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Learning Hilo — School's In

By Alia Wong CONNECT | 11/19/2013

Part 2 of a 5-part series



HILO, HAWAII — Downtown Hilo looks like it's frozen in time. Low, modest buildings are deteriorating relics of the sugar plantation era. The streets are usually quiet and free of traffic. Palm trees line a main boulevard that runs along the normally calm Hilo bay.



PF Bentley/Civil Beat

Hilo's plantation heyday is hardly more than a memory. The Big Island's last sugar plantation closed in 1995, and since then the area has for the most part found itself in a prolonged slump. Today, Hilo has the lowest percentage of married-couple families in the state, according to a UH Center on the Family study. It is home to a large number of "idle teens" — those age 16 through 19 who are not in school or employed, and UH data indicates that more than half of teenagers in the area grow up without sufficient parental supervision. Nearly one in four children lives below the poverty level, many of them in single-mother households, according to U.S. Census data. For children under the age of five, that percentage rises to nearly 30 percent, which is double the state average.

And then there is the material impact: the median household income in the town is about \$53,000, \$14,000 less than state's median, Census data shows.

It is enough to make people wonder what, if any, future the children here will have. "A fundamental question that all of the Big Island asks is, "Will our youth be able to live and make a living on the Big Island?" said Jim Shon, director of the University of Hawaii at Manoa's Hawaii Educational Policy Center.

Hilo, he added, is "a town that seems to want to fade."

The challenge at Connections, a high-poverty K-12 charter school partially housed in downtown Hilo's 81-year-old Kress Building, is to help make sure that doesn't happen. It is no easy task. After all, about three-fourths of the school's 359 students are low-income and eligible for free or discounted lunches, and many are from broken homes without positive male role models, according to the principal, John Thatcher.

With a long white ponytail and constant smile, Thatcher, a former public school teacher, looks like a cool uncle who might have once enjoyed rocking out on stage. He seems to know almost every student by name and floats between groups of kids, engaging them in conversation.

Thatcher thinks of Connections as a microcosm of Hilo's diversity. He envisions a place where everyone gets along and respects each other and where students develop creativity and confidence that they'll export to the outside world as adults. He also sees Connections as a safe zone the kids choose to come to, rather than resorting to drugs or crime.

Making Connections

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At Connections, teachers work to create self-confident autonomous kids who can — and want to — break down barriers, think outside the box and thrive regardless of the economic and social hardships around them.



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A core tenet of Connections' philosophy on education is simple: make learning fun so kids want to attend school. Think of it as teaching way beyond the test. On any given school day, clusters of children are dispersed throughout the colorful first floor of the Kress Building reading scripts for a theater class in a corner of the cafeteria, writing in their daily journals or doing research for self-driven projects, oftentimes with the help of the books that line nearly every wall. After school, the building turns into an open playground where kids can dance and sing, create and produce. For many, school doesn't really end until dinnertime, as dusk settles on the ocean-side boulevard.

And that seems to be the way the students like it. At Connections, *school's in*. About 100 kids are on the school's waiting list.

It's all about "educating the whole child," explains Thatcher after school as a group of teenage boys gathered on a makeshift stage, taking turns breakdancing to '90s hip-hop music and sparking applause from an energized crowd. "These kids are just being the way kids are these days."

Students at Connections display a dizzying medley of skills and interests, experiences and dreams, from

singing and musical theater to engineering and design. Their stories seem to come together gradually, like the pieces of a puzzle. Staff understand the importance of giving them the opportunity to believe and invest in their own talents and goals.

They're Hilo's next generation, the kids who Thatcher and others hope won't let the town fade.

