

# School Conditions and Academic Gains among Hawaiian Children

Identifying Successful School Strategies

## Executive Summary and Key Themes

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## Abstract

This project studied school-level factors that influence academic achievement and performance of Native Hawaiian students in public schools in the state of Hawai‘i. The study focused on school-level instructional strategies, curricula, and policies that distinguished schools in terms of increases in test scores for their Native Hawaiian students. Schools were selected to participate in the study on the basis of growth in test scores (classified as either low or high) of their Native Hawaiian students. The selection of schools was also based on the number and concentration of Native Hawaiian students in the schools to ensure changes in test scores were not unduly influenced by the performance of a small number of scores.

Individual schools were compared using cross-case techniques intended to identify the “success” factors present and operating in the schools sampled. The cross-case strategy was used not only to make comparisons within groups (i.e., within low growth schools and within high growth schools) but also across groups (i.e., contrasts between conditions at low and high growth schools).

Schools that were more successful at increasing test scores were characterized as having: collaborative school governance structures; decision structures linked to data; a well-established, dedicated teaching force; focused learning communities; strong, engaged leaders; shared accountability for their students’ learning; a commitment to continuous learning; and effective supplementary and after-school programming. Conversely, these characteristics are virtually absent in schools classified as low growth. Policy implications include promoting programs and interventions that stimulate collaborative schools and strengthening support for professional dialogue and ongoing learning communities in schools.

## Purpose of Study

Hawaiians are among the most academically disadvantaged groups in the state. Social inequities within this population of students have resulted in low test scores and graduation rates and high rates of absenteeism. However, at some schools within the public education system Hawaiian children are thriving academically. What makes some schools more successful at increasing test scores? How are they engaging and inspiring Hawaiian children in the classroom? To address these questions the Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE) and Kamehameha Schools (KS) partnered to conduct the Successful Schools for Hawaiians Study (SSHS) in an effort to identify the many ways public schools and teachers are helping Hawaiian students succeed.

### Some Common Characteristics of Successful Schools

1. Collaborative school governance
2. Decisions linked to data
3. Dedicated, stable teaching force
4. Focused learning communities
5. Strong, engaged leaders
6. Shared accountability

The SSHS was designed specifically to respond to the following questions:

- *In which public schools do Hawaiian students exhibit the highest growth in achievement test scores?*
- *What are higher-growth schools doing that distinguishes them from other schools? For example, what kinds of curricula, instructional approaches, and school policies have they implemented?*
- *Can we trace the success of Hawaiian students to particular conditions within these schools?*
- *How can we replicate these successful models throughout the public school system?*

Numerous sources of data were used to inform the research questions, including site visits to participating schools; classroom observations; interviews with school administrators (i.e., principals) and teachers; surveys of teachers, other instructional staff, and students; and secondary data (e.g., HIDOE's School Quality Survey [SQS]). A summary of these data are presented in Table 1.

### Locations of Schools Included in the Study

- 2 schools on the island of Maui
- 3 schools on the island of Hawai'i
- 6 schools on the island of O'ahu

**Table 1. Summary of Primary Data Elements by Growth and School Level**

N	Growth	School Level	Site visits	Classroom Observations	Principal Interviews	Teacher Interviews	Teacher Surveys	Student Surveys
1	Lower	Elementary	2	8	1	4	31	17
5	Higher	Elementary	10	32	5	27	100	219
1	Lower	Middle	2	12	1	5	15	80
1	Higher	Middle	2	2	1	2	7	51
2	Lower	High	4	14	2	10	46	138
1	Higher	High	2	5	1	4	75	65
4	Subtotal Lower Growth		8	34	4	19	92	235
7	Subtotal Higher Growth		14	39	7	33	182	335
11	Total		22	73	11	52	274	570

## Key Themes

There is an intrinsic link between school success and a whole host of factors, many of which interact with one another. The key themes that emerged from the study are supported by interviews with both school administrators and teachers, as well survey data and observations from site visits. We note that the scholarly literature and theories about effective school reform support our interpretations of the data, as well as lend credibility (i.e., trustworthiness) to those interpretations. References to this literature can be found in the full report.

### 1. Collaborative School Governance

Governance was a distinguishing factor of lower and higher growth schools. Governance is defined here as the formal leadership processes that result in decisions, define expectations, grant power to others, or verify performance. In higher growth schools, governance tends to be a collaborative, shared process by which teachers, parents, and the wider community are made to feel empowered by participating in school governance and decision-making (Bauch & Goldring, 1998; Cranston, 2001). By contrast, governance in lower growth schools is more likely to be determined by a single individual; that is, school-related decisions and policy are determined by one person in power—normally the principal—and teachers, parents, and the community have less influence or are not truly engaged in the decision-making process. The following comments represent the range of beliefs and practices related to governance among the participating schools:

Collaborative School Governance

- *Higher growth schools:*  
“It has been truly effective and has really increased teacher morale, and I think performance. Teachers are now much more engaged in thinking about school policies and have been more involved in shaping them.” (Teacher in higher growth school)

*“[Collaborative school governance] spawns that creativity because you have the meeting of the minds, and not where it’s only one person’s mind calling the shots in an era of compliance. ... Giving teachers some of that autonomy, the creativity that can come about can create that jump outside of the box.”* (Principal in higher growth school).

