

Youth Voice Hawai'i

Year 1 Report

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Prepared for:



Founded in 1962, the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation works to build resources for Hawai'i's future. We do so by investing in promising initiatives and organizations through grantmaking, using our convening power, and introducing and spreading new ideas and approaches to help solve some of Hawai'i's most pressing problems.

Prepared by:



Learning for Action's (LFA) mission is to partner with social sector organizations to advance knowledge, capacity, and culture of learning in the service of equity and justice. Since our start in 2000, we have engaged with hundreds of organizations across the United States and internationally to collect and interpret the data they need to design and implement strategies that achieve their desired impact.

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

The Harold K.L. Castle Foundation is committed to supporting Hawai'i's youth to fulfill their most ambitious dreams. Currently, far too many students are still falling short of achieving their dreams despite the system's focus on strengthening college and career pathways. While a lot is known about how students are fairing along these pathways (based on measures such as K-12 academic performance, high school graduation, and college enrollment and completion), these data do not tell the full story of the student experience, and what is supporting or getting in their way of success. Understanding the student experience, as well as the attitudes, values, and beliefs they hold about college and career, is critical to understanding underlying dynamics. To this end, the foundation has made a multi-year investment to deepen the field's understanding of the student experience, attitudes, values, and beliefs to inform ongoing policy and practice. This report presents findings from the first year of this study, primarily focused on understanding the perspectives and experiences of high-school age students.

Core Findings

Hawai'i's young people have ambitious dreams that center on personal fulfillment and happiness. Youth also seek independence, stability, and financial security, though the latter can be in tension with what brings them joy. While some youth have clear, specific education and career goals, not all youth have plans for how they will achieve their ultimate vision. Regardless of whether youth have a fully developed vision or plan, most youth seem to struggle with self-doubt, uncertainty, and stress. Discussed in *Youth's Future Goals and Aspirations*.

As young people develop and pursue their goals and aspirations, students are influenced by the people and environment around them. **Students thrive when the people in their lives and community are supportive and positive influences.** In particular, students are best supported when their family, peers, and others adults in their lives are a source of inspiration; offer guidance and encouragement; set expectations in ways that center their needs and goals; and facilitate exposure to and access to opportunities. However, far too many students are experiencing barriers such as low expectations, pressure to pursue pathways that feel disconnected from their vision, and limited access to opportunities. Discussed in *Key Influences*.

Given our focus on the high school experience, we dive deeper into how high schools are supporting students to develop and pursue their goals and aspirations. We heard from high school students and school staff about three areas for improvement that are highly important and where school system partners have a lot of influence:

- **Academic relevance** - greater alignment between what students are learning in school and their intended future plans and job opportunities in the market

Executive Summary

- **Life skills preparation** - more opportunities to develop social emotional skills (e.g. goal setting and self-management) and practical skills (e.g. financial literacy) that will support them in adulthood
- **Exposure to pathways and access to information** - more supports for students to understand pathway options and develop transition plans aligned with their goals

It is especially critical that these areas are strengthened with an eye toward equity to ensure that *all* students have access to the same opportunities. School staff and students shared that opportunities are often concentrated in schools/communities that are well resourced, or directed to the students who are most proactive. Discussed in *School System Levers*

System Opportunities

Reflecting and drawing on the findings above, we identified three areas to prioritize in service of supporting youth to fulfill their most ambitious dreams:

- **Mental Health and Student Well-Being:** Prominent feelings of stress, anxiety, overwhelm, and self-doubt among youth point to a need to focus on social-emotional skills and mental health supports.
- **Family Engagement and Collaboration:** The important influence that family has on youth development, wellness, and outcomes calls for system-level strategies and tools that facilitate positive and productive family engagement and collaboration.
- **Information and Exposure to Pathways:** Students' limited use of existing college and career transition resources suggests an opportunity to improve how information about potential pathways is shared with students.

We believe that these supports are *most* urgent for students who are disproportionately affected by inequitable access to opportunity and resources, negative narratives, and biased mindsets that perpetuate and reinforce low expectations for students.