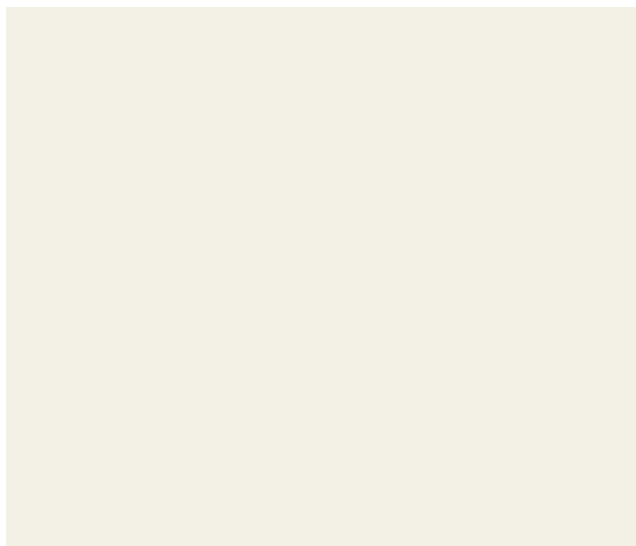
Civil Beat's *Learning Hilo* Series

[Civil Beat](#) is profiling Connections and other charter schools in and around the Hilo area as part of its five-part education series, *Learning Hilo*. The series takes a closer look at a handful of the state's 33 charter schools, most of which serve large populations of low-income students and about half of which are geared toward revitalizing the Native Hawaiian culture, either through Hawaiian-language schooling or values-based instruction.

The majority of Connections' students are very poor and, although most students are of mixed ethnicity, 39 percent identify as Native Hawaiian. (Special education is also a prominent feature at the school where 14 percent are in special ed, compared with a statewide average of less than 10 percent.)

The kids come from throughout the Big Island's eastern corridor, from Kau to Hamakua. The school has three of its own buses — a \$28,600 investment Thatcher said was worth making in order to assure that all kids, no matter their location, have access to a quality education. The school spends about \$35,000 each year maintaining the buses, too.

Connections does a lot with little — and despite a track record of legal disputes that placed its financial integrity in question, including a high-profile conflict-of-interest case that [went before the state Ethics Commission](#) late last year. The commission found that school employee Eric Boyd, who also owns and runs a food





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service business, engaged in more than two dozen ethics violations since 2006, including signing off on payments to himself as the vendor of the school meals. The Ethics Commission argued that the dispute raised important questions about charter schools whose finances existed at the time in something of a gray area, and therefore the outcome of the proceedings

had the capacity to set precedents for the state. Boyd was initially fined \$10,000, but after an appeal the state agreed to reduce the fine. The new amount is still being negotiated, Thatcher said.

Thatcher vehemently disagrees with the commission's decision, saying it was a "witch hunt" spearheaded by a disgruntled former employee who had been fired. According to Thatcher, charter schools were exempt from the state procurement code and Boyd was merely trying to save the school money. Boyd still works at Connections.

Facility Woes

Like all charter schools, Connections doesn't get any additional money from the state for facilities, which Thatcher says really stretches the school thin considering the high costs for goods and services. The after-school program, for example, costs \$95,000 per year. On a larger scale, the school's nonprofit arm [bought the Kress Building](#), which underwent large-scale renovations in 1995, for \$2.25 million in 2006 and leases some of the units out to a handful of tenants, including a movie theater and Indian restaurant. The school cafeteria contains the remnants of the vintage soda fountain that once stood in its place. Connections' annual operating budget is \$2.98 million, which appears to be comparable to other schools.

But the three-story Kress Building, which only has enough room to serve the school's K-8 classes, is cramped; its two main classroom spaces each hold three grade levels separated only by improvised partitions. Teachers must coordinate their schedules to avoid holding noisy activities that might disrupt other classes in the same room.

The building also lacks ventilation. A layer of heat permeates administrative offices located on the building's top floor, leaving most afternoons in the section unbearable. There's also a gaping hole in part of the ceiling, which offers an open view of water and termite damage the building has suffered over the years.

Meanwhile, classes for Connections' high school



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students are held at a temporary campus that is a 12-minute drive away.

Thatcher's efforts to develop a permanent campus closer to the Kress Building have so far succumbed to numerous roadblocks, including a scathing campaign to stop the construction that has been described as a form of "harassment" by residents who generally oppose development in the area.

After the normal school day ends, the school transports from there to Connections' Kress campus where the second floor is home to a brand-new after-school program for students in grades six through 12. The program is free. "Studio Shaka," as it's called, was launched in July as the first U.S. offshoot of New Zealand's High Tech Youth Network. The network's mission is to empower young people and encourage them to fulfill their potential through after-school activities that link cultural knowledge with technology.

