

HOPPE for Hawai'i:

Public Opinion about the DOE

Overview

What do people in Hawai'i think about the public education system? Findings from the 2003 Hawai'i Opinion Poll on Public Education (HOPPE) conducted by the Department of Education (DOE) suggest that a substantial majority of people think public schools in Hawai'i have not improved.¹ The largest proportion (41%) believe that public education has stayed the same. And the percentage of respondents who see improvement in the public school system (23%) is about equal to the percentage of those who believe it has gotten worse (24%).

The perception of a troubled public education system is widespread and acknowledged within the DOE itself.² However, the current political debate has challenged education systems, yielding new proposals and unprecedented opportunities for positive change. This infobrief summarizes some of the significant findings of the public opinion survey, highlights relevant initiatives within the DOE, and discusses potential implications for Kamehameha Schools as it seeks change through new collaborative efforts with the public school system.

Dissatisfaction with the System, Faith in the Community

PROBLEM: *Hawai'i's population has a more negative view of the state public school system than is typical for the United States.*

Throughout this series of national and state opinion polls on public education, respondents typically give the highest ratings to the institutions closest to them. For example, people usually rate their own community's schools above the state's schools, the state's schools above the nation's schools, and so forth. In Hawai'i, however, respondents rated the nation's schools more favorably than the state system. Table 1 shows the proportion of survey respondents who gave high ratings (grade "A" or "B") to the school system, both locally and nationally. A comparison of Hawai'i responses and national responses suggests that the island population has more negative views of its local public school

system than is typical for the United States. Although Hawai'i's rating of the nation's schools is comparable to the total U.S. rating (23% and 24% respectively), its ratings of the local school system were significantly lower than comparable national benchmarks. Encouragingly, more than half of all public school parents gave their own schools a high grade, suggesting that much of the perceived problem lies within a seemingly distant system, rather than with parents' own personal experiences.

Table 1. % of respondents who would give an "A" or "B" grade to...

	Hawai'i	U.S.
The nation's public schools	23	24
Public schools in their state	17	n/a*
Public schools in their community	31	47
The public school their oldest child attends**	52	71

SOURCES: *Hawai'i Opinion Poll on Public Education 2003*; L. C. Rose and A. M. Gallup, *The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools* (September 2003).

* The national equivalent of HOPPE, the *Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*, does not ask about the schools in a respondent's state—only schools in their community. (The exact wording is: "Students are often given the grades of A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in your community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here—A, B, C, D, or Fail?")

** Ratings by public school parents only.

PROSPECTS: *Proposed reforms that will allow greater school-level autonomy may build on the public's trust in neighborhood schools and school officials.*

Table 1 clearly shows that the public has greater faith in those schools within their own communities. Although 17% of Hawai'i residents gave a high rating to the state's public schools, nearly double (31%) gave their own community's schools a high grade. These figures suggest the value of the school- and community-based decision-making currently being debated in Hawai'i's political arenas. The DOE,

1. Office of the Superintendent/Planning and Evaluation Branch, *Hawai'i Opinion Poll on Public Education 2003* (Honolulu, HI: Hawai'i Department of Education, June 2003).

2. Pat Hamamoto, "The State of Public Education" (address to the 22nd Legislature of the State of Hawai'i [hereafter 22nd Legislature], Regular Session of 2004, Honolulu, HI: Hawai'i Department of Education, January 28, 2004).

the majority leadership at the legislature, and the governor's administration each has its own proposals for education reform, but common to all plans is greater autonomy at the school level, allowing principals and community advisory panels to decide how school funds are spent.³ Policies that promote school-level autonomy may build on communities' trust in their neighborhood schools and re-engage an alienated public in the educational system. The encouraging consensus among disparate policymakers on this issue suggests that, despite disagreements about how to achieve this goal, positive changes lie ahead.

An Under-funded School System

PROBLEM: According to public perceptions, lack of funding is the single largest challenge facing Hawai'i's public schools.

When respondents were asked about the biggest problems facing Hawai'i's public schools, the most commonly cited answer was lack of funding. National public opinion polls also indicate concern about educational funding, but the issue is more prominent in Hawai'i than at the national level. As shown in Table 2, approximately 31% of the island population cited funding as the school system's biggest problem, compared to just 23% of persons nationally. These figures reflect growing local concerns about the adequacy of educational resources and highlight an important policy question: Can schools be expected to meet increasingly demanding requirements with funding that is already perceived to be inadequate?

Table 2. Biggest problems facing public schools (%)

	Hawai'i	U.S.
Lack of financial support/funding	31	23
Teacher quality*	19	8
Lack of supplies, materials, equipment	18	n/a**
Large classes/overcrowding	15	17
Lack of discipline/poor classroom management	15	17

SOURCE: Hawai'i Opinion Poll on Public Education 2003.

* The grouping of answers relating to teacher quality differs between the national poll and the Hawai'i poll. See Table 3 for detailed breakdown.

** Not a top answer in the national poll.

PROSPECTS: New methods of allocating funding among schools may result in greater efficiency, with money going to schools that need it most.

