

Education

Summer School Offers Kids A 'Last Chance' To Catch Up Before New School Year

Federal relief money enabled Hawaii to offer summer school for free this year to help students overcome pandemic-related setbacks.



By Suevon Lee    / May 14, 2021

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As Hawaii's schools prepare to fully reopen in the fall, the pressure is on for educators to bolster kids' academic and social skills to make up for a disrupted — and truncated — school year that left many students struggling with their studies and mental health.

That means no rest for many public school administrators and teachers who will be offering summer school for free to students for the first time thanks to federal relief dollars aimed at stemming the learning loss and making sure kids are ready to get back to the classroom.

“Over the past few years we have not really had a summer school as most of our teachers have not shown interest in teaching,” said Waipahu Elementary vice principal James Suster. “This year we made a strong push and teachers were interested.”



Honowai Elementary School teacher May Anne Kim leads her kindergarten students in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Waipahu planned to prioritize reading, writing and math classes this summer for students who need it most. Teachers called parents and urged them to have their children sign up. After two weeks of that outreach, the school opened eligibility for summer school to all of its 940 students, netting 150 registrations to date.

School officials and other education advocates have pinned their hopes on summer school to help students catch up academically and to re-acclimate them to a school environment after spending more than a year at home amid the pandemic.

Last year the DOE also offered summer learning programs, but it expanded the menu of options this year.

“This summer is pretty much all we have before students are expected to show up next fall ready to go at the grade level they’re at without having to hold back massive amounts of kids,” said David Miyashiro, executive director

of advocacy group HawaiiKidsCAN. “This is really the last chance to catch kids up.”

In past years, families had to pay for summer school, which was largely used for credit recovery for older students or for other kids who wanted a jump start on the following year. The focus this year shifted toward all vulnerable students and classes are being offered without charge [due to the federal aid](#).

Last month, the Board of Education authorized the department [to spend \\$13.1 million to support summer “learning loss programs”](#) this year, including school learning hubs that support remedial or credit recovery, specialized support for students with disabilities and accelerated learning for kids who want to get ahead.



“This is really the last chance to catch kids up.” — David Miyashiro of HawaiiKidsCAN

Schools went online to stem the spread of the coronavirus after the pandemic took hold last year, forcing children, parents and educators to adapt to virtual classes. Campuses, starting with the elementary grades, began gradually reopening in January, but many students remain in distance learning mode or a hybrid version.

Furthermore, students lost nine calendar days of instruction [when the DOE delayed the start of the 2020-21 school year](#) to offer teachers more time for online instructional training.

U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz called summer school “essential.”

It’s about “giving kids the opportunity not just to recover from learning loss but frankly just to develop or regain habits related to showing up at school, paying attention in person and being a student again,” [the Hawaii Democrat](#)

[said during a Civil Beat Editorial Board meeting last week.](#) “And that takes time too.”

Summer School Offers High Cost-Benefit

Just down the road from Waipahu Elementary sits Honowai Elementary, where nearly a dozen students never showed up at all this year and may have to be held back a grade, according to principal Kent Matsumura.

“Most years we don’t hold back (kids), but this year has been quite a challenge. We do house visits from social workers, counselors, and vice principals and we still can’t get them to come,” he said.

At Honowai, where 65% of the ethnically mixed student body of 650 qualifies for a free or reduced price lunch, grades four to six are still on a blended in-person and virtual mode while kindergartners through third graders come to school every day.

Honowai Elementary's cafeteria, largely unused this year, recently installed special UV-C lights to prepare for next year's return of students.

The school has actually been offering summer school for several years now and first grade teacher Dawn Tolentino, one of the veterans, said she doesn't mind it.

"It's fine, I enjoy it, I look it as a cost-benefit thing," she said during a recent visit to her classroom, where children were munching on school breakfasts at their spaced-apart desks before the official start of the day. "It's in the mornings, it gets me up, it keeps me active."

Down the hall at Dalen Izumo's class combining fourth and fifth graders, 9-year-old Breydon Valencia said he preferred sitting in the classroom with his friends to learning from home.

"I like doing activities, projects," he said while shaping a piece of paper into a cone.

His teacher sat at the front of the room, monitoring the students in the classroom while also attending to fifth graders who were logging in remotely, through his laptop.

"I'm younger, so the technology, I don't mind it," said the 28-year-old teacher.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Honowai Elementary teacher Dalen Izumo teaches a class combining fourth graders who attend in person and fifth graders online.

But though Honowai will be offering its customary summer school this year, including a pre-kindergarten transition program and a music camp, it won't have capacity to extend other services.

“Classes will end at 11 or 12,” said Matsumura of the summer. “No grab and go meals — our staff is burnt out from the last year.”

There will be traditional summer school at 15 sites with more than 200 schools out of the total 294 offering learning hubs, outgoing school superintendent Christina Kishimoto said in [a guidebook for parents](#).

“Schools have worked hard to design programs of high interest for vulnerable students who have been less engaged during the pandemic as well as enrichment programs for students seeking to try new things and explore new interests,” her letter said.

But some schools are already facing difficulty in getting the students they most want to reach to sign on, thereby opening up spaces to the greater student body at large.

“Those are our priority and those are the ones we try and communicate to parents with, but at a certain point, we have to cut our losses and offer to others who are interested,” said Matsumura.

The DOE has pledged to collect and report summer learning data to “accurately and transparently assess the progress of these efforts.” The results will be shown on a Summer Learning Data Dashboard that will be “updated periodically during the summer” before a final report is issued, it said.

However, some education advocates question whether the DOE will be able to counteract its shortcomings last summer to reach the most vulnerable now that the pandemic has disrupted an entire school year. According to the He'e

Coalition's analysis, only 20% of disadvantaged children were reached that year, at a considerable cost.

“The structure of summer school for 2021-2022 does not seem to be significantly different than that of 2020-21,” Cheri Nakamura, director of the He'e Coalition, wrote to the BOE [in recent testimony](#).

Elaborating on that view, Nakamura said she observed that what's being offered this year is similar to last year with few additional specifics on how to measure progress.

She's concerned that DOE may not be tracking and reaching the right students.

“I would want to know, how many were you able to reach during summer school? Did they attend and if they didn't, why? If they didn't attend summer school, what can be done to try and address them?” she said.

Honowai Elementary Principal Kent Matsumura said the school is prioritizing summer school for students who fell the most far behind, but also said they have to “cut our losses” if the interest isn’t there.

Warren Hyde, a grandparent and community member, questioned the specifics of these summer learning options, comparing the “learning hubs” from a year ago to “a study hall — unstructured with little to no data collection and accountability for schools.”

“Let’s remember that pre-COVID, Hawaii has a very low achievement rate among all subjects,” he wrote in a letter of testimony to the Board of Education. “Students are already performing low, then COVID hit, and already low performance decreased.”

Many schools plan to jump right into summer school. At Waipahu Elementary, that means June 2 to July 16, with the new school starting on Aug. 3.

Some schools, like Farrington High, are also hiring school counselors for the first time for the summer — eight in total.

“We need to find out why the kid is failing before we can address the issue,” said principal Al Carganilla. “COVID-19 has really turned our system upside down.”

For a complete listing of summer learning programs including more information on how to sign up, [visit this website](#) launched by the Hawaii Afterschool Alliance.

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