


Hawaii Grown

Here's How These Ka'u Kids Are Learning Outside Of The Classroom

When things were not looking great for students at Ka'u High & Pahala Elementary School, the teachers took their lessons to the region's roots — agriculture.

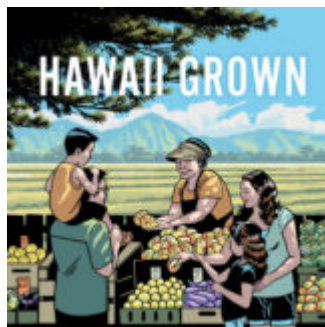


By Thomas Heaton   / January 18, 2022

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KA'U, Hawaii Island — Biweekly harvests at Ka'u High & Pahala Elementary School could contain anything from eggplants and radishes to kalo and cabbage.



The hauls make their way into the Ka'u community first through the students and their families and later via the Naalehu Resilience Hub, where the fresh produce is used in hot meals for the community.

The 545-student school broke ground on its farm at the beginning of 2021 as part of the first class to come through the [Ka'u Global Learning Lab](#), a school-centered strategy to help make the greater Ka'u area thrive and become a more sustainable community.

And as the state tries to get more local food into schools, this south Big Island school could be feeding itself in the near future, according to program director Aina Akamu.



Ka'u High & Pahala Elementary School students move mulch for their school farm.

The farm is central to a new curriculum in which students are tasked with creating their own businesses. They learn how to make value-added products with what's available on the farm or in the area. Then they are taught how to process, market and sell them as viable businesses, learning about budgeting, networking and marketing, which strengthens their comprehension of core academic subjects.

In the first year, 2020-2021, students launched businesses for locally produced lilikoi butter, carved ohia and aalii wood jewelry, and a dried opelu snack business.



Cody Ah Yee, 18, was in the inaugural class and found getting his hands dirty a better way to learn. He farmed the land, brought lettuce or eggplants or beans home for his family, and improved his grades by integrating outside work with his academics.

“My favorite was learning how to perfect the produce and how to make the food grow,” Ah Yee said.

But, he adds, working with machinery and building things, like a rabbit hutch or the hydroponic trays, were highlights.

He also learned how to process and dry opelu for his business Ka’u Ono I’a, as well as shoot his own advertisements, which he did with his drone. He’s now planning to get his drone license after graduating.

Everyone’s outcomes improved, and the farm has grown from about 12 patches to a modern one that is being operated with conventional, hydroponic and organic farming methods.



Ka’u High & Pahala Elementary School is growing several different varieties of kalo.

Getting Practical About Learning

When Akamu started working at the school in 2017, it was suffering from truancy issues, its student outcomes were unsatisfactory and the school's accreditation was on two-year probation.

He saw practical education as the solution, and took eight kids with higher needs and taught them in person beginning in 2020.

Central to that curriculum is Career Technical Education, or CTE, which blends academic and technical skills with a focus on feeding the labor market.

[CTE has become a darling in Hawaii's education system in recent years](#), as the Department of Education has sought to improve outcomes through practical training. Lawmakers have also recognized its success, [pushing for legislation to expand access to CTE programs](#) across the state.

Success has already been seen in other schools, such as Waimea and Waipahu high schools, where the curricula have been realigned to focus on career training. At Waipahu High School, [several academies](#) provide vocational training and education for health care, natural resources, engineering and public service, among other areas.

In Ka'u, CTE means farming and everything that comes with it.

Ka'u students can become certified in food safety or landscaping and have the opportunity to graduate with six college credits.

"If kids are super motivated, we can get kids to graduate with an associate degree," said Akamu, who became certified to teach the college-level courses.

Students are taken on field trips to farms, ranches, food businesses and orchards to learn about their community and the business, Akamu said. In the first year, students started turning up to school on the weekends to work the farm.



Students are taught the benefits of several farming techniques, from conventional and organic to hydroponics.

Going forward, agriculture will continue as a central theme to their classes, such as math, English and science.

“We’re looking at how all of our different teachers in all the different classes can have this — ag, sustainability, malama aina — in the classroom,” Akamu said.

Hands-On Growth

Cody Ah Yee’s mother saw his report cards change from “Ds and a few Fs” to being filled with As. And as an education assistant at Na’alehu Elementary, Louann Ah Yee puts the program’s success down to a change of scenery.

Ka’u is historically a farming community, attracting sugar plantations and now ranchers and coffee farmers. So agricultural knowledge is something they can use, she says.

“It’s a really great program for a lot of our kids,” she said. “We know that there are a lot of students out there who are sitting in a classroom and that’s not what they need.”

Former teacher and First Lady Dawn Amano-Ige, who visited the school last year, is a proponent of programs such as Ka’u’s, as well as ensuring children are consuming healthy, local foods in school.

“Education has to be relevant for the students,” Amano-Ige said. “What was relevant 20, 30 years ago may not be applicable now.”

And as a strong supporter of school gardens — there are 60 in the [Hawaii Island School Garden Network](#) — Amano-Ige says the holistic approach is effective.

“To have students be able to participate in community change while in high school is so meaningful,” Amano-Ige said.

The entire community has gotten behind the school’s farming efforts, participating in volunteer farm days on Saturdays and a monthly community agriculture hui with local farmers and other producers.

There is plenty of work to do, Akamu says, and a lot of macadamia nuts to be harvested. Soon he hopes they might get some pigs and could build an apiary. They are also seeking funding for new farm machinery.

Nonetheless, more community-building events will be what it takes to create a strong community and to empower Ka’u kids, according to Akamu.

“They are the best ones to take care of these lands,” said Akamu. “Nobody is going to work to care for Ka’u except Ka’u.”

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