At "Studio Shaka," kids choose what they want to do for the afternoon. The music room is a favorite among even the most timid children, while in the computer room kids can edit and produce short movies. But "The Makery" room might be the most popular. There, students have access to a range of high-tech equipment purchased with outside grants — including laptops equipped with top-notch software, a laser cutter and a 3-D printer — to turn computerized graphic designs into objects made out of materials such as wood and plastic. The walls of the Makery are lined with dusty book shelves that exhibit past student work — boxes, earring holders, masks and an intricate three-way chessboard whose design was invented by a high school student.

The activities provide positive outlets for students, allowing them to unleash their creativity and gain confidence in skills they might not otherwise have the opportunity to harness, said Kris Kua, who coordinates the Studio Shaka program.

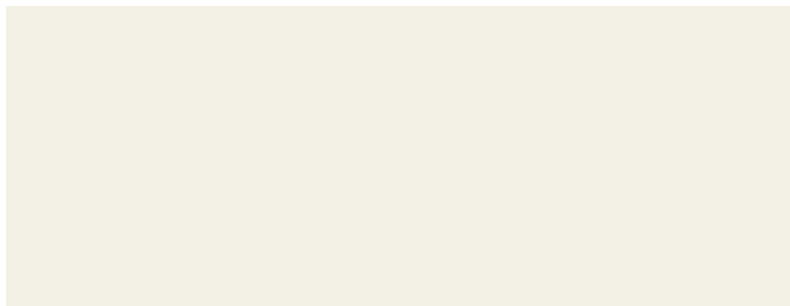
He regularly posts videos and photos featuring student work on social media and the Studio Shaka website. "We're capturing their greatness and then showcasing it and sharing it," Kua said.

Creations and Careers

On paper, Connections is performing on par with other schools in the state. Seventy-three percent of its students met reading proficiency last school year, exceeding the statewide goal of 71 percent. But the school failed to meet the state's math proficiency benchmark of 60 percent, with only 47 percent of its students proficient.

Still, Thatcher points to the \$1.25 million in grants the school has received from private and public sources as evidence that the community believes in the school's core mission of producing the next generation of innovators who are passionate about making the world — or at least their world — a better place. And Studio Shaka is the newest chapter of a two-decade-long effort to achieve that mission.

In the Makery, students were busy at work with their inventions. One student watched as the 3-D printer built a plastic case he made for his USB thumb drive. Another was making a puzzle in a sophisticated graphic design program, clicking





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her mouse as she shifted the cursor around lines on the computer screen.

Nearby, a girl displayed a box containing dozens of intricate wooden earrings that she designed with the laser cutter, jewelry that she would sell later that week for \$7 each at a booth at the downtown Hilo Art Walk.

Bill Thorpe, the teacher who oversees the program, said the Makery is sort of like a blank canvas where anything goes. Most of the objects created in the Makery, according to Thorpe, are the result of students' original designs. He urges them to create objects that they will actually use in the real world.

"I always say, 'if you see or feel frustration that's where the need is,'" Thorpe said, pointing to a decorative board that one student made to hold keys. "It points the students to a career rather than a job."

UH Manoa College of Education professor Neil Scott recently teamed up with Connections to open a similar makery in downtown Hilo, where students can create products to sell. Several of Connections' students have already secured internships at the shop.

Up on the second-floor hallway, music continued to echo.

Eighth-grader Gracie Rogers, a slim, soft-spoken girl, said she transferred to Connections because she didn't fit in at the private school she attended previously. Sitting in a green chair, she soulfully sang an iconic song by The Animals that includes a warning to the next generation about a life squandered in self-destructive partying. Her twin brother Tate, his brows furrowed and lips pursed with concentration, played an electric guitar.

The lyrics of the song? "Oh mother tell your children/Not to do what I have done/Spend your lives in sin and misery/In the House of the Rising Sun."

Read other stories in this five-part series:

- [Learning Hilo — The Turnaround](#)
- [Learning Hilo — Defending Hawaii](#)
- [Learning Hilo — The Bucket List](#)
- [Learning Hilo — The New Voyage](#)

DISCUSSION: *What do you think about Connections' approach to education? What did you learn from your own schooling?*

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