Introduction

Evaluation Context & Vision

About this Report

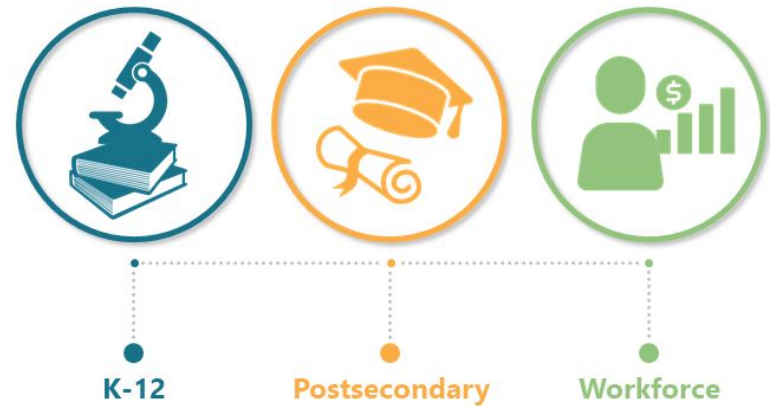
Hawai'i High School Graduation and College
Going Rates

Evaluation Context & Vision

Existing research shows Hawai'i's students are increasingly prepared for academic success in college and the workplace. More teenagers earn Honors diplomas, meet academic benchmarks, take and complete college-level courses, and place into college-level "gateway" courses upon matriculation from high school. Efforts to increase the rigor of a high school diploma and improve student transitions into college seem to be paying off. Unfortunately, being more prepared has not meant that more students graduate high school and matriculate to college.

With this context in mind, the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation determined that more insights were needed; looking at student outcomes alone risked missing a deeper understanding of student attitudes, values and beliefs. In 2020, the foundation engaged Learning for Action (LFA) to conduct a multi-year evaluation to learn more about the experiences of secondary students in Hawai'i's public schools. The foundation was curious to learn: How do high school students actually think about their future? Do they feel prepared? Hopeful? Anxious and overwhelmed? Can they make sense of the vast range of post-high school options? Who do they turn to for help in navigating their path forward?

The foundation envisioned an evaluation that would center the voices and experiences of young people, so that their vision, hopes, concerns, and needs would play a significant role in informing schools and policymakers, and shaping the implementation of education reform efforts.



About this Report

The findings of this report are based on qualitative methods informed by and primarily collected from youth. We share more details about the research questions and how the evaluation was conducted in the **approach and methods** section. Throughout the report you will see quotes directly from youth who participated in focus groups and from staff who were interviewed. We have also included photographs and narratives prepared by youth as part of the Photovoice project.

This report starts with an exploration of **youth's future goals and aspirations**. Given the importance of centering youth voice in this evaluation, we ground in how youth are thinking and feeling about their future. We focus on how youth define success for themselves and what their goals are for the future, as well as the barriers and challenges that they are thinking about as they plan for those futures.

We then move to a deeper examination of the **key influences** that inform or affect youth's goals and paths. Here, we discuss the unique role people (family, other adults, and peers), the community, and broader environment play in shaping youth's aspirations and mindsets, and how they are supporting and preparing students for what comes next.

Given our focus on high school students, we then dive deeper into how high schools are supporting students to develop and pursue their goals and aspirations. We discuss four **school system levers** - academic relevance, life skill preparation, exposure to pathways, and access to information and resources - that surfaced as important for young people to make a successful transition after high school.

Following the research findings, we dive into **opportunities for the system**. While this research was not designed as a systems-level evaluation, we want to offer some considerations for the system to think about in relation to the findings. Throughout the report, suggestions for system opportunities will be embedded in call-out boxes. In this specific chapter of the report we go into greater detail, looking at learnings as a whole and tying together cross-cutting ideas.

To support you/your team to reflect on the findings and opportunities presented in this report, we have included a **reflection and action planning guide** in Appendix C.

