

EDITORIAL | OUR VIEW

Editorial: Open DOE books on pandemic funds

Today

Hawaii had been making progress in improving its funding commitment to education, but as the COVID-19 pandemic approached, the state lost ground in comparison to others in the U.S.

That's a finding Hawaii's students and the state as a whole should be unhappy about, given the islands' high costs and high proportion of students from underserved communities, or who live in constrained economic circumstances.

For the 2019-2020 academic year, the nonprofit Education Law Center's annual report on education funding ranks Hawaii squarely in the middle of the pack — 28th — for average spending per pupil, at \$14,662. That's \$784 less, per pupil, than the U.S. average.

However, spending has ticked up again since 2019-20, the year examined in "Making the Grade 2022," observers say. Next year's report may show improvement — and if not, the state Department of Education (DOE) needs to get busy making the case for improved funding.

A bright spot comes with a closer examination of Hawaii's "funding effort": spending for schools as a proportion of the islands' overall gross domestic product. Here, Hawaii also earned a "C" for average effort in 2019-2020; however the data shows that the state did improve, funneling increased proportions of its budget to education over the last 15 years.

Still, as Osa Tui Jr., president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association (HSTA), says, "Hawaii is losing out even more" than the report might suggest, because the state's cost of living is much higher here than in most others.

Don't miss out on what's happening!

Star Advertiser



Stay in touch with top news, as it happens, conveniently in your email inbox. Best of all, it's FREE to sign up!

Enter your email

Get It Now

By clicking submit, you agree to Star-Advertiser's [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

Unfortunately, representatives for the state DOE were not available to comment on the Hawaii findings last week, during schools' winter break. The public needs reassurance that the DOE is leveraging its current funding for the most effective, student-centered purposes.

Board of Education Chair Bruce Voss responded to the funding report by noting that the 2022-2023 DOE budget includes new state funding to address lagging increases in teacher pay, increase pay differentials for special education and hard-to-staff positions, and address repair and maintenance, as well as emergency pandemic funding.

Serious concerns remain, however. Beyond budget numbers, the DOE must do much better with providing teachers, students and Hawaii taxpayers detailed information about how emergency pandemic funding is being deployed.

The HSTA's Tui told the Star-Advertiser that \$639.5 million in supplemental federal money given to the DOE to address learning loss and emotional trauma from the pandemic has been largely parked at administrative levels. Meanwhile, teachers and students in classrooms are not consistently seeing a benefit.

The nonprofit advocacy group Hui for Excellence in Education (HE'E) has also expressed concern over DOE's use of pandemic-era emergency funding. The group, along with the public, has been left largely in the dark about what, specifically, DOE is doing to address learning loss, or social and emotional

setbacks suffered by individual students due to the pandemic — and there has been no adequate explanation or evaluation of the spending's impact or effectiveness.

This is no way to operate a statewide school district. Teachers, students and taxpayers need better information, now, about how emergency pandemic funding is being deployed. DOE must publicly document that its spending is directed toward helping students in need, and it must communicate with advocates and the public on its spending strategies — in clear detail, on a proactive basis, so that the community can participate in this emergency response.

That educators and community members feel out of the loop on DOE spending and initiatives is a troubling indicator. Hawaii's DOE may well need more funding, but it will be hard-pressed to make that plea if it cannot communicate with the public about what it's doing with what it has.

[Click here](#) to see our full coverage of the coronavirus outbreak. [Submit](#) your coronavirus news tip.



Be the first to know

Get [web push notifications](#) from *Star-Advertiser* when the next breaking story happens — it's FREE! You just need a supported web browser.

[Subscribe for this feature](#)