

FEATURE

Does Hawaii Make the Case for Religious Charters?

*Immersion charter schools in the Aloha State infuse
native language, culture, and tradition*

THE POST-PANDEMIC GENERATION—to be dubbed, perhaps, the Coronials—wrestles with fears, emotional distress, and social isolation. Bullying, chronic absenteeism, dropping out, drug use, shoplifting, and even suicide are on the rise. Device-staring replaces people-watching. Independence, energy, and entrepreneurship seem in scarce supply. With the social world shaking beneath their feet, district school teachers and leaders are easing academic standards, recruiting social workers, and emphasizing social and emotional learning.

Few public educators are openly asking for divine help, but that, too, could change. The Texas legislature is considering legislation that would allow local districts to recruit chaplains to “provide support, services, and programs for students” in public schools. A charter authorizer in Oklahoma has given the go-ahead for opening an online Catholic charter school in 2024, invoking the 2022 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, in *Carson v. Makin*, that government funds may not be denied to religious entities if granted to secular ones. Still, the Sooner State is not the soonest to consider allowing religious instruction at a charter school. That honor belongs to Hawaii, where charter schools are

By PAUL E. PETERSON and NINA BUCHANAN



*Students from the Kua O
Ka Lā New Century Public
Charter School in Hilo,
Hawaii, led by their kumu
(teacher), learn about the
cultural and medicinal
uses of native plants while
exploring a local forest.*



seeking connections to the gods deeply embedded in Hawaiian culture and tradition.

This may come as a surprise to observers of Hawaii's political alignments. Just as Hawaiian skies glow with a luminous blue (*aouli*), and its enveloping ocean gleams a darker hue (*kai uli*), state politics display a blue so deep we have yet to learn the equivalent Hawaiian word. Yet many public charter schools in the state are explicitly religious. For more than two decades, students at Hawaiian-focused schools have offered chants and prayers to the pantheon of gods who rule over skies, seas, and earth, including to the volcanic god, Pelehonuamea ("she who shapes the sacred land"), popularly known as Madam Pele.

Prayers begin the school day as part of protocol, a series of songs (*mele*), chants (*oli*), prayers (*pule*), and homilies ("ōlelo no'eau) reminiscent of morning chapel or classroom prayers at a Catholic or Evangelical Protestant school. Upon arrival, students declare their readiness to learn by requesting teacher permission to enter their classrooms. Embarrassed tardy students must chant a similar request before the assembled community.

On the occasion we visited one immersion charter school on the island of Hawaii—also known as the Big Island—boys and girls, neatly divided from one another, chanted their *pule* while standing perfectly erect, à la George W. Bush. (At the wish of the immersion schools we visited, we are not identifying the schools by name.) A class of 4th graders visiting from Maui, a bit less correct in posture, faced them at the door of the school throughout the 20-minute protocol, complete with chanted *oli*, ukulele-accompanied *mele*, and "ōlelo delivered by faculty, students, and the school director on the importance of learning one's heritage. The protocol was chanted in Hawaiian, as the curriculum at immersion charter schools is conveyed entirely in the indigenous tongue, even though nearly everyone on the islands speaks conventional English. That was the required language of instruction from the end of the 19th century, when the U.S. asserted its control over the islands, until 1986.

Gods make their presence felt on the Big Island, an isle so young it keeps growing. In late 2022, Mauna Loa erupted, pouring molten lava down the mountain for 16 miles, coming within striking distance of Saddle Road, the major thoroughfare between the island's leeward and windward sides. In January 2023, Madam Pele's home, Halema'uma'u, spewed fountains of lava 160 feet high, reminding everyone that in 2018 the volcano had poured forth a profusion of *ʻaʻā* (stony lava) and *pāhoehoe* (smooth lava) that destroyed rain forests, roads, homes, and the Kua O Ka Lā charter school. Most recently, nearly 100 people lost their lives to wildfire on Maui's dry side.

But why are students at charter schools reciting traditional prayers in Hawaiian? How did immersion charters emerge? How do their character-building practices, with their morning protocols, shape school culture and functioning? How do they survive in a state governed by a political party better known for its advocacy of strict separation between church and state?