*“My teachers really don’t understand. With restructuring how can I possibly include them in any major decisions? I really don’t have a choice anymore than they do.”* (Principal in lower growth school).

*“We have almost zero decision-making power here ... the administration keeps making changes week-to-week. ... We never know what to expect and when it looks like something could be good or work, they change it! Some of us don’t even know what the current policies are.”* (Teacher in lower growth school)

### 2. Decisions Linked to Data

Linking decision structures to data was a common feature in nearly all higher growth schools, emerging in many forms. A large majority of these schools link their assessment strategies to curricular and instructional strategies. Data are used to hone in on student weaknesses and areas of difficulty, to link content to state standards, to identify students in need of additional instruction, tutoring, or supplementary programming, and other educational indicators, for example. Principals and teachers in these schools clearly understood the benefits of such practices:

*“We learned the hard way [not using these strategies to inform decisions] [and] it took some time to get my teachers to buy-in [to using grade level and subject-matter formative assessment strategies created by grade-level and subject teacher teams to modify curricular and instructional strategies and to identify student weaknesses], but once they saw the results [learning gains] they were quick to latch on. ... In general our teachers are open to new approaches.”* (Principal in higher growth school).

*“Our teacher teams are dedicated to this. ... We work hard creating assessments or getting our hands on tests that do the job we want them to. ... The old ways of testing and assessment don’t work anymore, not in this time of high-stakes stakes testing. ... But, since we have linked our curricula and teaching to better methods of testing our students, we have made good gains.”* (Teacher in higher growth school).

Conversely, in some of the lower growth, restructuring schools, the idea of linking decisions to data is not absent. It is just not functioning the way it is intended. For instance:

*What they [the restructuring vendors] gave us just didn’t work. ... They were missing students, they were missing student scores, they counted students who are no longer here. ... They [school administrators] don’t talk about it ... just as long as it ‘appears’ that we have a system, whether or not it actually works.”* (Teacher in lower growth school).

### *3. Well-Established, Stable, and Dedicated Teaching Forces*

A major feature that distinguishes lower and higher growth schools is not only the quality of teachers, but also the continuity and devotion of those teachers. It was very common in higher growth schools to find teachers who were extremely devoted not only to their students, but also to school as a whole, its mission and vision, and its administrators.

*“We take our work very seriously and our principal gives us the support and encouragement that we need. It has created a truly unique environment where teachers feel that they are needed and wanted and that they truly make a difference in the lives of our students. He [the principal] has helped create and foster all of this. Teachers like working here. ... They are recognized for their efforts.”* (Teacher in higher growth school).

*“In this school we [teachers] are given the opportunity to contribute to the creation of the school’s goals and meeting those goals. ... You will never find more committed teachers. I have been teaching for more than 10 years and I intend to spend the rest of my career at this school.”* (Teacher in higher growth school).

By comparison, although teachers who are dedicated to their schools certainly exist in lower growth schools, they are far fewer in number.

*“In the last three years, we have had nearly an 80% turnover in our teachers. ... They come and go, but mostly go.”* (Principal in lower growth school).

This lower level of commitment on the part of some teachers in lower growth schools can be explained by at least two common factors that we observed: first, administrators who are

perceived as not valuing teachers, their perspectives, or their contributions; and second, the absence of other important support mechanisms and structures (e.g., mentoring of new teachers, lack of a cohesive school vision, and the challenge of mainland teachers operating in an entirely different culture and social environment). It was not uncommon for teachers in lower growth schools to become extremely emotional and upset during our interviews.

*“They just put me in a classroom. No one ever came to see how I was doing, if I needed help, or whether my teaching was any good.”* (Teacher in lower growth school).

*“How can we be committed to the school when the school is not committed to us? Sometimes we feel like we are not even wanted here. ... In meetings, our principal belittles us, criticizes our ideas and concerns, and trivializes the work we do. ... Most of us are getting out as soon as we can.”* (Teacher in lower growth school).

#### 4. Focused Learning Communities

Creating an interactive professional community among teachers is the subject of many major studies and generally is regarded as a key ingredient leading to successful schools and school improvement (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). It refers to the way teachers interact with one another outside of their classrooms that may positively contribute to student success and academic achievement in the classroom. In higher growth schools, for example, teachers develop curricular and assessment strategies unique to their students’ needs along with their teacher teams, grade level teams, and subject matter teams. Teamwork is central to successful schools. For example, teachers in higher growth schools regularly discuss their students and their students’ work, and participate in the collaborative development of curriculum and assessments. Moreover, school leadership support and encourage these activities by dedicating time to it.

*“For the past several years, we have been given time to work in teacher teams, grade-level teams, subject-matter teams, and teams across grades and subjects. This has really improved our focus on what and how we teach. ... We know what is expected of our students entering the next grade and we can develop curricula and assessments that are more closely aligned to those needs.”* (Teacher in higher growth school).