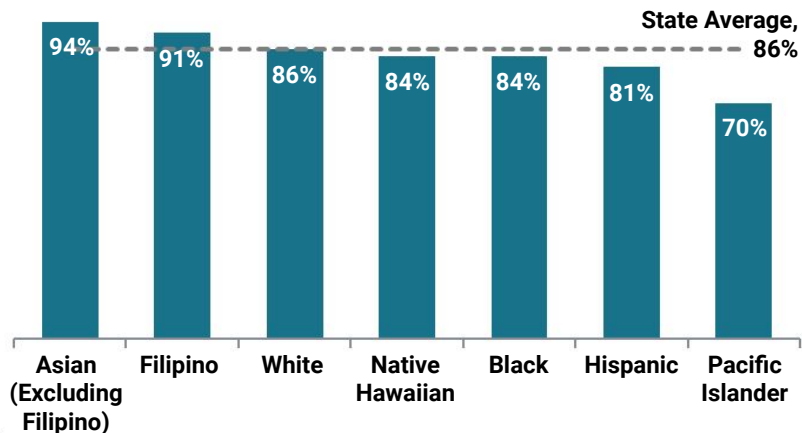
Hawai'i High School Graduation and College Going Rates

To contextualize the findings in this report we present what is known about how many students are graduating from public high schools and how many are making the transition to college. The data that follow shows that there continues to be a large gap between the number of students who graduate from high school and those who enroll in college. The data also show that two predominant student groups experience more systemic barriers to their success than their peers: economically disadvantaged students and Native Hawaiian students.

High School Graduation

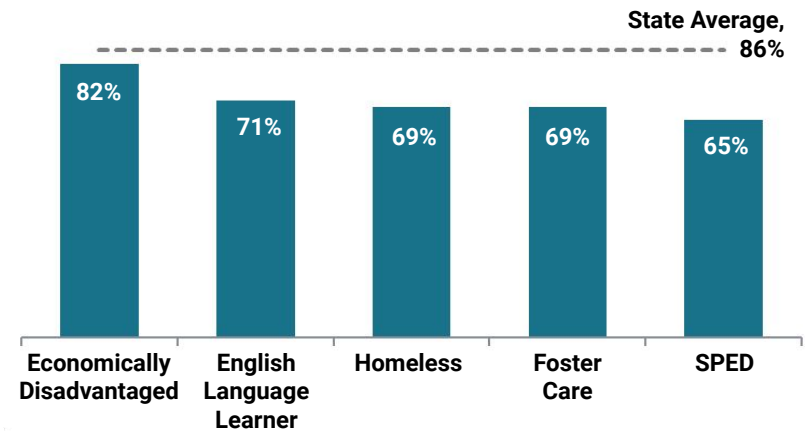
The on-time high school graduation rate has been trending upwards for the state. The percent of high school students graduating on-time was the highest on record for the class of 2020 at 86% (up from 82% for the Class of 2015). However, there are particular groups of students who are graduating below the state average. Students who identify as Native Hawaiian, Black, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander graduate at lower rates (see Figure 1). Students who are economically disadvantaged, receive special education services (SPED), English language learners, homeless, and in foster care also graduate at much lower rates (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. High School Graduation Rate (Class of 2020)



Data Source: Hawai'i Data Exchange Partnership

Figure 2. High School Graduation Rate (Class of 2020)