We do not have all the answers. But one of us has studied and worked closely with the charter schools since they were founded. The other brings a mainland perspective enriched by brief visits to two charter schools that immerse students in the Hawaiian language and two that instruct students in English but are nonetheless infused with indigenous cultural traditions.

Hawaiian Renaissance

*At the time when the earth became hot
At the time when the heavens turned about
At the time when the sun was darkened . . .
The intense darkness, the deep darkness
Darkness of the sun, darkness of the night
Nothing but night*

So begins *Kumulipo*, the revered Hawaiian creation chant. "Nothing but night" expresses well the state of Hawaiian culture in 1970, about three-quarters of a century after Queen Lili'uokalani surrendered her sacred lands to pro-American insurgents and the islands were annexed by the United States. To assimilate and acculturate a multiethnic population of Japanese, Chinese, and European immigrants, the government required that schools teach standard English, and the islands became celebrated as an integrationist nirvana. But the indigenous population paid a high price when asked to give up its language, the incubator and transmitter of so much of its cultural heritage. Attached to the land but resistant to work in the cane fields, native Hawaiians were pushed to the periphery, trailing all other ethnic groups in income, education, health, and longevity.

Then came the Hawaiian Renaissance of the late 20th century, when the indigenous population and its advocates acquired greater political influence. Protestors succeeded in convincing the U.S. Navy to give up the island of Kahō'olawe, which the military once used for bombing and nuclear testing exercises. Farmers refused to make way for a large development in the Waiahole-Waikane valley in Oahu. Traditional Hawaiian songs and legends found their way into mainstream popular music. The law banning instruction in Hawaiian was repealed, and the language was finally offered in some of the islands' public schools, typically as an additional subject for those who were interested. It was at immersion charter schools that the movement reached its fullest expression.

Immersion

Immersion has a different meaning in Hawaii than it does at most bilingual charter schools on the mainland. At the latter, immersion consists of dual instruction in both English and the native tongue spoken at home by recently arrived newcomers. In Hawaii, immersion means instruction conducted only in the Hawaiian language, which is seldom spoken at home. The goal is not to open the door to the mainstream language but

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to sustain a heritage that has been pushed to the periphery.

One may wonder whether such immersion programs prepare young people for life and work in an English-speaking society, but as a tool for cultural preservation, the strategy has many advantages. Both immersion schools we visited are enjoying rising enrollments, with hundreds of students pressing the school's

been there since he matriculated in preschool. New teachers are needed as the schools expand, of course, and at one of the schools, a few senior teachers have left to take positions at Kamehameha, a private, multi-campus school that serves children of Hawaiian descent (see sidebar). Others have accepted leadership positions at immersion charters on other islands.

Principals say the earlier a student begins at an immersion school, the better. Hawaii's charter law lets the schools give enrollment preference to younger students, and parents of older applicants are counseled that language learning is more difficult beyond a certain age. Neither immersion school typically admits a child beyond the age of seven, though an exception was made for a passionate young person desperate to retrieve his heritage language.

For the school, the advantage of early recruitment can hardly be overstated. The child quickly adapts to school culture, parents



Students perform their morning wehena, or protocol, a practice of unifying hearts and minds and calling upon the wisdom of ancestors.

physical capacities, substantial waiting lists, strong leadership, and a stable teaching staff. You cannot teach a new language without high expectations and devoted teaching. And students benefit doubly from the instruction in Hawaiian, since learning another language can also enhance comprehension of the structure underpinning one's original tongue.

Clearly, the immersion schools have an élan that other charter schools might hope to emulate. Administrators say that only one or two new teachers leave each year. A senior at one of the schools told us that his teachers, "except for the new ones," have

connect to teachers, the dress code is accepted, and students learn early the practice of "talking story," the Hawaiian way of conversing thoughtfully and showing mutual respect when issues arise. Our student guide at one school said, "I feel sorry for the kids who can't come here."

At both immersion schools we visited, we observed especially large preschool classes. The tiny tots at one school chanted and listened to the visiting 4th graders from Maui with as much composure as could be expected of preschoolers. A few knew the chants well, and the rest followed along. The worst error was

committed by one of your authors, who, until corrected, lined up on the female visitors' side of the room.

