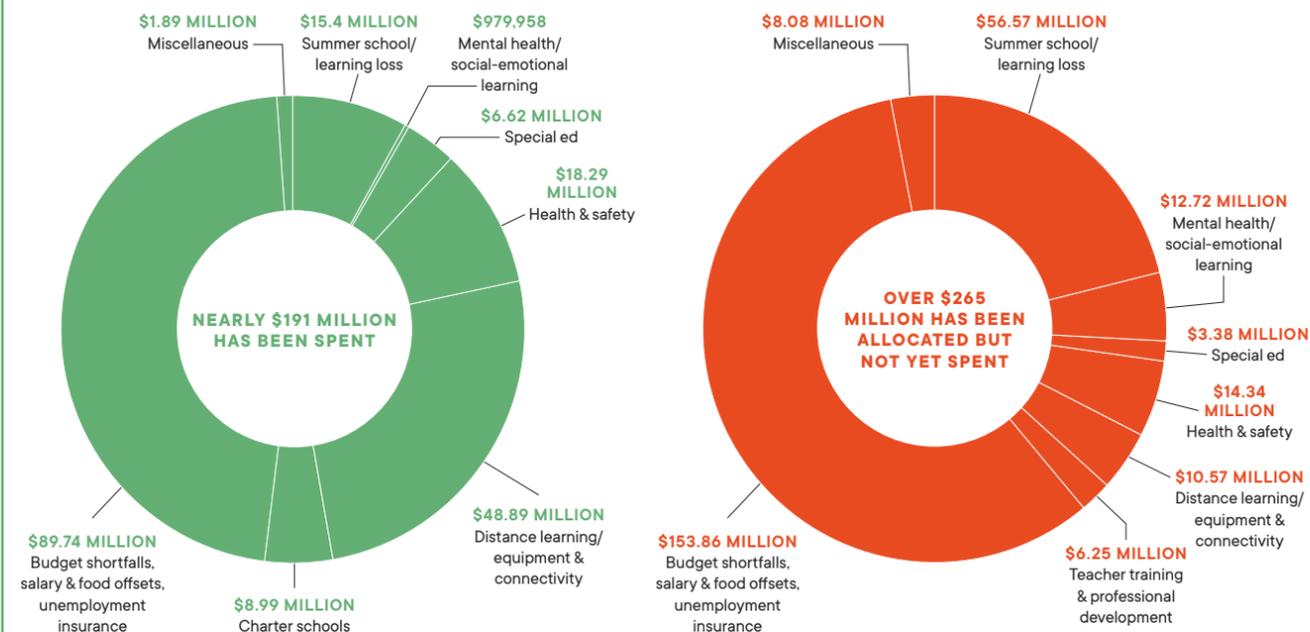
FEDERAL FUNDING POURS IN

Step two in the recovery efforts has been figuring out what to do with the bounty of federal money flowing into U.S. school districts, the vast majority for elementary and secondary school emergency relief, or ESSER.

Data from the DOE's fiscal office shows that the state was allocated \$690.6 million in total funding through the federal CARES Act, the CRRSA Act and the American Rescue Plan Act. The last batch of ESSER funds received in August was massive – more than \$412 million – and the money must be spent or committed by Sept. 30, 2024.

Federal funds have been directed toward summer school, personal protective equipment, technology, mental health support, distance learning and free meals. For the newest ESSER III funds, nearly half has been budgeted to address "learning loss," or "accelerated learning," though only a small fraction has been allocated or spent.

HOW FEDERAL PANDEMIC FUNDS ARE BEING USED



ADDING IT ALL UP:

- Total amount spent as of March 1: \$190.81 million.
- Total amount allocated but not spent as of March 1: \$265.79 million.
- Total encumbrance amount: \$23.93 million.
- Total amount awarded: \$690.61 million.
- Final installment of ESSER III funds must be spent by Sept. 30, 2024.

Source: DOE Office of Fiscal Services budget summary.

And while federal aid came with few restrictions beyond pandemic recovery, a big chunk of ESSER funds – roughly \$120.9 million, according to DOE spokesperson Derek Inoshita – is being used to fill budget holes that resulted from last year’s cuts by the state Legislature.

While the department has identified broad areas to receive funding, many details are still being worked out, and the interim superintendent is asking school and complex area leaders to decide what they need most.

