

Hawaii's public school spending receives a C

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Hawaii's spending on public school education has earned C grades in a new national report, with per-pupil spending here reported at \$14,662 — \$784 less than the U.S. average.

Hawaii ranked just below the middle of the pack at 28th in funding level among the 50 states and Washington, D.C., in "Making the Grade 2022," an annual report from the nonprofit Education Law Center.

New York ranked No. 1 at \$26,605 in per-pupil spending; Arizona was last, at \$10,244. The national average was \$15,446.

Hawaii's progress in per-pupil spending appears to be lagging compared with other states. In 2008, the report said, Hawaii was ranked 20th.

And "Hawaii is losing out even more" than the report might suggest, said Osa Tui Jr., president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association. The reason is that with the sky-high cost of living here, with the Aloha State often labeled as the most expensive

in the U.S. to live in, funding doesn't go as far in the islands, he said. Making the situation worse, Tui contends, is that the \$639.5 million in supplemental federal monies given to the state Department of Education to alleviate the learning loss and emotional trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic still are largely getting stuck at state and complex area levels, and not consistently trickling down to the classroom level. The DOE has spent only about half of it so far. "We see our teachers having to beg for money on these GoFundMe and DonorsChoose sites rather than being provided funds for their basic classroom needs," Tui said.

The ultimate problem is that students suffer when school funding is inadequate and not reaching them, he said. "They don't get those meaningful learning experiences," Tui added.

The report by the New Jersey-based Education Law Center used the most recently available U.S. Census data on funding from the 2019-20 school year. "The data in this edition gives a picture of states' investment in their public school systems in the 2019-20 school year, the historic moment when public education, and society at large, experienced the massive disruption brought on by a worldwide public health crisis," the report said, referring to the pandemic.

The report assigned grades to the states in three areas: >> Funding level: How much money did schools allot per pupil?

>> Funding distribution: How much more money did high-poverty districts get than lower-poverty districts within a state?

>> Funding effort: How much did each state provide for schools relative to its overall gross domestic product?

Wyoming, where the per-pupil spending was \$19,555, was the only state to get straight A's in all three areas.

Nine other states got A's in two of three metrics.

Nevada, at \$11,076, was the only state to get straight F's. Eight other states got F's in two of the three metrics.

In addition to the C grade Hawaii earned for funding level, Hawaii got a C grade for funding effort. The report assessed funding effort by looking at how much of each state's gross domestic product, or GDP, is allocated to support the PK-12 school system.

Each state was assigned an "effort index," and Hawaii ranked 17th. But when the report named the top 10 states improving in effort since 2008, Hawaii was fifth in improvement.

Hawaii and Washington, D.C., were not given grades for funding distribution, because each runs on a single-district system. Within other states, funding can vary dramatically from one school district to the next. One of the report's major conclusions was that the nation's disjointed systems of funding for public schools are leaving "vast inequities" between school districts and among their students.

Requests for the state DOE to comment on the Hawaii findings were not answered by Wednesday evening.

Board of Education Chair Bruce Voss said by email that he anticipates Hawaii's metrics may improve in subsequent years when the reports include "the substantial amounts the 2022 Hawaii State Legislature funded beginning with the 2022-23 school year."

"The Legislature did fully fund the education budget in 2022, plus added amounts to address compression in teacher pay, teacher pay differentials for special education and hard to staff areas, additional amounts for repair and maintenance, etc.," Voss continued. "I expect that if this study was done for the current school year, the results (and grade) likely would be different."

Cheri Nakamura, director of the nonprofit advocacy group Hui for Excellence in Education, also known as HE'E, noted that Hawaii's education system is primarily funded by state revenues. "DOE funding is around 25% of state general funds, which is a large chunk of our state budget. We may be constrained by our finite state resources," she said.

Nakamura added that while the DOE has been "extremely fortunate" to receive federal supplemental funding and the restoration of state funding, "we are not sure what the DOE is doing specifically to address the challenges of learning loss and the SEL/pandemic fallout. There has not been a clear explanation of how the funds are being strategically used, nor has there been an explanation of how these funds are making an impact in student outcomes, academically or socially-emotionally." SEL refers to social and emotional learning.

She echoed the teachers union's call for more support directly to schools. "We need to support our principals and teachers with resources for the classroom and students," she said. "We also need more targeted supports for our high-needs students who suffered disproportionately from the effects of the pandemic."

The Education Law Center report also calls on the states to devise new funding now for when federal pandemic-relief monies run out. Congress over the past two years has authorized more than \$263 billion in federal COVID-19 relief funding to the nation's schools and colleges, including nearly \$950 million to Hawaii.

"If we fail to meet that challenge," the report said, "the lessons of COVID-19 will be lost and, in short order, students and schools will be right back where they were when the pandemic struck."