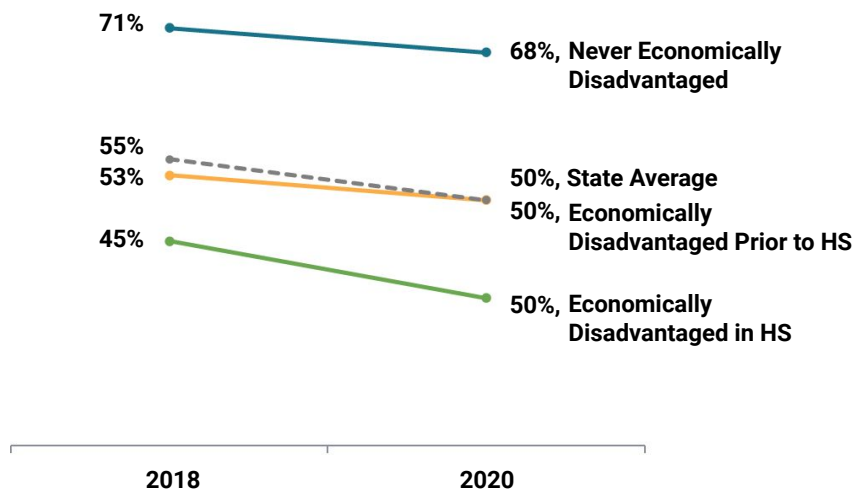


Data Source: Hawai'i Data Exchange Partnership

College-Going Rates

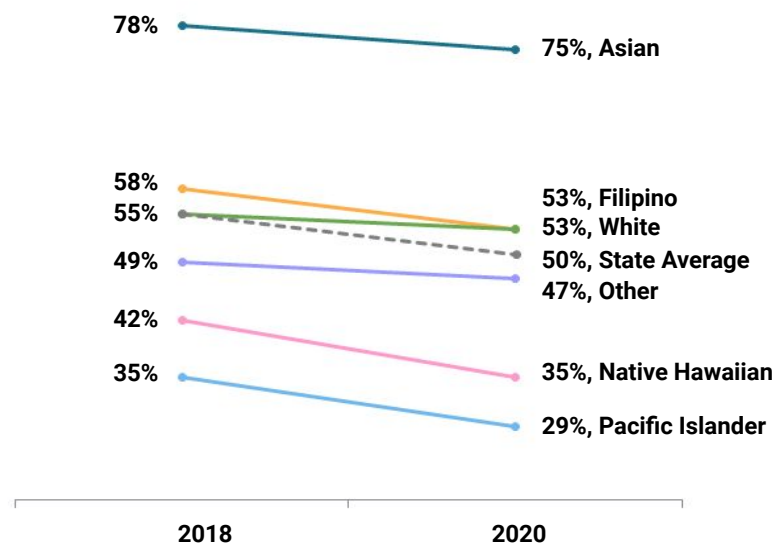
Though on-time public high school graduation is trending upwards, nationwide college-going rates* have not kept pace - they have not increased over the past few years and took a meaningful dip in 2020, likely due to Covid-19. Prior to the pandemic, the nationwide college-going rate had plateaued at 55% since 2016 and then dropped to 50% in 2020. The rate of decline was similar for students enrolling in a 4-year institution (from 34% in 2019 to 31% in 2020) and 2-year institution (from 21% in 2019 to 19% in 2020). Graduates from economically disadvantaged households showed sharper declines in college-going rates than their non-economically disadvantaged peers (see Figure 3). The decline in college enrollment affected all race/ethnicities but was especially large for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (see Figure 4).

**Figure 3. College Going Rate by Economic Advantage
(Class of 2020)**



Data Source: Hawai'i Data Exchange Partnership

**Figure 4. College Going Rate by Race & Ethnicity
(Class of 2020)**



Data Source: Hawai'i Data Exchange Partnership

*The nationwide college going rate is the percent of public high school completers with confirmed enrollment in any national postsecondary institution in the fall following high school graduation, based on reports provided by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). Public high school completers are matched to NSC data based on name, gender and date of birth. The college enrollment data do not reflect students who cannot be matched due to name change or data entry error, or students who have requested that their postsecondary directory information not be disclosed.

Approach and Methods

Research Questions and Participatory Evaluation Approach

Data Collection Methods

Youth Participant Recruitment

Youth Participants

Research Questions

The core questions guiding our research included:

- How do high school students think about their future?
- What helps young people achieve their life goals?
- What gets in the way of young people achieving their life goals?

The full list of sub-questions is included in Appendix A..

Participatory Evaluation Approach

Given the evaluation goals of generating insights about the student experience and amplifying and centering student voices, we implemented **participatory evaluation** methods to engage students as partners throughout the evaluation process. We selected this approach because of its promise to yield results that are locally relevant, empower and build capacity among participants, and disrupt power dynamics baked into traditional evaluation approaches.

