

Education

How Hawaii Schools Are Weaving Connections With Pacific Islander Students

A new arts pilot program at two Honolulu-area middle schools demonstrates how cultural programming can foster better ties.



By Suevon Lee    / About 9 hours ago

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On a recent Tuesday, 14 students sat on pieces of cardboard spaced several feet apart in a shaded patch of lawn at Honolulu’s Washington Middle School. In front of each student was a frond from a coconut tree.

The middle schoolers watched as Jendrick Paul, founder and executive director of the Marshallese Community Organization of Hawaii, demonstrated how to create a basket out of the thick leaves.

The basket, known as “enra,” is a traditional vessel used to carry and transport food in the Marshall Islands. It’s formed by fusing together two similarly woven plates, which these students had learned how to make in a previous class.



Jendrik Paul, who heads the Marshallese Community Organization of Hawaii, holds two woven coconut fronds before demonstrating how they are woven together to create a basket at Washington Middle School.

“Weaving is one of the daily things we do,” explained Paul. “Back in the islands, when we prepare foods, we weave plates. When we go out, we weave bigger baskets.”

The activity is part of a new Pacific Islander cultural initiative integrated into voluntary summer programs at two Honolulu-area middle schools this year — Washington and Stevenson Middle — which are partnering with MCOH and organizations like Afterschool All-Stars Hawaii and the YMCA to help administer the programs on campus.

It’s also the beginning of a more concerted effort within the Hawaii Department of Education to promote inclusivity for Micronesian students in hopes of fostering better relations and cultural understanding. Roughly 8,650 DOE students, or about 5% of the entire student population, are [categorized as Micronesian](#), specified as Chuukese, Marshallese and Pohnpeian on [DOE enrollment forms](#).

But the number of Micronesian students may be higher, since students can also identify themselves as “other Pacific Islander,” a group that includes another 1,600 students.

Time For Change

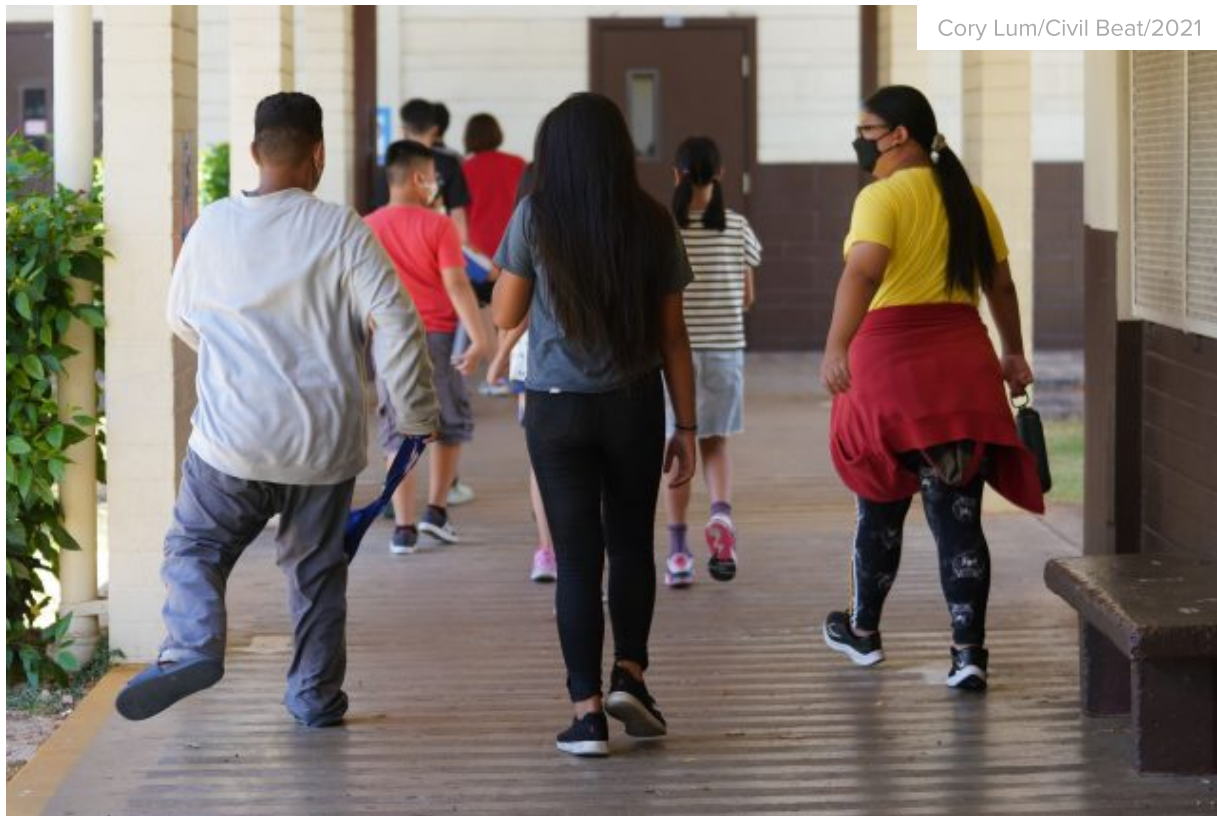
The idea for the arts program came about in a grassroots way, with several community groups joining forces to brainstorm new ways to better engage Micronesian students, [who have long suffered from inequities and discrimination at school.](#)

