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Editorial | Island Voices

# Philanthropy has vital role to support public schools

By Terrence R. George, Kelvin Taketa and Jack Wong

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COURTESY PIXABAY

Recent news and opinions, such as [“The search for a superintendent”](#) (Star-Advertiser, Island Voices, March 29), have inspired us to explain how and why so many Hawaii philanthropies support our public schools.

Most foundations and trusts are permanently endowed with assets by donors; we use some of those assets each year to make grants or to operate our own programs to

achieve our philanthropic goals. Many of us have focused on children, because all keiki deserve to be nurtured and given a chance to thrive. Over the past century, Hawaii's philanthropies have played critical roles establishing our network of preschools and private schools, as well as youth-serving nonprofits. We are not newcomers to public education, either. For example, the Samuel N. and Mary Castle Foundation was a leader in helping to establish public kindergarten in the mid-19th century.

So why the emphasis on philanthropic support for education and particularly for public education? The first reason is that education is fundamental to our society. When schools are strong and keiki get access to excellent education, communities thrive because students attain the skills and knowledge they need to secure good futures for their families.

We celebrate the gains made in recent years by our school system and applaud teachers for their hard work. Standards are now clearer. Chronic absenteeism is dropping. More students are graduating on time and going on to college, and fewer of them require remediation once they enter college. A new crop of school leaders is showing courage and creativity.

Yet — and here's the second reason — not all students are receiving the education they need to achieve their dreams. Despite major improvement in recent years, our achievement gaps between economically disadvantaged students and others remain stubbornly high. Most alarming is that for every 100 9th graders, roughly only 20 get an associate's or bachelor's degree within six years after graduating from high school. Not enough keiki enter kindergarten ready to learn, because Hawaii lags behind most states in its support for high-quality early childhood education.

For these reasons, we expect that philanthropy will remain a permanent, nonpolitical source of capital for children. We aim not to replace public school dollars but to make those dollars work more effectively.

Many of our grants provide the school system with resources to improve their training, to give teachers and leaders time to reflect together, and to scale what works. For example, look at what the McNerny Foundation's support has meant for hundreds of Waipahu High School students who are now taking college courses while still in high school.

For us, this work will continue regardless of who is the superintendent. We have aligned ourselves with the vision and goals of the updated Strategic Plan of the Board of Education/Department of Education and of the Governor's Blueprint for Public Education. We will deploy more funds as long as there remains commitment to this new direction in education, with children — not adults — as our focus. We're not investing in any superintendent, we're investing in Hawaii's children.

Philanthropies are not partisan political bodies, and none of us wishes to play any role in the selection of the new superintendent; that is the job of the Board of Education

and no one else. We know that change in large school systems like Hawaii's DOE is not easy, nor does it happen overnight.

From the superintendent on down, we need adult leaders in the school system who can roll up their sleeves, work with teachers, parents, unions and employers, and deliver results for kids as laid out in the Blueprint and the Strategic Plan. We don't need more vision — we need execution. Our keiki deserve nothing less.

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**Terrence George, left, is CEO of Harold K. L. Castle Foundation; Kelvin Taketa is CEO of Hawai'i Community Foundation; Jack Wong is CEO of Kamehameha Schools.**

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***Correction:** Kelvin Taketa is CEO of Hawai'i Community Foundation, not chief operating officer as stated in an Island Voices piece that ran on Sunday.*