A critical component of the participatory evaluation approach was the engagement of a **Youth Advisory Group (YAG)**. The evaluation team worked with the [Center for Tomorrow's Leaders](#) to identify and engage current and recently graduated Hawai'i public high school students to join the YAG to shape the evaluation.

The YAG's input helped to ensure that the evaluation questions focused on those things that matter most to young people in Hawai'i when considering next steps in their futures.

- The first YAG cohort, engaged over the 2020 summer, provided feedback on the research questions, data collection methods, and data collection instruments. Their input also ensured that the language and framing of the questions would resonate with young people, and accurately target the types of information we were seeking.
- The second YAG cohort, engaged over the 2021 summer, contributed to the analysis and interpretation of data from their peers. They helped to identify themes from the data and supported the research team's effort to make meaning of the qualitative data collected from other students.

Youth Advisory Group Profile

The 2020 YAG cohort included eight students ranging from high school sophomores to college freshmen. The students represented high schools from Oahu, the Big Island, and Lana'i.

The 2021 YAG cohort included eight students ranging from high school juniors to college sophomores. The students represented high schools from Oahu and the Big Island. For continuity, three students from the 2020 cohort also participated in the 2021 cohort.



Data Collection Methods

The evaluation included four types of data collection:

1. **Youth Focus Groups** - 44 youth
2. **Youth Photovoice Projects** - 15 youth*
3. **Interviews with School Staff** - 8 school staff, including school counselors, counseling department heads, curriculum coordinators, and teachers (who also instruct in career and college pathways)
4. **Review of Publicly Available Data**

The evaluation team, in collaboration with the YAG, selected the first two methods because of their potential to surface deep, rich stories about students' college and career goals and their experiences trying to achieve those goals. To supplement and triangulate the stories collected from youth, the evaluation team conducted interviews with school staff and reviewed publicly available data. The evaluation team considered a student survey but the YAG did *not* recommend this method. While students are familiar and comfortable with surveys, the YAG shared that students are over surveyed and, as a result, fill out surveys quickly - often times not reading the questions closely or responding without a lot of reflection.

Note about COVID-19: All data collection for this report happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, in our analysis we cannot completely disentangle themes (especially testimonies of fears, challenges, and stressors) from the context under which this research happened. However, through deep engagement and conversations with youth, we are confident that the concerns and barriers highlighted in this report were exacerbated, but not caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Though the number of youth who participated in photovoice was smaller than we had hoped for, the themes that emerged from the data were consistently surfaced by youth across diverse groups and across methods, suggesting that the themes are not outlier experiences. Additionally, many of the themes are also present in research others have conducted.

Photovoice is a participatory method that empowers participants to tell their stories using photography and written narratives. This approach generates a visual representation of the participant's experience, which can be a powerful communication tool ("a picture is worth a thousand words").

Photovoice empowers participants by building their skills and confidence to tell their own story. Engagement with participants is designed to build deep, mutually beneficial relationships between the evaluators and participants, rather than extractive or one-directional interaction (i.e. the research benefits from the participant's time but not the other way around). Because this method is multi-modal (oral, written, visual) it also provides for diverse forms of self-expression, which is critical for inclusion of students with diverse expression styles and needs.

A downside of this approach is the need for extensive time and training for participants to complete a project.

Photovoice submissions from youth can be found in Appendix E.

Youth Participant Recruitment

The evaluation team partnered with six high schools and five community-based organizations to identify and **engage 59 young people** across Hawai'i. Throughout the recruitment process, we worked to identify students who reflected a diversity of:

- Gender
- Race/ethnicity
- Grade/age
- Socioeconomic background
- Academic outcomes
- Plans for the future (if known)
- School experiences (e.g. participation in extracurricular activities or leadership programs)

We also invited school and community-based partners to consider other dimensions of diversity relevant to their contexts.

The evaluation team encountered challenges in the recruitment of schools and participants due to the pandemic. The team initially reached out to ten high schools - with diverse student bodies and from across the islands of Hawai'i, Kauai, Maui, and Oahu - to participate in the study, but four declined due to limited capacity (related to the pandemic).

