



## Lessons from Hawaii's Efforts to Use "Race to the Top" to Boost Achievement of Native Hawaiian School Children

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Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind in 2002, the U.S. federal government has been prodding states and local communities to improve school performance across the board. Currently, the Obama administration's "Race to the Top" program gives extra support to 11 states undertaking innovative efforts to ensure educational excellence for every school child and reduce achievement gaps between whites and minorities such as Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans. Even as state and local budgets shrink, schools face the challenge of educating students from diverse social backgrounds.

Hawaii is a Race to the Top state grappling with its own version of the ethnic achievement gap – between Native Hawaiian students and other groups. Native Hawaiians are the largest ethnic group in the state and are one of America's important indigenous populations. In addition to having the lowest educational outcomes, Native Hawaiians mostly earn relatively low incomes, suffer from the highest rate of incarceration, and experience the worst health outcomes.

Native Hawaiians struggle to define who they are. Their lands have been taken by others, and their culture pressured and diluted by the other peoples who have come to Hawaii, including the Japanese, Koreans, and Anglo-Saxons. Although the plight of Native Hawaiians may seem unique, it actually mirrors the experience of many indigenous and immigrant groups. For marginalized and imperiled minorities, education becomes a key to future individual and family success. Yet public schools in such communities face extra challenges in helping students achieve their full potential at rates equal to peers from more privileged groups.

### Race to the Top Reforms in Hawaii

Across the country, Race to the Top encourages five kinds of reforms of state educational systems: designing and implementing rigorous standards; attracting and keeping great teachers; collecting and analyzing data to inform decisions; finding innovative ways to improve struggling schools; and promoting collaborations to expand support for public schools and close achievement gaps.

My research shows that Hawaii's educators have developed their own versions of these standard reforms. In particular, individual schools with many native students have devised special approaches to help close achievement gaps.

- Race to the Top encourages teaching to rigorous "core" standards in reading, math, and so forth. Then educators devise assessments and tests to see if all groups of students are meeting those standards. In many Hawaii schools, efforts go beyond teaching to high standards; further reforms aim to create a positive atmosphere and celebrate students' successes each step of the way. In the past, the

presumption has been that Native Hawaiian kids do not do well in school. To reverse low expectations, reformers and teachers convey a much more positive tone, letting students know they can achieve whatever they set their minds and hearts to accomplish. Every student can make it to college, they say. Each little success is celebrated, including good behavior and regular attendance at school as well as accomplishments of academic goals.

- To attract and keep good teachers, Hawaiian schools create focused learning communities where teachers can learn from and encourage each other and coordinate their lessons. Focused learning communities encourage team communication beyond each classroom, and allow teachers to engage with one another through peer feedback and observation.
- Teachers also learn how best to interact with family members in particular communities. In high-poverty areas, for example, teachers learn about the special learning challenges faced by children from low-income or struggling families, and share ideas about how best to approach parents in such circumstances.
- To build sustained support for educational excellence, Race to the Top encourages school leaders to collaborate with business leaders, community groups, and other stakeholders. In Hawaii, where schools have long faced budget cuts, this approach has long been in force, so educators continue to build on past relationships.
- Race to the Top calls for innovative approaches to turn around struggling schools and boost minority achievement. In Hawaii, the key innovation has been to place a heavy emphasis on Native Hawaiian culture, to create a positive learning environment for all students.

## **A Special Focus on Native Hawaiian Culture**

Hawaiian schools have learned to innovate by featuring Native Hawaiian culture, infusing everything the school does with such distinctive themes and practices.

- Successful schools get everyone involved, by teaching concepts and skills featuring relevant aspects of Native Hawaiian culture and traditions. Lesson plans help the context come alive for all students, allowing them to achieve academic success through mastering ideas that seem relevant to everyday life and their community customs.
- School is featured as a gathering place for the community, where everyone takes pride in a shared identity as well as the students themselves. Native Hawaiian kids have often been marginalized at school, so honoring their culture can help to remove some of the stigma – even as all children learn about the state’s special native heritage.

Nationwide, Race to the Top stresses proven, standard steps to improve student achievement. But the most effective innovations to help close achievement gaps for immigrant and indigenous populations often rely on stressing cultural specifics. Rooting school life in the surrounding community actually helps all students by giving people pride and a sense of place that makes it safe and honorable to excel. In Hawaii and beyond, this translates into greater wellbeing and academic gains for minority students who have long been at the bottom of the ladder.

**This brief draws on research about school reforms for the Office of Hawaiian Affairs.**