

SPECIAL REPORT { *Exploring Hawaii's charter schools.*

Tweet Like 75 Send

6 Reactions

## Learning Hilo — The New Voyage

By Alia Wong and PF Bentley | 11/22/2013

Part 5 of a 5-part series



HILO, HAWAII — A 6-year-old boy stands between his classmates in line to gear up for the daily after-school assembly. His brown bangs are crooked and freckles dot his nose and cheeks, which are marked with traces of his last meal. If his blue T-shirt of Batman, the resilient "Caped Crusader," is any indication, he may want to be a superhero.



PF Bentley/Civil Beat

And who could blame him. His arms and legs are raw with bug bites, some scabbing so badly they could leave scars. When he leaves school at the end of the day, Principal Daniel Caluya later told us, he doesn't go home because he doesn't really have one. As is the case for about 100 of the 130 kids at Na Wai Ola Public Charter School, the boy is homeless, according to Caluya, who cites data the school tracks [as part of the federal MicKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#). (The law defines homeless children as those who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.")

Na Wai Ola, an elementary school in the Big Island's impoverished Puna district, was the first charter school *Civil Beat* visited for its [Learning Hilo series](#), a collection of profiles on four of the nine charter schools in the roughly 50-mile expanse that runs from Hamakua to Volcano. Na Wai Ola offers an example of how a failing — [and, it is worth clarifying, truly failing](#) — school has [turned itself around](#) in a matter of years to become one of the highest-achieving public schools in the state.

Caluya says the recipe is simple: responsibility, compassion and a strong conviction that failure is not an inevitable by-product of money, ethnic origin or geographic distance from the powers that be.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

About the Authors

**Alia Wong**  
Reporter

Articles / Alia Wong  
Topics / Alia Wong

**PF Bentley**  
Chief Photographer

Articles / PF Bentley  
Topics / PF Bentley

**Thank you for your interest in Honolulu Civil Beat! We are subscriber-supported and your subscription allows us to provide quality, in-depth investigative reporting.**

**Not a subscriber yet? Help us keep telling the stories that impact your community, sign up here!**

- Your Team At Civil Beat

Media



Related Content

- Articles
- Learning Hilo — The Turnaround
  - Learning Hilo — School's In
  - Learning Hilo — Defending Hawaii
  - Learning Hilo — The Bucket List