Our student guide said that children never receive explicit instruction in the chants they perform. Rather, they follow teachers and other students until they master the language and gradually come to understand the chants' meanings. According to a faculty member in the Hawaiian Studies program at the University of Hawaii at Hilo—an immersion program itself—immersion students have a fluency with the Hawaiian language well beyond that of students who learn it as a second language at an English-speaking school; but, having learned by rote, immersion students are more likely to make grammatical errors.

Families of students at immersion charter schools show their commitment by arranging for their child's transportation, purchasing the school uniform, and covering costs for

extracurricular activities. Still, not all parents are devotees of the Hawaiian Renaissance. Some families calculate that an immersion experience in elementary school enhances chances for acceptance at Kamehameha, which gives priority to those with demonstrated cultural awareness. Others simply prefer the immersion schools' emphasis on community and character building.

Are immersion students learning the skills needed to survive and prosper in contemporary society? We are told that most graduates go on to college. And Shawn Kana'iaupuni, a sociologist who is now director of planning at Kamehameha Schools in Honolulu, reports that, despite low performance upon entry, students at Hawaiian-focused schools showed greater progress on state standardized tests administered between 2003 and 2006 than comparable students at the state's traditional public schools. Whether that edge still exists cannot be ascertained by looking at state testing data. Many parents ask that their child not be tested, and administrators, aware that performance on standardized tests is not one of the schools' strong points, do not seem inclined to press the point.

A few parents seek exceptions to other rules. One parent explained that her boy no longer wanted to participate in protocol. "That's fine," said the principal, "there is no need to participate in protocol. This is a school of choice. There are plenty of other schools your child may attend." The boy decided to stay. He was not eager to attend a school administered by the Hawai'i State Department of Education.

The Department of Education

Those who think school districts and local school boards should be abolished will find Hawaii the paradise travel agents claim it to be. The governor appoints the one and only board of education that governs the Department of Education, or DOE, which in turn operates all traditional public schools from its headquarters in Honolulu. The board also appoints the state's one and only charter school authorizer. Currently, Hawaii has 37 charter schools serving about 12,000 students, or approximately 7 percent of the state's public-school enrollment.

The DOE has a collective bargaining agreement with the Hawaii State Teachers Association, which represents all DOE and charter-school teachers. In both sectors, teachers are licensed by the state and compensated according to a single salary and benefit schedule. The DOE assigns teachers to the schools it operates, but charter schools may recruit their own teaching staff. Teachers at DOE schools can switch to a charter school and remain at the same level on



Charter students learn to make poi, the traditional staple food of Hawaii made from the taro plant. Poi is cooked, mashed, and fermented to taste.

During the Hawaiian Renaissance of the late 20th century, the indigenous population and its advocates began to exert more influence on the culture.

the salary schedule. If they choose to return to a DOE school, they also stay at the same level.

Charters do not necessarily receive the same per-pupil funding levels as DOE schools, because the state legislature determines a lump-sum allocation for all charters, and the money is distributed among charters on a per-pupil basis. Charters face a particular lack of funding for transportation, special education, other ancillary activities, and, of greatest import, land acquisition and capital expenditure.

DOE schools in the town of Hilo (population about 45,000) are large, impersonal, featureless, pale-yellow brick structures apparently built with Pacific winds and storms foremost in mind. By comparison, the charter schools we visited resembled tents in a forest.

The Hawaiian Renaissance has barely touched DOE's educational mission. Since its founding, DOE's principal goal has been the integration of a multiplicity of cultures under an English-only umbrella. Small Hawaiian-focused programs were initiated within DOE in response to Renaissance pressures, but when given the opportunity to separate themselves from DOE into charter schools, these programs chose autonomy and flexibility over stable physical facilities.

For its part, DOE was pleased to see them depart.

Sacred Land

Charters across the United States struggle to find adequate facilities for their schools, but the competition for space is even more intense on an island in the middle of the ocean. Nothing illustrates this point better than the fate of Kua O Ka Lā, a non-immersion charter school serving indigenous families in a rural area near Hilo. In 2002 the school's founders leased 600 acres of oceanfront property owned by the Bishop estate (see sidebar). Students studied its rainforest vegetation, lava soil, and geothermally warmed ponds, which were on occasion used as swimming holes. Kua O Ka Lā had clearly found the right place for a Hawaiian-focused school. Its enrollment grew

to 282 students during the school's first 16 years.