Shanty Asher, [a member of the Board of Education,](#) said the need to be more proactive took on fresh urgency following tensions over the April 5 [death of Iremamber Sykap,](#) a 16-year-old of Chuukese descent who was shot by Honolulu police officers [while driving a car allegedly tied to several crimes.](#)

“This kid was a product of the DOE system; he grew up here,” said Asher, who also is a Pacific Islander liaison officer at Honolulu’s Office of Economic Revitalization. “If we put up the right interventions, it might be a source to keep kids in school and we might not lose them.”

[Hawaii DOE data shows](#) that Pacific Islander students have higher rates of absenteeism and lower college-going rates, compared with Asian, Black, White, Filipino, Native Hawaiian and Hispanic students. They’re also [more subject to suspension and school discipline](#) than their peers.

“We really needed to reflect and find out why this was happening,” said Linell Dilwith, the complex area superintendent for the [Kaimuki-McKinley-Roosevelt complex area,](#) which includes Washington and Stevenson middle schools. “We have to increase the sense of belonging for our Micronesian students and really change to an asset-oriented mindset where we value our students’ language and culture.”



Washington Middle's Afterschool All-Stars summer program participants attend the free program daily, participating in academic, cultural and sports activities from 12 to 3:30 p.m.

The effort is not limited to basket-weaving.

The DOE also is funding new "student liaison" positions at Central Middle, Kaimuki High, Kalakaua Middle and Fern Elementary during the upcoming school year. These liaisons will be teacher's aides, helping students who don't speak English as a first language or just offering encouragement during tough times.

Central Middle, which has a large concentration of Chuukese students, has been engaging groups like [Pacific Resources for Education and Learning](#) and Chuukese pastors to improve the experience of Micronesian students. With the help of such community ties, the school recently hired a new student liaison who was born in Chuuk, raised on Guam and graduated from high school in Washington.

"He is going to change the game for us," said Joe Passantino, Central Middle's principal. "He is truly focused on supporting our school community

and is excited to engage families so we can build relationships and support all students.”

Fostering Cultural Understanding

As for why there is suddenly more momentum in making changes, Dilwith pointed to strong school leaders.

“We have the right people in the right seats right now,” she said. “We want to turn school into a place that’s welcoming and accepting, with people who speak their language working at that school.”

School leaders are cognizant of the [discrimination that Micronesians face](#) and how brokering a cultural understanding among students is one way to bridge differences.

At Stevenson Middle, Principal Katherine Balatico said the basket-weaving activity had opened up conversations among students who are Hawaiian, Filipino or Japanese, in addition to Micronesian. Students opened up and shared stories about their homes and backgrounds while sitting in circles as part of the exercise.

Though many Micronesian students were born and raised in Hawaii, many of their parents are non-native English speakers and come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The kids may receive little structural support or a quiet place to study at home.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2021

Hawaii Board of Education member Shanty Asher assists Washington Middle School students with weaving coconut frond baskets.

Michael Harano, Washington Middle’s principal, said middle school is the optimal time to offer such programs since that’s when kids tend to start “pushing back” against parents or authority. He hopes the arts pilot project will continue during the school year and said one of the key factors to success is parental involvement.

Josie Howard, executive director of [We Are Oceania](#), a nonprofit that works to uplift the Micronesian community, praised the new initiatives.

“It’s about time something like this is happening, and I really hope for the best,” she said.

She stressed the need to recognize diversity among different ethnicities across Micronesia, which broadly speaking, can refer to the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, which have their own languages and unique customs.

When it comes to helping students thrive at school, she added it's important for schools to look at kids' potential independent of their ethnicity.

"It shouldn't matter whether they're Micronesian or whatever ethnicity. Culture shouldn't be a barrier for a child," she said.

During the recent visit to Washington Middle, Asher sat among the group of students to help them weave the baskets.

"When I was growing up, every girl had to do this," Asher, who is from Kosrae, said. "Coconut is that one tree that every family has, along with a breadfruit tree."

Though inspired by Micronesian students, the program is open to all students.

"Culture is really key to those (Pacific Islander students) born and raised here," said Asher. "There has to be a connection. And culture and art is something we can bring to the school."

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Suevon Lee [Twitter](#) [Email](#) [RSS](#)

Suevon Lee covers education for Civil Beat. You can reach her at slee@civilbeat.org or follow her on Twitter at [@suevlee](https://twitter.com/suevlee)

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