*“I can now more fully appreciate what other teachers have to offer. I don’t feel like I am on my own. We communicate everything and everyone contributes to solving problems.”* (Teacher in higher growth school).

##### Focused Learning Communities

###### ▪ Higher growth schools:

*“We have a common vision now...everyone is on the same page and striving after making this school the best it can be. If we didn’t have time to meet as a group I don’t know that this would be the case...we have been fortunate that he [the principal] values this time and gives us the opportunity to work together to create materials and discuss our curricula.”* (Teacher in a higher growth schools)

In lower growth schools, however, these communities—if they exist—do not usually serve the intended purpose.

*“For us, it’s really meeting for the purpose of meeting. We don’t ever discuss substantive areas or curricula or instruction. ... It’s normally just complaining about the administration.”* (Teacher in lower growth school).

*"We [teachers] don't talk. I don't even know what the other math teachers are doing."* (Teacher in lower growth school).

*"We just don't have time. ... None of our teachers will come unless they are paid, which we aren't. ... We just can't keep up with the workload, you know, grading papers, calling parents, planning."* (Teacher in lower growth school).

## 5. Strong, Engaged Leaders

A growing body of research evidence has documented the effects of leadership on schools, teachers, and ultimately students (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hattie, 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Riehl, 2000). This body of research suggests that leadership has significant effects on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers' instruction. Our observations and interviews attest to the power of strong, engaged leaders as one of the major elements of school success.

*"[The principal] has really helped his school to improve ... she is involved in everything, but doesn't make decisions for us]. ... She advocates for us and takes our opinions and concerns seriously."* (Teacher in higher growth school).

*"[The principal] arrives early every morning and greets the students and their parents as they arrive. ... He really engages parents and the community and gets them to take an interest."* (Teacher in higher growth school).

Conversely, as one principal in a lower growth school (with a high rate of turnover of administration) stated:

*"Teachers, students, and parents have no sense of continuity or commitment and have grown frustrated with the constant turnover ... and view it as a lack of caring toward this community, the school, the teachers, and the students."* (Principal in lower growth school).

Moreover, teachers in lower growth schools were often frustrated and disappointed in their school's leadership. For instance:

*"[The principal] doesn't do anything. ... He is hardly ever here and when he is he criticizes the teachers, the students, and everyone else at the school. It is really frustrating, everyone wants to do a good job, but when someone like that is constantly bringing the staff down everyone becomes bitter and angry and wants to go to another school ... I know that many of the teachers here plan on leaving as soon as they can get a spot in another, better, school."* (Teacher in lower growth school).

## 6. Shared Accountability

Successful results also are more likely when students are viewed as everyone's responsibility (i.e., a shared moral community, reflecting the commonly used phrase, "it takes a village"). Teachers know what is going on not only with their students, but also with other teachers' students. This theme was observed across nearly all schools classified as higher growth and very rarely in lower growth schools.

*“Part of the success of this school is because we are consistent, because everyone gets involved, and because we are so small. From grade to grade we can look at certain students and say this child is having a hard time with numbers and operations or computations or whatever the skill happens to be for that student. Then we can target that student and work particularly on that area with that child ... which we often do as teams.”* (Teacher in higher growth school).

*“[Shared accountability] is a real strength for our school. We have created a very warm and loving atmosphere here and we continue that, I mean that we really build on that. So our kids know that they are cared for and that they are well taken care of and if they have a problem they know that they can go to any person on this campus and that person is going to help them. They also know that if they have contributed to that problem that they will be held responsible too, so there is a high level of accountability.”* (Principal in higher growth school).

## Policy Implications

The factors that distinguish high growth schools in this study are complex and represent sustained effort and a shared vision from the entire school community. It would be inexcusably naive to suggest that simple “fixes” can produce the same growth in achievement at all schools. Any reasonable observer will acknowledge that there are myriad important differences in the resources available to individual schools and in the communities they serve.

It is our shared responsibility to ensure that the most challenged schools have the support and resources they need to offer all students a high quality education. The following policy recommendations are based on the results of this study. They do not address the specific content and context of pedagogy and instruction, which may differ from school to school depending on the mission and approaches used. However, they do present research-based strategies to strengthen and support the mission and approaches that schools are using to engage their students and build educational successes. These recommendations also are consistent with nationwide research on effective school reform. We organize the policy implications in two broad categories: increasing collaboration and enhancing professional dialog and continuous learning.

### **1. Promote programs and interventions that stimulate collaborative schools:**

- *Find new methods to engage community, families, and teachers in shared school vision and relationship building*
- *Promote programs and interventions that build school-wide leadership*
- *Develop shared accountability among teachers, principals, and students*

### **2. Support professional dialogue and ongoing learning communities in schools:**

- *Develop focused learning communities aligned with goals*
- *Share information and data to identify strengths/challenges and drive forward successes*
- *Support ongoing professional development for teachers (techniques for enhancing student engagement, knowledge construction, cooperative learning)*