“It doesn’t make sense to say at a state office level: ‘Everyone will do the same thing,’” says Hayashi. “We do have metrics that we’re looking at statewide in terms of chronic absenteeism, academics, graduation rate and so forth across all of our K-12 schools, but it’s really important for our area superintendents to customize the supports for each school based on their needs.”

Specific academic programs funded so far, says Hayashi, include tutors in the A+ afterschool program at no added cost for families, extra in-school instruction for small groups of struggling students and salary increases for part-time teachers.

Kristen Brummel, a former elementary school teacher and now an educational specialist with the DOE’s Hawai’i State Teacher Fellowship Program, says the summer school program rolled out last year helped her daughter catch up on reading skills be-

“IF THE EXPECTATION IS THAT STUDENTS WILL COME BACK AND IT’S ONLY GOING TO TAKE A YEAR FOR THEM TO CATCH UP, I THINK THAT’S A FALLACY.”

KEITH HAYASHI, Interim superintendent of the DOE

fore entering third grade.

“It was the same teacher that she had in the second-grade year, so she knew my daughter’s struggles and what worked well as far as motivating her,” says Brummel. A small group of students met for four weeks of intensive instruction. “I strongly believe in those extended kinds of programs with a qualified person who can really understand the needs of the students.”

Schatz says that with so much ESSER money heading into the academic realm, he’s optimistic, but he worries it’s not enough to close achievement gaps. A DOE study of the first quarter of the current school year found that among students who were economically disadvantaged, had disabilities or were learning English, 79% were behind two or more grade levels in English language arts, as opposed to 21% of the general population. Those percentages were nearly identical in math.

“What do parents of high socioeconomic status do when their kids are behind? They tutor them, or they pay somebody to tutor them,” says Schatz. “Systemically, we need to embrace that for our schools. And it cannot be laid at the classroom door of teachers.”

Reading and math levels in a single classroom can vary by five grades, he says, and “it’s not realistic to expect differentiation to be the solution. ... Intervention needs to be something other than expecting the teacher to be magical.”

BUT PRIORITIES CAN STILL BE HAZY

● Schatz’s pitch for intensive, systematic tutoring points to a wider criticism about the DOE’s decentralized approach, which some say is inadequate for dealing with deep-seated problems, now exacerbated by the pandemic.

Cheri Nakamura, director of HE’E (Hui for Excellence in Education), says many U.S. school districts narrow their funding focus to areas like health/safety and academics. Some are even more laser-focused, such as in Houston, which she says is targeting literacy.

“That might have been a more strategic way of utilizing the federal funds to address learning loss, and ultimately it would be easier for everybody because they would be able to focus,” says Nakamura.

HE’E was focused in the aftermath of “furlough Fridays,” when public schools closed for 17 Fridays in the 2009-10 school year to help balance the state budget. The move infuriated many parents and made international news. My mother-in-law in Germany, for example, learned about it on her local news and called to say that the last time their schools closed was when she was a child and Allied bombs were falling from the sky.

Nakamura’s organization has served as a DOE watchdog ever since, as well as a gathering place for 48 education-focused Hawai’i nonprofits – themselves part of a larger network that operates like a level three triage unit trying to stabilize the system.

Coalition member Hawai’i P-20, for instance, has initiated programs such as Summer Start, which helps incoming kindergartners get ready for formal schooling. The program now runs in about 85 public schools, says Schatz.

HawaiiKidsCAN launched a pilot program on Lāna’i that gave families money via ClassWallet to buy supplies or tutoring, and has sponsored a bill (still alive in March) to expand the program statewide. Executive Director David Sun-Miyashiro says “there’s definitely

something in the air now to get funds into the hands of families because there are just so many needs.”

One big idea that Nakamura would like to see implemented is benchmarking. She points to schools such as Pauoa Elementary on O’ahu, where 52% of students qualify for subsidized meals. Despite the economic challenges, the school posted fairly strong results for 2020-21: 68% of students were proficient in language arts and 66% in math. For comparison, at Noelani Elementary, where just 17% of the student body qualify for subsidized meals, 80% were proficient in language arts and 77% in math.

“What are the common elements of getting to excellence that can be applied to other schools?” she asks. “That’s really a state office function to be able to identify these exemplary schools to understand those elements – Is it consistency? Is it communication? Is it personalization? – so that they can help support schools that are having trouble with it.”