Then, in 2018, Pelehonuamea lost her temper. The volcanic forces that had warmed the ponds destroyed both Kua O Ka Lā and the home of one of its principal benefactors. The school turned to the Hilo Boy's and Girl's Club for temporary space, making it possible to finish the school year. But the challenge of finding a permanent space forced a shutdown of the high school and a permanent shift to online learning for the middle school. "It was very hard to find a space for 282 kids at the time," Susie Osborne, the school's founder and development director, told the *Hawaii Tribune-Herald*. "When we lost our campus in Puna to the eruption, we had some transitional sites, but settled at the Nani Mau Botanical Gardens."

One of the immersion schools we visited offered classes within a DOE building when it first began a small program of instruction in the indigenous language, but after receiving a charter it was pressed to shift to its own facility. After

The Bishop Estate and Kamehameha Schools

PRINCESS BERNICE PAUAHII, lineal descendent of the great Chief Kamehameha, ignored family pressures and married a Protestant missionary, Charles Reed Bishop. She died of cancer at the age of 51 in 1884, leaving in her will about a half million acres of land, or 8 percent of Hawaii, to what became known as the Bishop Estate Trust. Proceeds from sales or leases of the land were to be used for the construction and operation of two schools for Hawaiian boys and girls. By 1995, the Trust was said by the *Wall Street Journal* to be worth as much as \$10 billion, providing a handsome endowment for Kamehameha, a private, now co-educational school in Honolulu for those of Hawaiian descent. But in 1997 the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* ran a 6,000-word essay accusing trustees of mismanagement, corruption, and misuse of trust funds. After an explosive controversy that ensnared some of the state's leading attorneys, judges, and legislators, the trustees resigned, a newly appointed board built schools on Maui and the Big Island, and funds were provided for Hawaiian-focused programs in public schools. Today, the trust fosters the Hawaiian Renaissance by giving priority to those applicants for admission to Kamehameha who have demonstrated family commitment to the preservation of Hawaiian culture. However, the Bishop Estate remains controversial, most recently for inadequate management of the invasive, dense grass on its property, which contributed to the devastating 2023 firestorm near Lahaina, Maui. The same was true for DOE-owned grassland. Neither educational institution proved to be a good steward of the land.

a prolonged battle, it left DOE in 2013 for quarters that a *Tribune-Herald* reporter found abysmally primitive:

[The school] has few permanent classrooms and many of the meeting and teaching spaces lack walls of any sort. Sometimes they are sheltered by nothing but a tent-like canopy. At stormy moments teachers put class on hold as students crowd into the few sheltered spaces to avoid getting drenched.

Today, facilities for the 222 students at the school have at least tent flaps for all classrooms except for the roof-only stage used for morning protocol and hula dancing, but everyone has learned to forgo socks so their feet dry quickly. Your authors did not “avoid getting drenched” on the day we stopped by.

We could observe only the exterior of Ke Ana La’ahana, the second non-immersion charter we visited, because on the day of our visit the school held classes in a nearby park where local Hawaiian practitioners taught the school’s 37 students the basics of knot-tying, taro preparation, hula dancing, and star tracking.

The other immersion school, well-funded and with close to 600 students from elementary through high school, has an intensively used campus. The high school officially remains part of the DOE, where it had begun as an immersion program, and its students still play on DOE sports teams. An administrator avows that DOE team instructors welcome immersion students,

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as they are more coachable. However, high school classes are located on a separate campus that also houses the elementary and middle charter school, making for ever-increasing density as enrollment has accelerated. Our student guide recalled playing on once-open spaces now built over with preschool units. High school classes are held in the gymnasium.

Religious Charters?

In sum, Hawaiian immersion schools make a case for religious practices at school—or at least for charters that emphasize community, character, and commitment rather than academic accomplishment alone. Whether or not the practices are truly religious is open to interpretation. An employee at an immersion school on the island of Kauai filed a complaint in 2015 with the Hawaii Civil Rights Commission, claiming a violation of the establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution. Though the complaint has captured little attention, some school administrators prefer to avoid further controversy by emphasizing the strictly

cultural aspects of the morning protocol. As one of them said, “There are cultural rituals built into these performances, but they should not be considered religious or compared to practices of prayer.” But in the words of the executive director of the Hawaii Charter Schools Commission, “The line isn’t always so clear. . . . If you are doing a chant that talks about the spirit and how to live, at what point would it cross the line to where it becomes prayer?”

