

Hawai'i Scholars for Education and Social Justice

Research Brief #1

October 8, 2018

The Underfunding of Hawai'i's Public Schools and Proposed Supplemental Funding from Property Taxes

Hawai'i's public schools are chronically underfunded, and funding affects the quality of children's education.¹ Hawai'i voters have a rare opportunity on November 6 to approve a constitutional amendment that will provide additional state funds for public education.

The amendment will provide funding for education by taxing investment properties, including homes in which the owners do not live and commercial properties. Unlike other states, Hawai'i has one statewide school district. Educational funding from property taxes would be used to enrich all schools, not just the communities from which the taxes are collected.

Ethnic diversity is a strength of our population. But, the chronic underfunding of our public education system chips away at the strength of our diversity by creating a system of economic disparities. Since 2008, there has been a 33% increase in the numbers of students from low-income families in the public schools.² Native Hawaiians, Filipino Americans, and other ethnic minority groups constitute over 70% of the 180,000 public school students. Down the educational pipeline, these students continue to be underrepresented at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.³ Public education affects everyone, but is particularly important to our State's most vulnerable children. As citizens, it is our collective kuleana (responsibility) to care for each other, which includes addressing these educational disparities.

See the proposed amendment:

https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session2018/bills/SB2922_HD1_.htm

There are misleading claims and inaccurate assumptions 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 research brief that uses research in education and other relevant fields to show how underfunding affects public education and how funding from this amendment 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: The Hawai'i State Department of Education (DOE) is adequately funded.

Facts:

- **Hawai'i ranks among the lowest of states in percentage of state and local expenditures supporting K-12 education** (15.9%), compared to the U.S. average of 21.7%.⁴
- **As the cost of living in Hawai'i increased, the percentage of expenditures for public education remained the same.** The percentage expended for public education in Hawai'i per capita was the same in 2011-2012, as was in 1998-1999.⁵
- **When adjusted for cost-of-living, Hawaii's teachers are the lowest paid in the nation,**⁶ and Hawai'i is ranked as the worst state to be a teacher.⁷ This has led to a chronic teacher shortage. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of teachers who quit their job and

left Hawai'i increased by 84 percent from 2010 to 2018.⁸ For the 2017-18 school year, the DOE hired 524 unqualified "emergency hires" to fill teacher vacancies.⁹

Hawai'i ranks 42 of all states for per-pupil spending, when taking cost-of-living into consideration.¹⁰ The most recent study on the extent of underfunding of the public schools found that the DOE would need an additional \$278 million a year in order to provide an "adequate" education to its students.¹¹ Parents report that underfunding has resulted in not enough or dilapidated facilities; outdated textbooks; cancellation of classes in art, music, technology and PE; and inadequate support for multilingual learners and those with disabilities.^{12, 13} Most teachers use their own money to purchase supplies for their classrooms.¹⁴

Hawai'i's teachers are the lowest paid in the nation, when considering the cost-of-living.¹⁵ Teachers in Hawai'i make 19% less than other residents with bachelor's degrees in the State.¹⁶ Research suggests that when salaries are low, teachers leave for higher paying professions,¹⁷ and student performance worsens.¹⁸

In Hawai'i, only 2% of 4-year-olds attends a state-funded preschool, compared to the national average of 32%.¹⁹ Hawai'i ranks 42

of all states for access to public Pre-K and is the state with the highest percentage of a married couple's income needed for full-time preschool.²⁰ Due to lack of funds, Pre-K education is offered at only 24 of the 170 elementary schools. Over \$139 million is needed over the next 10 years to operate public Pre-K classrooms to reach the State's goal of serving 36% of 4-year-olds.²¹ An additional \$456 million is needed to build appropriate facilities for those classrooms.

Misconception #2: More funding will not lead to improved education.

Facts:

- **Funding matters in education.** There is clear evidence that quality education is expensive and there are few low-cost alternatives to well-funded schools.²²
- **Increased funding for public education raises student achievement and performance,** increases high school graduation rates, and leads to higher income as adults.²³ Students who attend public schools in better funded districts are more likely to go to college.²⁴ Increased funding has the greatest positive effect on student outcomes when it is used to raise teachers' salaries, reduce class sizes, or lengthen the school year.²⁵
- **Increased funding in Hawai'i could allow the DOE to expand promising practices** such as Early College, in which students enroll in college-level courses taught on their high school campuses²⁶ and increased access to Pre-K programs in public schools.