Recommended Content



PF Bentley/Civil Beat

*Na Wai Ola Public Charter School*

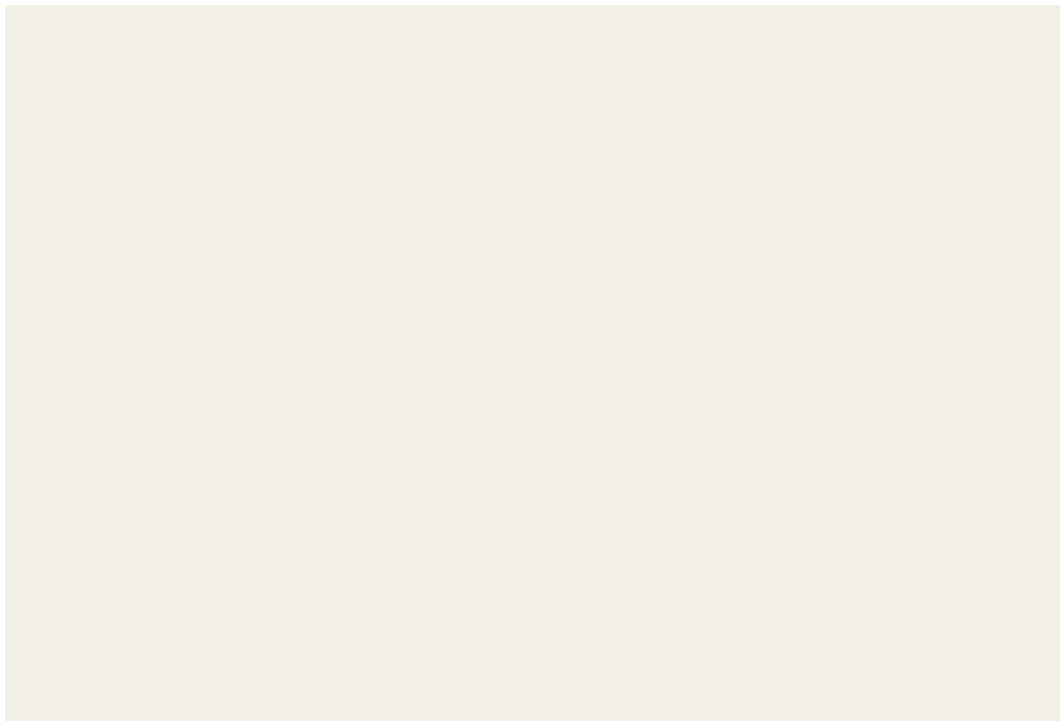
Follow Civil Beat      

The varied visits offered a glimpse into the educational diversity that characterizes the state's 33 charter schools. Even the 17 charter schools in Hawaii geared toward the specific goal of rejuvenating the Hawaiian language and culture comprise a mixed bag of learning models and teaching practices, contexts and outcomes.

But there is a sort of glue that holds these schools together. It is something that often sets them apart from the state's 255 more-traditional public schools, and it has to do with a sense of place, identity and circumstances.

Part of it involves growing up surrounded by rural poverty. After Na Wai Ola, we visited Connections, a K-12 school in downtown Hilo, as well as a pair of Hawaiian immersion schools; an average of three in every four children on their campuses are considered poor.

But the schools are working to make sure that does not define the children's future. They are also working to give the kids reasons to want to be in school. Part of that means making students into temporary stakeholders who help to shape their school, and that they can be genuinely proud of it.





PF Bentley/Civil Beat

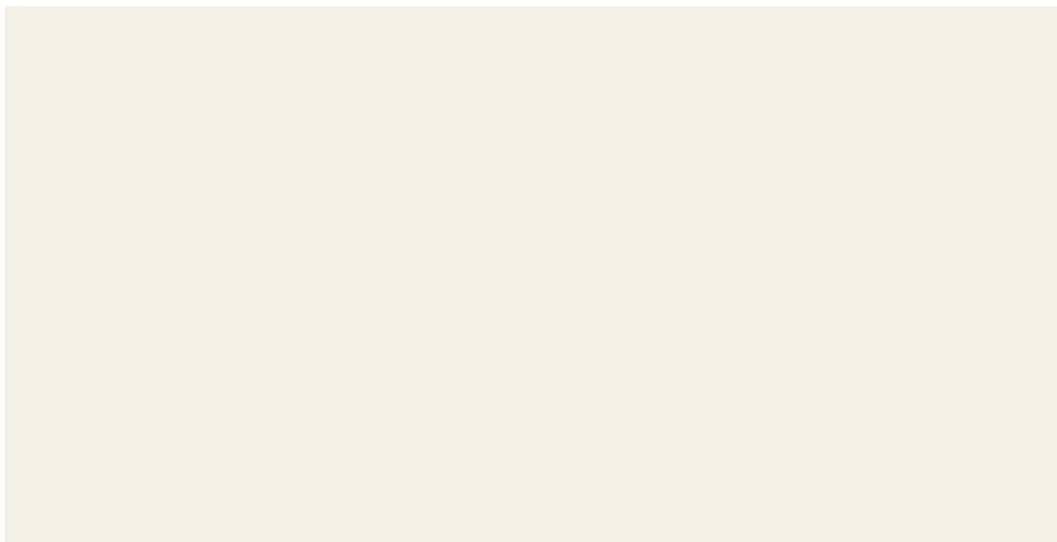
11-year-old Kaniaumoana Kekuewa and 13-year-old Krystyn Vidinha, Connections Public Charter School

At Na Wai Ola the school garden is the students' laboratory. They planted and observed, grew and created, as their dirt-smudged faces glowed with concentration and as moist soil seeped between their fingers. In one of the campus's rundown classroom bungalows, Sandy Carvalho's fifth graders fixated on their iPad minis (purchased thanks to grant money from the state) as they researched countries that joined the United Nations after World War II. With markers and colored pencils, they drew the countries' flags and then eagerly approached their teacher, asking, "Can I move on to the next one?"