Public concern regarding school funding suggests that local policymakers need to prioritize education in their budgetary decisions. In the absence of

increased funds, the DOE has embraced a proposed reform of funding allocation methods—a weighted student formula that takes student characteristics and special needs into account when allocating school funds.⁴ Although this proposed policy will probably not result in additional educational monies, it represents a potentially more effective use of the DOE's existing resources.

Finding and Keeping Good Teachers

PROBLEM: A large proportion of Hawai'i respondents expressed concerns about the quality of teachers in public schools.

The second most commonly cited problem with Hawai'i's educational system was the quality of teachers (19% for the total Hawai'i public). This concern was even more prevalent among public school parents (25%), who are arguably the most familiar with the very real challenges facing students in public education. Table 3 shows that in Hawai'i concern about teaching is significantly higher than national benchmarks. These figures indicate that the nationwide problem of finding quality teachers may be particularly salient in Hawai'i.

Table 3. Attitudes about teacher quality (%)

	All Respondents	DOE Parents
Hawai'i		
“Poor teaching/lack of commitment or motivation”	19	25
“Difficulties with teacher recruitment & retention”	14	12
U.S.		
“Difficulty getting good teachers/quality teachers”	8	8

SOURCE: Hawai'i Opinion Poll on Public Education 2003.

PROSPECTS: The DOE has increased recruitment efforts and developed a number of external partnerships to improve teacher education and increase the supply of teachers.

3. Hamamoto, op cit.; for details of these bills presented to the 22nd Legislature, see *A Bill for an Act Relating to Education* (hereafter *BARE*), H.B. 2002 (House Majority package); *BARE*, S.B. 3238 (Senate Majority package); *BARE*, S.B. 3240, (Senate Majority package); *A Bill for an Act Proposing Amendments to the Constitution of the State of Hawai'i Relating to Public Education* (hereafter *Proposed Amendments*), H.B. 2331 (Governor's package); *BARE*, H.B. 2332 (Governor's package); *Proposed Amendment*, S.B. 2806 (Governor's package); *BARE*, S.B. 2807 (Governor's package).

4. Hamamoto, op cit.

Given public concerns about who leads our classrooms, the teacher recruitment steps taken by the state DOE are crucial. To increase the number of qualified teachers in Hawai'i's public school system, the DOE has actively engaged partnerships with the local post-secondary teacher training programs and educational organizations such as Kamehameha Schools.⁵ Together, these collaborations have resulted in policies and programs that promote early placement of teachers, facilitate teacher credentialing, improve local teacher education programs, and explore financial incentives such as scholarships, low-interest loans, tax credits, and loan forgiveness.⁶

Implications for Kamehameha Schools

On the whole, more than 75% of respondents feel the public education system in Hawai'i is not improving. These opinions are consistent with the troubling prospects for Hawaiian students, who are the largest ethnic group in the DOE. Current data tell us:

- The Hawaiian population is growing, especially among younger age brackets.
- Teachers at predominantly Hawaiian public schools tend to be less experienced, less stable, and less likely to be fully credentialed than are teachers at schools with lower levels of Hawaiian enrollment.
- Aggregate data for Hawaiian children in the DOE suggest poorer outcomes—such as test scores and engaged learning—than those of other students.
- Teachers in the DOE appear to refer a disproportionately high ratio of Hawaiian students to special education classes.
- Even as Kamehameha Schools approaches its full K-12 capacity on three campuses, Hawaiian students are—and will be—enrolled in private schools at much lower rates than are their non-Hawaiian peers.

Taken together, negative perceptions of the DOE and consistently poor outcomes for Hawaiian children may result in increased demand from Hawaiian families for alternatives to the public school system. In this context, Kamehameha Schools' education programs and strategic focus on extending reach to more Hawaiians are increasingly crucial to Hawaiian well-being. Other programs, such as Hawaiian charter schools and Hawaiian immersion schools, also breathe vitality and diversity into the range of alternative approaches.

Yet the goal of ensuring quality educational opportunities for all Hawaiian children cannot be achieved without addressing the problems plaguing Hawai'i's public school system. Even if enrollment in charter schools and Hawaiian language immersion programs reaches the thousands, tens of thousands more will remain within the general public education system. Moving forward, collaborative partnerships between Kamehameha Schools, the DOE, and other private and public organizations will be a pivotal component in improving education for Hawai'i's keiki and winning public support for the educational system.

by Koren Ishibashi, MPP

5. B. J. Reyes, "Low Pay, Isolation Hamper Teacher Recruitment," Honolulu Star-Bulletin, April 16, 2001, <http://starbulletin.com/2001/04/16/news/story4.html>; Recruitment and Retention Support Center, "Marketing and Recruitment," Hawai'i State Department of Education, <http://doe-jobs.k12.hi.us/rrsc/markrecr.htm>.

6. Treena Shapiro, "DOE Barriers Stand in the Way of Hiring Teachers," Honolulu Star-Bulletin, September 6, 2001, <http://starbulletin.com/2001/09/06/news/story1.html>; Recruitment and Retention Support Center, "Transition to Teaching Overview," Hawai'i State Department of Education, <http://rrsc.k12.hi.us/transition.html>; Recruitment and Retention Support Center, "Felix Response Plan (FRP) Hard-to-fill Location Incentive—\$3,000 per Year," Hawai'i State Department of Education, http://rrsc.k12.hi.us/jobs/inc_hard.htm.