However the spiritual practice is understood, many Hawaiian families are willing to sacrifice other educational amenities to have their child attend a school that emphasizes character development by recalling the gods and traditions of their ancestors. Despite crowded classrooms, despite modest playground space and minimal sports facilities, despite inadequate school budgets, despite family-dependent transportation, enrollments at the two immersion schools we visited continue to rise. Those instances do not seem exceptional. The growth of charter schools is posing such a challenge to DOE that the department constrains charters from exceeding their enrollment projections in any given year by more than 10 percent. If DOE is the Goliath that its reputation suggests, then Hawaiian charters must be Davids with slingshots.

The two English-speaking charter schools we visited that focus on the Hawaiian heritage are both suffering from enrollment declines, struggle to find adequate space, and have no guarantee of survival. From these two cases we do not conclude that an English-speaking approach is not viable. One non-immersion charter school in a nearby community is prospering. And Kua O Ka Lā’s survival despite volcanic destruction is testament to the personal courage and commitment of its founders. But the cohesiveness of the immersion schools, with their religious overtones, stands out.

To thrive on the mainland, religious charters will need to connect to the cultures and traditions of the populations they serve. They could do worse than to consider adopting a protocol as a way of unifying their community, strengthening ties to parents, and providing social and emotional support to what seems to be an increasingly distressed generation of children and adolescents. The successful immersion schools we visited were all led by talented and resourceful leaders of Hawaiian descent, some of them trained at Kamehameha and others at university-based Hawaiian language programs. Mainland educators could copy this model by drawing from the deep wells of their own religious and cultural traditions.

Sustaining tradition need not mean excessive attention to its ugly side. In Hawaii, many traditional practices are beset by questionable origins. Careful historians and anthropologists tell us that the indigenous caste system was so rigid no commoner could become a member of the nobility (*ali’i*), that *kapu* (traditional norms and rules of conduct) required prostration by commoners before *ali’i*, and that incest within the ruling elite was as pervasive on the Pacific islands as in ancient Egypt. We heard no such stories during

our visit. Instead, Hawaiian-focused schools concentrate on the ancestral crossing of the Pacific Ocean in small boats with nothing more than the stars for guidance, the Hawaiian practice of “talking story” as a tool for tolerating differences and reaching compromises, and the beauty of traditional chants and dances. Mainland American schools might also

without adequate space for physical fitness programs, general assemblies, or even appropriately appointed classrooms. A number of small federal programs facilitate charter access to financial markets at reduced rates, but those funds are hardly sufficient to support the needs of 7,000 charter schools serving more than three million students.



Students at Kua O Ka Lā listen to instructions about hula, Hawaii’s traditional storytelling dance set to an oli (chant) with mele (song).

recognize that children thrive on knowing the best, not just the worst, about their past.

Identity schools are almost by definition not statistically representative of the general population. We asked our hosts whether they were concerned that their schools might be ethnically segregated. “We are open to all that apply,” replied one. “We are socially diverse but not ethnically balanced,” another conceded. On the mainland, too, charters might better foster genuine equality of opportunity by developing strong identities with student traditions than by striving only for racial balance.

Finally, Hawaii highlights a fundamental defect in state charter policy: the too-frequent denial of state funding for land acquisition and capital costs. Schools need a stable place in which to build identities. Place is not an extraneous afterthought for a school, as if it were an accountant’s office that can simply shift files from one building to the next. Only a few charters have generous benefactors who can acquire land and construct buildings on their behalf. On the mainland, as in Hawaii, the lack of capital funding has left too many charters

Despite the challenges, immersion charters are prospering. A young professor explains why: “A language is a dialogue with the environment. . . . Being able to know . . . [a] couple dozen words for different types of rain that Hawaiian has, that English doesn’t . . . that’s something that’s . . . really meaningful to experience.” As the creation myth foretold:

*Born was Expected-day, a female
Born was Midnight, born First-light
Opening-wide was their youngest
These were those who gave birth
The little ones, the older ones
Ever increasing in number*

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