Along the beach in Keaukaha, sixth graders from [Ka Umeke Kaeo](#) collected data from a fishpond, observing how the day's climate affected the life swimming below the shimmering surface — the latest of several visits to the *loko*. They knew that their research mattered beyond the confines of their school. And they knew it was theirs. At [Connections](#), students know something else belonged to them: the plastic and wooden objects they designed and produced in "the Makery," not to mention the music they shared with their peers.

And at [Nawahiokalaniopuu Iki](#), students took pride in seeing themselves as the latest soldiers in the struggle to revive the Hawaiian language and bolster their culture. Language was taken away from them, they said, and now they're learning it back. Hawaiian, as one 14-year-old boy explained, "is our life."

"It's our heart and soul."





PF Bentley/Civil Beat

*Nawahiokalaniopuu Iki*

Soul. There's a lot of it in and around Hilo, not least in those four schools. The charter-school "laboratories of innovation" aren't just places where instruction is delivered seven hours daily five days per week. Those schools are gathering places, community hubs — second homes, even. In fact, for some students, the schools offer more of a home than anywhere else.

At Connections, teenagers congregate after school to do the things they love. The program keeps them off the streets and out of trouble — a safety net considering that more than half of teenagers in the Hilo area say they [lack sufficient parental supervision](#), according to [University of Hawaii](#) data.



PF Bentley/Civil Beat

*Ka Umeke Kaeo*

At the other schools, students gather in chant and song everyday to express their gratitude to each other and to the people who got them where they are today. The harmony of their voices is almost haunting. It reverberates throughout the once-condemned public gym that Na Wai Ola has recently co-opted for its students and the gazebo ceilings of outdoor lanai where Hawaiian-speaking children gather everyday without their shoes.

As Cheryl Lupenui, chair of the [Board of Education](#)'s student achievement committee, recently said, in Hawaii there's a special relationship between school and a sense of place for students.

Charter schools are at the forefront of a "voyage," she said, to bring the world to Hawaii's children and Hawaii's children to the world.

The little boy in the blue Batman shirt might not yet know about such details, but superheroes usually have to overcome some form of hardship, including childhood scars, to tap into their special powers.

*Read other stories in this five-part series:*

- [Learning Hilo — The Turnaround](#)
- [Learning Hilo — School's In](#)
- [Learning Hilo — Defending Hawaii](#)
- [Learning Hilo — The Bucket List](#)

*Click the bottom right-hand button to enlarge the slideshow and read Photographer PF Bentley's insights about some of the photographs from Learning Hilo:*

---

DISCUSSION: *What do you think charter schools have to offer Hawaii?*

Tweet  Like  75  Send

Have feedback? Suggestions? [Email Us!](#)

---

Discussion

9 comments ▼

[Add a comment](#)



[Steve Hirakami](#)

Imagine this is happening at 33 charter schools around the State, not only on Hawaii Island which has 14, but also on Maui, Molokai, Kauai, and Windward, Leeward, and Central Oahu. Listening to and responding to our unique and diverse communities around the State about the social, cultural, and educational needs of our children. Congratulations to all four of these schools for the wonderful display of love and commitment and congratulations to all charter schools in the State who are beating the economic odds to deliver this wonderful and valuable service to Hawaii.

[Reply](#) ·  3 · - November 22 at 5:50pm

[About Us](#) | [Contact](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Partners](#) | [Archive](#) | [Topics](#) | [Multimedia](#) | [Register](#)

Copyright © 2010-2013 Peer News LLC. All rights reserved.

Civil Beat ® is a registered trademark of Peer News LLC

All purchases subject to Hawaii and City and County of Honolulu General Excise Tax of 4.712%.

Coded With Aloha