



Hawai'i Scholars for Education and Social Justice

HIGHLIGHTS of Research Brief #5

December 2024

The Chronic Underfunding of Hawai'i's Public Schools and Related Policy Recommendations

Hawai'i's public schools are chronically underfunded. Funding affects the quality of children's education and contributes to a system of ethnic and economic disparities. Misleading claims and inaccurate assumptions continue to be made about Hawai'i's educational problems and proposed solutions. The Hawai'i Scholars for Education and Social Justice (HSESJ) felt compelled to provide some of the facts about the current situation. We produced this brief, using research in education and other relevant fields to show how underfunding affects public education and how increased funding can improve education and the lives of Hawai'i residents. In doing so, we clarify misconceptions by presenting the facts about educational funding in Hawai'i.

Misconception #1: **Hawai'i's public schools are adequately funded.**

Facts:

- **Hawai'i ranks among the lowest of states in percentage of state and local expenditures supporting K-12 education—15.1% compared to U.S. average 21.5%.**
- **Despite the increased cost of living in Hawai'i, the percentage of expenditures for public**

education has decreased. In FY 2024, public funding for education was 7% less than 2023, even when the State had a budget surplus.

- **The public schools experienced a dramatic decrease in funding when \$640M of temporary federal pandemic funding ended on September 30, 2024.**
- **Lack of funding leads to a lack of programs that nurture “the whole child,”** e.g., the arts, PE, bilingual aides, and afterschool enrichment, which are not consistently funded.

Misconception #2: **The teacher shortage no longer exists.**

Facts:

- **Salary differentials, which are not permanent, redistributed the educator workforce and addressed some needs, but did not solve the teacher shortage.**
- **The public schools are forced to hire individuals without teaching credentials to fill teacher vacancies.** As of January 2024, there were 738 “emergency hires” employed in public schools across the State.
- **High attrition rates account for about 89% of new teachers needed each year.** The public schools annually replace about 1,200 teachers, with 43% of them coming from out-of-state.

Misconception #3: More funding will not improve public education.

Facts:

- **Funding matters in education.** Clear evidence shows that quality education is expensive and there are few low-cost alternatives to well-funded schools.
- **Increased funding for public education raises student achievement and performance,** influencing high school graduation rates and college going, and leading to higher incomes in adulthood.
- **Increased funding in Hawai‘i could promote greater access to Pre-K programs.**
- **Increased funding of Hawai‘i public schools could raise the enrollment of local high school graduates at community colleges and universities, increasing lifetime earnings.**
- **Funding affects teacher preparation.** Increased funding could offset costs associated with teacher preparation and support the mentoring of pre-service teachers.

Misconception #4: Public school funding only affects parents with children in public schools.

Facts:

- **Investing in quality public education is an investment in Hawai‘i’s economy.** Increasing high school graduation rates leads to additional tax revenue. Technological changes continue to shift the economy toward skilled labor.
- **Public schools are places where students from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds can interact with and learn from each other,** increasing understanding and harmony across such groups. In Hawai‘i, people who could afford private education but chose public schools for their children often viewed this as a benefit.
- **Better-funded public education is related to lower poverty.** Increased funding results in positive outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds, increased wages and family income, and reduction in adult poverty.
- **Public schools save families money.** Increased funding and quality of public schools could encourage parents who send their children to private schools to switch to public schools, thereby reducing their financial burden.

Policy Recommendations

As citizens, it is our collective kuleana to care for each other. To address the significant and pervasive underfunding of public education in Hawai‘i, and with the aim of providing more equitable education to all of Hawai‘i’s children, we offer the following policy recommendations.

1. **The State Legislature** should prioritize increased and permanent funding for adequate public education.
2. **The State Legislature** should prioritize funding for teacher recruitment and retention, with particular focus on increasing salaries and improving workplace conditions.
3. **The State Legislature** should appropriate funds for an analysis of the public school budget to determine the extent to which public schools are adequately funded.

4. **The State Legislature** should provide resources to support universal public preschool.
5. **State policy makers** should support teacher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds and increase compensation for quality mentor teachers.
6. **The State Legislature** should provide housing benefits for teachers to alleviate the cost of living.

More than 100 scholars in Hawai‘i have endorsed this statement. View the complete text of the HSESJ Research Brief #5 and the full list of signatories online at <http://hawaiischolars.weebly.com/research-briefs.html>.

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