Marissa Baptista, the VP of leadership for the 6,000-member Hawai’i State PTSA, sees the benefit of having a single statewide district, which she says makes it easier to voice concerns about such issues as hot classrooms with no A/C. But she’d like to see better communication from the DOE to parents, and guidelines on which interventions work best.

“There’s no standard set of tools used across the state,” says Baptista. “The state says, ‘Here’s some money, here are some tools that you can choose from. We won’t really tell you whether they’re effective or not.’ They leave it up to the complex area and sometimes the individual schools to identify what their reading program should be, what their approach to remediation will be. ... Shouldn’t we have lessons learned across the communities?”

Teachers are helping to fill the void and many have been regularly gathering online to share their practices with one another and with administrators.



Brummel, from the Teacher Fellowship Program, says that in the past, “people who were making decisions about education were not actually in the classroom every day. By creating spaces for teachers who are feeling the struggle and also feeling the success of what works, and having them inform decision-makers ... that is so important.”

POCKETS OF EXCELLENCE EVERYWHERE

● **There’s a funny phenomenon in Hawai’i.** If you ask people about the public schools, they’ll often say they’re terrible. But if you ask a parent about their child’s specific school, the answer is far more likely to be positive.

That disconnect comes, in part, because great schools and dedicated teachers can be found in every neighborhood, on every island.

Baptista moved to Hawai’i in 2019 from the high-achieving school districts of Loudoun County, Virginia, outside Washington, D.C. With Native Hawaiian ancestry and family in the Islands, she says she and her husband have always wanted to settle here.

Currently, her children attend different schools: Moanalua High School for the oldest; Hawaii Technology Academy, a hybrid remote/in-person public charter school, for the middle-schooler; and a fully online option offered by Nimitz Elementary for the youngest, who wasn’t old enough to get a Covid vaccine when the school year began. Both of the younger children plan to switch to in-person classrooms next school year.

Baptista has been pleasantly surprised with the experience and finds the rigor just right for her kids and the teachers extremely hardworking and invested.

“I came from a community where everybody knew their role and stayed in their lanes. You’re the teacher, you teach. Probably by 4 o’clock you’re off the clock and I’ll see you again at 8 o’clock tomorrow,” she explains. “But here, they’re not only the teacher, but they’re the counsel-

or, they’re trying to find activities for the kids to be involved in after school, they become like another arm of the family.”

Whitney Aragaki is one of those exceptional educators. She teaches science at Waiākea High School on Hawai’i Island and online Advanced Placement classes through the DOE’s Virtual Learning Network, and was named the 2022 Hawai’i State Teacher of the Year and one of four national finalists.

She says last year’s struggles opened a space to rethink education and to help students “truly love what they’re learning.” For example, when her students wanted to talk about Covid and “why it is ruining our lives,” she launched into an ever-widening series of conversations and lessons.

“We’re not just going to learn about viruses in the immune system. What about other pandemics we’ve experienced as a human population? Why do some people have a higher propensity to get Covid based on socioeconomic status, health care access and educational opportunities? And what is the historical experience in Hawai’i with pandemics?” Aragaki says.

“We looked at data, we brought in the math, the statistics and a lot of social studies. ... It’s not just science anymore, but it’s about the idea of rigorous observation through many perspectives.”

She’s invested in the school system, both as a graduate of Waiākea High and as the parent of two children in public schools. Although she left for college at Swarthmore, “that experience, while it pushed me academically, also pushed me back home. It reminded me that this is where I need to be.”

Other teachers are doggedly helping students master basic skills after seeing how far they’d fallen behind. An English teacher at a Honolulu high school tells me that she’s never worked harder or longer hours.

“It took me the first quarter to realize how profound the learning loss really was,” she explains. “I have had to give much more feedback and direction to students, and I have had to start back at the beginning and reteach even the basics, like what a complete sentence is and isn’t.”

Many students report that they’re happy with their teachers and their education. Amika Matteson is finishing

TWO TUMULTUOUS YEARS IN A SPECIAL ED CLASSROOM

Liam Arnade-Colwill started his Teach For America assignment in fall 2020, working with special education students at Wahiawā Middle School.

Teach For America is a selective national program that puts college graduates through summer training, then sends them into partner schools. About 200 teachers were placed in local public and charter schools this year, mostly on O’ahu and Hawai’i Island, and many in hard-to-fill STEM and special education positions, according to Isaiah Peacott-Ricardos, TFA’s communications director.