Outreach and recruitment of participants also required more effort and time due to students being virtual. Sharing information about and encouraging participation in the study was more difficult than if students were in person. School staff also shared that students were less willing and able to engage in activities such as this project because of burnout related to COVID. Ultimately, the evaluation team expanded outreach and recruitment to community-based organizations to fill the gap in participant numbers.

It is also important to acknowledge that due to the unique financial, physical, and emotional stressors and uncertainty of the time, the ability to participate in this research may have been more difficult for more vulnerable student populations. The evaluation team worked with coordinators on the ground to ensure that access to technology would not be a limiting factor, but there may have been other barriers to participation. Overall, the support of school staff and program coordinators was essential to the success of the research during this challenging time.

High School Partners

Campbell High School
Honoka'a High and Intermediate School
Pearl City High School
Radford High School
Waiākea High School
Wai'anae High School

Community-Based Organization Partners

Adult Friends for Youth
Hale Kipa
Hui Mālama O Ke Kai Foundation
Islander Institute
Kupu

Youth Participants

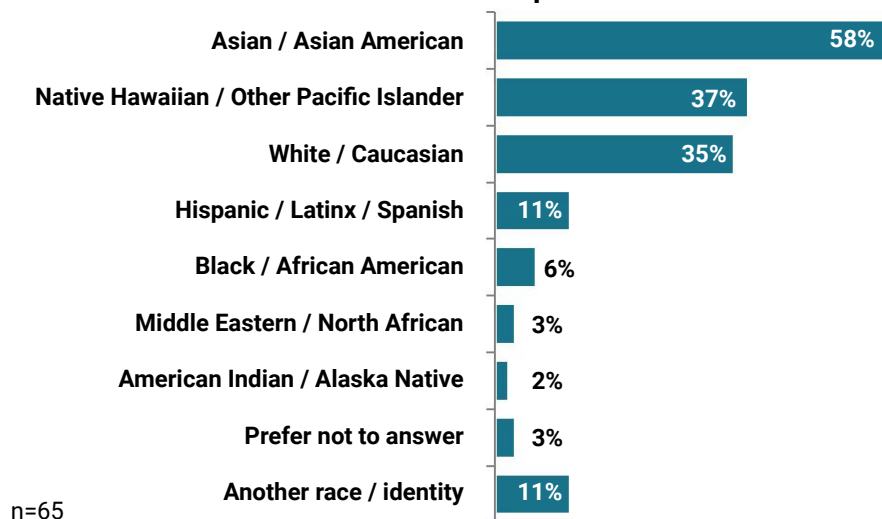
Demographic Diversity

Participants were predominantly (72%) in their junior and senior year of high school (see Figure 5). About half (47%) identified as young women and nearly half (42%) identified as young men (see Figure 6). Participants largely reflected Hawai'i's racial and ethnic diversity. Nearly half (42%) identified as multiracial. When looking at race and ethnicity (alone or in combination), the three largest groups were Asian/Asian American (58%), Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (37%), and White/Caucasian (35%) (see Figure 7).

Island Diversity

Participants were from the islands of Hawai'i and Oahu. (As noted earlier, though we attempted to recruit youth from Kauai and Maui we did not ultimately achieve representation from these islands, largely due to the pandemic's impact on school and student capacity to participate.)

Figure 7. Race & Ethnicity (Alone or in Combination) of Youth Participants



The total for the race and ethnicity categories do not add up to 100% because they are not mutually exclusive; participants could check all identities that applied.

