

## Education

# Community Schools Would Get A Boost In Hawaii Under Proposed Legislation

The bill would require the state DOE to provide grants as part of a two-year pilot program to test the concept.



---

By Cassie Ordonio   / About 9 hours ago

 Reading time: 6 minutes.



---

At Kohala Elementary School, dentists educate Hawaii island students on the importance of having healthy teeth. Waianae Elementary School opens its food pantries twice a week to hungry families on the Leeward coast.

The programs are part of a movement to turn public schools into community schools that provide local services and support in addition to the traditional curriculum. The idea is to ease hardships so students can focus on learning.

Several of Hawaii's 258 public schools already have adopted the approach. Lawmakers who want to encourage the concept are considering a [bill that would require the state Department of Education to provide grants](#) to fund and implement community schools under a two-year pilot program.

“It’s a different way of delivering education that looks at the whole of the child, and depending upon the community, that also can include services for families,” said Rep. Justin Woodson, the chair of the House Education Committee, who introduced the measure.



Waianae Elementary School offers free food twice a week to the community. (Courtesy: Waianae Elementary School)

House Bill 55 is scheduled for its first hearing on Tuesday before the House Education Committee. The cost of the initiative has yet to be determined pending appropriations by the House Finance Committee.

Advocates have long pushed for community schools in the state, saying they serve as resource hubs for both neighborhoods and students.

Schools that already function as community schools include Kohala Elementary School, Kohala Middle School, Kohala High School, Waianae Elementary School, Honaunau Elementary School and Mountain View Elementary School.

Jennifer Masutani, program director of the [Hawaii Afterschool Alliance](#), a nonprofit that advocates for the concept, said that number is expected to rise to 23 this year.

## A Growing Movement

Hawaii is one of several states that have adopted community schools, including New York, Maryland, Minnesota, California and others.

The community schools movement began in the early 1990s and has significantly grown, said Reuben Jacobson, [director of the Education Policy and Leadership Program](#) at American University in Washington, D.C.

So far, there are roughly 8,000 to 10,000 community schools in the country, according to [a report from New York University Steinhardt](#).

“It used to be boutiquey community schools where you would only see one or a handful at a place,” Jacobson said. “The movement launched initiatives that would happen across an entire school district.”

Jacobson added that states and the federal government also began to fund community schools through grants.

The U.S. Department of Education [announced \\$63 million in grants](#) to expand community schools this year.

Community schools offer wide-ranging support, including mental health services, after-school and summer programs to expand learning time, family and community engagement and leadership opportunities.

The strategy is to make schools into community hubs, Masutani said.



“It’s not a program, it’s not a curriculum, and it’s not a checkbox list of things schools have to do. Instead, it’s a way of thinking about how we can bring families, communities, and partners into the school to provide resources and figure out how we support students and their families,” she said.



Kohala Middle School and its counterparts adopted the community school concept in 2018.  
(Courtesy: Alan Brown/2017)

To facilitate connections with local nonprofits and other organizations, community school coordinators are hired as part of school staff.

Ross Paget, who works under [the Partners in Development Foundation](#) to serve as Kohala’s community school coordinator, called them “the liaison between the school and the community to help bring in the resources and services.”

Kohala Elementary, Kohala Intermediate School and Kohala High School were the first to adopt the community school concept in 2018.

Paget said the schools brought in [the Aloha Medical Mission](#) to offer dental checkups and fluoride treatment.

They're now planning to provide vision testing from [Project Vision Hawaii](#) and are working [with Mental Health Hawaii](#) to conduct a workshop on bullying and suicide awareness for students, faculty and parents.

Paget said the plan is for each Kohala school to get its own community coordinator, although he will still be around to help.

The department is establishing community school coordinators at 12 schools with the greatest needs, according to DOE spokeswoman Nanea Kalani.

Waianae Elementary School Principal Sheldon Konno said his school integrates aspects of community schools by providing a garden program for students and families by growing and harvesting food.

"We want to meet the need to provide food security, but I don't want our families to feel that they have to depend on something or someone," Konno said. "I want them to get to a point where it's independent and they're able to grow and harvest their food and know exactly how they can use these different things from the garden in ways to prepare for a nutritious meal in their household."

## How Would It Work?

The requirement that the DOE provide grants for planning and implementing community schools would take effect immediately upon approval and last through June 30, 2025.

Schools would have to apply for grants. The bill is aimed at supporting those who most need it, with criteria including Title I schools serving children in low-income communities or high schools with graduation rates less than 60% over the past three years.

Masutani said she wants legislators to remove those eligibility requirements to open the grants to all public schools.

The bill also requires that applicants demonstrate how they plan to implement wraparound supports such as physical and mental health services, social services, after-school programs, high-quality teaching, and parents and community engagement plans.

Grant recipients would then hire full-time community school coordinators.

Masutani said the Hawaii Afterschool Alliance is advocating for \$1.575 million annually to fund five schools.

Cheri Nakamura, director of the [education advocacy group He'e Coalition](#), said community schools are a good idea but may not be the best use of money.

“No one would disagree that the idea of community schools is a good one and that it could be an effective system of student support strategy to improve academic achievement and outcomes,” Nakamura said. “But effectively implementing it is extremely difficult. Especially now, when we have limited resources, we must think, is the most strategic way to use our resources to impact students?”

Robert Shand, assistant professor at the [School of Education at American University](#), said the biggest hurdle facing community schools is getting the initiative off the ground — an effort he said would take more than the two years allotted for the pilot program.

He noted the schools would need funding to hire a community school coordinator and additional staff positions. They also would need to be well-connected with community organizations and be ready to provide data analysis on the effort.

“Within large-scale initiatives, there’s a very tricky balance to strike between implementing a model with fidelity,” Shand said.

Kohala Elementary School Principal Hannah Loyola said additional funding would help the community school efforts.

“The reality is it’s challenging because, at the school level, we’re so limited,” Loyola said. “We’re focusing on our students learning and growing. If we can expand this model, it would be so beneficial for other schools.”

*Civil Beat’s education reporting is supported by a grant from Chamberlin Family Philanthropy.*

## Something to consider...

Civil Beat is a small, independent newsroom that provides free content with no paywall. That means readership growth alone can’t sustain our journalism.

The truth is that less than 2% of our monthly readers are financial supporters. To remain a viable business model for local news, we need a higher percentage of readers-turned-donors.

**Will you consider making a tax-deductible gift today?**

CONTRIBUTE

## About the Author



**Cassie Ordonio** ✉ 📡

Cassie Ordonio is a reporter for Honolulu Civil Beat.

**Use the [RSS feed](#) to subscribe to Cassie Ordonio's posts today**