Wahiawā Middle relies on TFA for its special education department, with about 10 of 14 positions filled by new TFA recruits or former TFA teachers who stayed past their two-year stints, says Arnade-Colwill.

Like many of the teachers, Arnade-Colwill is young, bright and eager to give back to kids who had far fewer advantages than he did. A graduate of Punahou and Yale, Arnade-Colwill traveled after college on a Fulbright award to teach in Taiwan. In spring 2020, as Covid ex-

ploded, he returned to Hawai’i and began teaching English language arts at Wahiawā in August.

The entire school started the year online, then shifted in the spring 2021 to a hybrid model that brought struggling students to classrooms in shifts, while teachers tried to simultaneously teach students online. Classes have been in person since August 2021. When we spoke, Arnade-Colwill was in his final semester of his teaching commitment and weighing plans for the future.

The passages have been lightly edited for clarity and conciseness.

Students never logged on

● “I can’t tell you the number of times that students have said to me this year, ‘I’m so glad we’re back because when we were online, I didn’t do anything. I didn’t go to class. I didn’t log in. Or if I logged in, I wasn’t paying attention. It was too loud at home and I couldn’t hear anything.’ ... A lot of students are here again this year when they should have moved up to the high school because they simply didn’t log in last year.”

Reading skills have suffered

● “I could see right off the bat that a lot of my students were reading well below grade

level. From my own experience of being a student, I could conceptualize things like, how do I teach an argumentative essay? How do I formulate really interesting discussion questions about a reading? How do I get students excited about a story? But what I didn’t know was, how do you actually develop the skills of reading fluency in the first place? I had to navigate that on my own.”

Teachers feeling extreme fatigue

● “All the teachers and administrators, everyone who works in education, is aware that there’s been so many tremendous losses over the past two years. So I think we all feel a sense of urgency to do whatever we can to get our kids to where they need to be. That being said, I think there’s also extreme fatigue.”

Quarantine absences

● “One of the biggest challenges I’ve had is that since so few of my students are vaccinated, every time they had a close contact, they had to quarantine at home. ... There was a point in the first or second quarter of the school year where I actually had an entire class not show up because everyone was quarantined.”

More students act out

● “Having students back in person has been so wonderful for so many reasons, and it’s been good for their learning. ... But it’s the first time I’ve had to deal with difficult behaviors in the classroom. After a year of being isolated and suffering lots of trauma, these students are frustrated and angry sometimes, and that comes across in the classroom. So we’re not only being teachers, we’re also trying to be counselors and psychologists and therapists.”

Support staff can’t keep up

● “The staff here is really committed, but they’re frankly overwhelmed. We have so many students that are dealing with mental health challenges and crises. So many students that are truant. So many students who are missing school for various reasons, whether it’s Covid, family issues or they just simply don’t want to come to school. It’s too much for the small staff.”

Committed but inexperienced

● “So many of the special ed teachers here, our TFA, we’re all committed. We all care about our students. We love what we do. But when you think about

it, we’re all like 20-something-year-old graduates who weren’t given extensive training in how to do this.”

Teachers band together

● “I’ve seen teachers really come together to support each other – veteran teachers helping the younger teachers, younger teachers helping the veteran teachers, and TFA teachers working together. If the DOE couldn’t provide us with special ed training, well, we’ll teach each other how to do it. ... All of the special ed department heads at our school for the past two or three years have been TFA people.”

The pandemic made everything harder

● “We struggle with poverty here and high rates of inequality, and that’s what motivated me to come do this work. I knew it was going to be hard, probably the hardest thing I’d ever done. I knew that there was deep-seated inequality in Hawai’i. I knew that my students were going to be dealing with a lot of challenges in their lives. But nothing would’ve ever prepared me for doing this in the context of the pandemic.”

her senior year at Kalani High and has a transcript rife with AP classes in biology, English, world history and psychology. About 40 to 50 students have taken comparably challenging loads, she estimates.

“If you try, you can get a lot out of the school. I don’t know what a private school could do better,” she says.

The classes have been hard, she says, but she handles the pressure by not packing her calendar with sports and clubs and the frenzied pursuit of awards – a hallmark of private school culture. Instead, she’s focused on academics and is deeply involved with just one club, HOSA, which is for future health care

professionals. Her membership there led her to shadow a surgeon at Kapi’olani Medical Center.