Better funding can improve the public schools and make a difference in children's learning and educational experiences. Contrary to perceptions that educational funding in Hawai'i is used for "middle management," 93% of the DOE budget is used for direct school support, including teacher salaries.²⁷

Higher teacher salaries attract more qualified teachers and keep teachers from leaving their jobs.^{28, 29} Improved teacher retention strengthens student-teacher relationships, thereby improving student learning and achievement.³⁰ Higher spending for public schools leads to lower student-to-teacher ratios and smaller class sizes.³¹ School districts with higher teacher salaries have higher student test scores in reading and mathematics³² and tend to produce higher student graduation rates.^{33, 34}

Increased funding can also provide needed instructional materials. With limited access to resources, teachers from underperforming schools often use outdated or otherwise inadequate instructional materials, equipment, and supplies.³⁵

Better funding can also provide high quality teacher professional development, which is related to children's growth and achievement, particularly for students from low income and multilingual backgrounds.³⁶ Good professional development increases teachers' capacity for effective teaching and leads to decentralization of decision-making about resources such that principals and teachers decide how to best leverage resources for school improvement.³⁷ Such practices foster teacher engagement in professional learning activities and collaboration between educators that leads to effective and student-centered instruction.³⁸ This, in turn, affects student achievement and performance.³⁹

There are promising practices in the DOE that if expanded could lead to greater learning and achievement. Since its start in 2012 at Waipahu High School, Early College has increased annually in the number of students served, classes taught, and participating schools.⁴⁰ In 2018, 18 Early College students graduated with UH Associate of Arts degrees before graduating from high school. In 2017, the DOE requested \$9 million to expand the program to every high school in the State, but received only \$2 million for two years (2017-2019) from the State legislature.

Greater funding can also increase access to publicly supported Pre-K programs. There is strong evidence that quality early childhood education is related to positive outcomes, including increased cognitive skills, better transition to kindergarten and greater learning and engagement in school.⁴¹ Children who participate in high quality early childhood education, particularly those from lower income families, are more likely to graduate from high school and college.⁴² There are intergenerational effects on individuals that also affect their children's education and earning potentials.⁴³ The economic returns are greatest when the investment is made before children are 5-years-old.⁴⁴

Misconception #3: Higher property taxes will adversely affect Hawai'i's economy and local people's lifestyles.

Facts:

- **Hawai'i has a very high percentage of out-of-state property owners, many of whom leave their places vacant for most of the year.** Statewide, those from out-of-state own over 70% of commercial related properties, (e.g., beach house rentals, office buildings, storefronts) and close to 11% of residential properties.⁴⁵ Scholars explain that this is partly due to low property taxes.^{46,47}
- **Housing in Hawai'i is very expensive.** Hawai'i has highest cost of median monthly rent and the third highest median cost for mortgages in the U.S.⁴⁸ An analysis by the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism⁴⁹ concluded that **higher state taxes on investment property would discourage out-of-state buyers from leaving their properties vacant. This would lead to lower home prices and a greater inventory of homes for local families' purchases and rentals.**
- In all other states, where the school system is funded by property taxes, higher property taxes are related to higher quality schools and better education for residents in those communities.⁵⁰ Similarly, **if Hawai'i were to use property taxes to increase funding for the State's public school system, all residents would benefit from improved schools and education.**

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

Facts:

- **Hawai'i's employers and consumers depend on an educated workforce.** By 2020, most jobs in Hawai'i will require education beyond a high school degree.⁵¹
- **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.⁵² In Hawai'i, people who could afford private education, but chose public schools for their children, often viewed this as a benefit of their public school choice.⁵³

- **Better-funded public education is related to lower poverty.** For every additional dollar spent on public schools, there is a \$2 return investment at the individual level, resulting in a person's

6% lower likelihood of living in poverty.⁵⁴ Lower poverty in Hawai'i will benefit everyone in the community by decreasing homelessness and other social problems.⁵⁵

- Increased funding and quality of public schools could encourage parents who currently send their children to private schools to switch to public schools, thereby reducing their financial burden.

Conclusion

By creating this research briefing paper, HSESJ presents the facts related to the underfunding of public education in Hawai'i and its effects on children, teachers, and community members. We point to the ways that increased funding can create a more productive learning environment for students, particularly those from low-income and ethnic minority communities, who make up the majority of our public schools. We underscore that increased funding for the Hawai'i Department of Education is needed to improve the education and lives of our children, and that increasing educational funding by taxing investment properties can benefit our State as a whole.

Notes

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Hawai'i Scholars for Education and Social Justice (HSESJ) is a volunteer group of researchers in Hawai'i who conducts, reviews, and disseminates research related to education and social justice in Hawai'i. Our goal is to use research to promote dialogue and create an informed consciousness about public education in our State. We partner with educators, educational groups, and non-profit organizations. **If you are interested in learning more or becoming involved, please email Infohsesj@gmail.com.**

Our educational researchers are available for comment and discussion on topics raised in this research brief.

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