Like Yasuda at Waipahu, Matteson is hoping for enough financial aid to go to an East Coast college; she says she’s prepared for the challenge. At Kalani, 91% of students are on track to graduate, and 95% attend regularly, according to DOE metrics published in late February. For the class of 2021, 74% of graduates enrolled in two- or four-year colleges.

But Kalani didn’t always have such a good reputation. In 2001, a New York Times story opened with a portrait of the school’s termite-eaten cabinets and rust-caked faucets. The decrepit facilities were part of a larger story about a system buckling under the weight of low test scores, a teachers strike and threats of a federal takeover for failure to meet special education mandates.

HELP CAN FEEL A LONG WAY OFF

● **Just a few miles away,** Kaimukī High resembles that picture from two decades ago, quite literally. Storage shelves have been chewed and stripped by bugs. Science labs are inoperable.

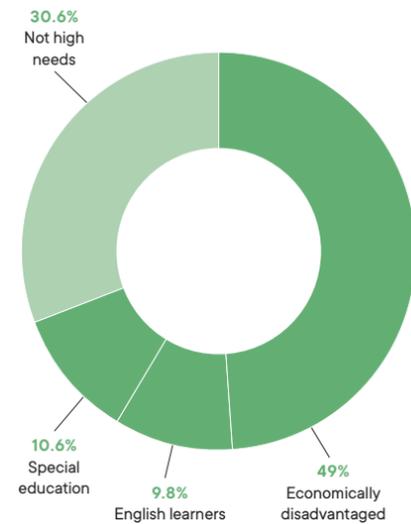
Many of its students aren’t faring well either. Just 70% are on track to graduate and 87% attend regularly. And while about 5% of Kalani’s students failed core subjects in the first semester, according to DOE metrics, Kaimukī’s rates were significantly worse: 11% failed English, 13% failed math, 19% failed



↑
Lunchtime at
Waipahu High
School

HIGH NEEDS

About 70% of students in Hawaii's public schools are classified as "high needs" in one of these categories:



Source: DOE ESSER Educational Plan 2022, page 6. Breakdowns represent 159,503 total students in public, non-charter schools for the 2021-22 school year.

science and 22% failed social studies.

A stray progress report found on the floor clarifies the picture even more. One student, whose name is redacted, missed up to five weeks of some classes in the first semester of the 2021-22 school year. That student's GPA was 0.75, which was better than 27 peers among a class of about 150.

These are harsh numbers, and painful to contemplate. What happened to the student? Were they depressed? Were they stuck at home caring for younger siblings? Or did they just lose interest, falling further and further behind before giving up altogether?

For every success story, there's a corresponding story of disengagement and struggle and failure. Many of these stories are linked directly to poverty, which impacts students' lives in profound ways.

No stable place to live, not enough to eat, difficulty seeing a doctor, spotty internet access, lack of quiet places to study, no one to help with homework – these common stress points make it harder for students living in poverty to succeed, according to a

2020 statement from the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Enrollment figures for this year show that 49% of public school students – 78,127 kids – are considered economically disadvantaged. That's 1,300 more kids than the year before; meanwhile, total enrollment fell by nearly 3,000 students as more families opted for private schools and homeschooling.

As more and more residents struggle to scrape by, Hawaii's public schools feel the effects.

"We often put the onus entirely on the Department of Education and the teachers, when really these are systemic, communitywide issues," says Deborah Zysman, executive director of the Hawaii Children's Action Network. The nonprofit has been advocating for more child care funding and child tax credits, among other initiatives.

"We're now at a point where 60% of families are below or really below a survival budget. These are families who work full time and often have degrees, sometimes graduate degrees. Some are our teachers

and our social workers," says Zysman.

Yet schools are responsible for trying to fix the chronic absenteeism, academic failures, and behavioral and mental health issues they face every day. And the problems, according to some people I spoke with, have snowballed.

"The prevalence of students dealing with mental health concerns has shot dramatically up. ... They've experienced trauma over the past two years, and that's coming out in the classroom," says special education teacher Arnade-Colwill. "Veteran teachers have told me that this is far and away one of the hardest years in terms of classroom management and behaviors that they've ever seen in their entire teaching career."

While Arnade-Colwill says that only a small fraction of students at Wahiawā Middle are experiencing serious problems, there have been "more fights on campus, more incidences of bullying, more incidences of students expressing severe anxiety or even suicidal ideation."

Sun-Miyashiro of HawaiiKidsCAN says the challenges won't just vanish. "I think kids who've been in school the last couple of years will need more supports than other generations. Just the number who have experienced the loss of a parent or family member, I think it's pretty staggering."

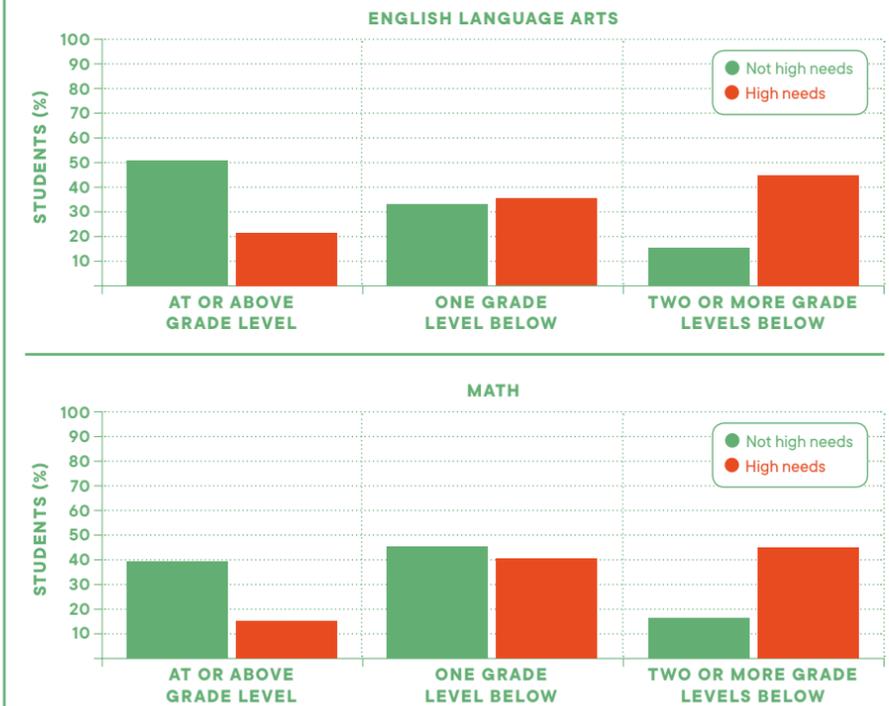
Other problems are more subtle but still concerning. At Kalani High, Matteson says students are less engaged than in pre-pandemic years. "They're still on mute and never say anything," she says. Last year's Zoom experience has "extended into the classroom this year."

Some teachers are burning out. A Honolulu high school teacher describes her new workplace conditions: 35 students in a small classroom, kids running around with their masks dangling, no guidance about how to help them catch up, and a general lack of respect.

"The past years have been some of the most difficult years of my life," she explains. "I have gone through major depression a couple of times and have to keep reminding myself of those students who are kind and thoughtful and want to learn. Those are the students who keep me going. I think that most of the teachers I know feel the same way. ... If we could all retire right now or afford to just quit, we would."

BEHIND OR NOT

More than three-quarters of high-needs students are at least a year behind



Source: DOE ESSER Educational Plan 2022, page 8. Universal screener data from the first quarter of the 2021-22 school year.

In the 2020-21 academic year, many did just that, with 25% more teachers retiring or resigning compared with the previous year.

Superintendent Hayashi says he empathizes with the challenges teachers face. "Until people walk in the shoes of individual educators who are at schools dealing with the issues every day, it's really difficult to truly understand what's happening."

EDUCATION DETERMINES THE FUTURE

Many people laboring on the front lines are exhausted. Another Honolulu teacher told me how discouraging it's been to see so many good people and so much effort leading to the same lackluster results. "Sometimes it feels like nothing ever changes and you lose hope that it ever will."

But others have expressed optimism, as legislators, nonprofits, the private sector, and school administrators and educators try to pick up the pieces after two years of turmoil. Their efforts are supported with heaps of federal pandemic funding and a renewed sense of urgency.

As Hawaii's P-20's Stephen Schatz describes it, education is core to a functioning society, and a strong school system that lifts everyone up is essential.

"If we truly believe in equity and in closing achievement gaps, that requires some level of discipline and high expectations for all of our kids," says Schatz. "We want the community at large to think of education, and in particular public education, as not only an entity in and of itself, but also it's our future workforce. It's our future leaders. It is what Hawaii will be."

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STEPHEN SCHATZ,
Executive director,
Hawaii P-20