Figure 5. Grade Level of Youth Participants

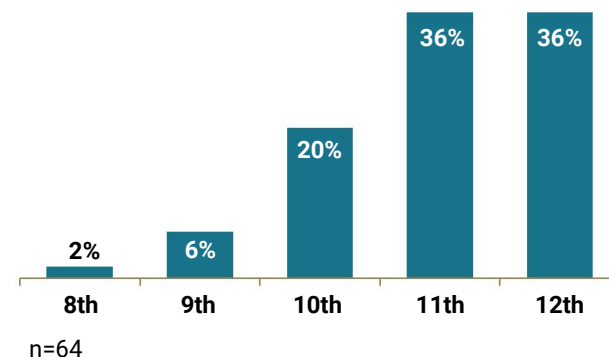
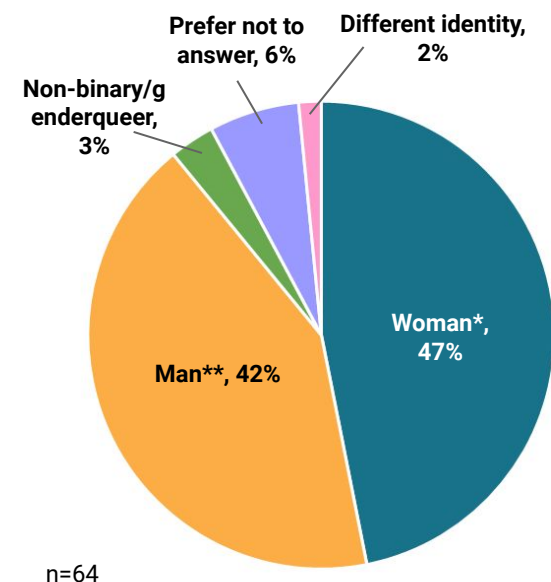


Figure 6. Gender Identity of Youth Participants



*includes transgender women; **includes transgender men

Youth's Future Goals and Aspirations



In my future, I want to achieve what I believe now to be unattainable. I envision myself flying, free, and achieving the impossible. In order to get there, I need to let go of my insecurities, troubles, and worries, and just strive to be the best version of myself.

I hear the busy road and conversations. I smell the scent from the street vendors. I taste the money in my pockets. I feel inspired and want to work hard. I see hard work and dedication.



Introduction

What Youth Want or Aspire to in their Futures

How Youth Think and Feel About their Futures



Introduction

The Harold K.L. Castle Foundation's education strategy northstar is to support Hawai'i's youth to fulfill their most ambitious dreams. In our conversations with youth, we invited them to share the dreams they hold for themselves, asking "What are your goals for the future?" When talking with young people about their goals and how they view success, no restrictions were given, so youth could think as narrowly or expansively as made sense to them, and on short- or long-term timeframes.

While youth possess a wide range of hopes and ambitions, several themes emerged around their greatest aspirations. Young people's dreams center on personal fulfillment and happiness. Young people also seek independence, stability, and financial security, though the latter can be in tension with what brings them joy. While some youth have clear, specific education and career goals, not all youth have plans of how they will achieve their ultimate vision. Regardless of whether youth have a fully developed vision or plan, most youth seem to struggle with self-doubt, uncertainty, and stress. We expand on these themes in this section.



Freely floating. Bold and balanced. I aspire to go with the flow: rid of expectations, but guided by goals. I've never been able to map out my path, and thus dreaded answering the popular question of "what do you want to be in the future?" Because in all honesty, I have no clue. However, I can provide an answer to "who do you want to be in the future?" I want to be adaptable, brave, and considerate. Dynamic, educated, and forgiving. Granted, these are just words, but I hope to display them through actions. In this simultaneously judgmental yet kind atmosphere, watch as I attempt to stay afloat and keep moving forward.





What youth want or aspire to in their futures

When thinking about their futures, young people's long-term visions most often centered around personal fulfillment and happiness. Youth aspire to live a life aligned with their values; they define success as being happy or content with what they have done in their life, meeting their goals, overcoming obstacles, not giving up, continuing to grow and improve, and being proud of who they are. Young people hope to find jobs they enjoy, that provide opportunities to continue learning, or that allow them to experience new things. Many youth spoke of balance, believing emotional stability should be valued on par with financial success. Youth also want to have a sense of purpose, and many of their goals focused on helping others. Young people hope for futures that allow them to give back to and have a positive impact on their families, their community, and the world. Several spoke of their interest in volunteering and doing service work.

"To me, success means that I and the people around me are content and happy with their lives. In addition, I also see success as being stable financially, emotionally, socially, and mentally."

- Youth, 2021

"I want to be able to balance my life - work, family, free time, exercise, finding ways to be an ethical citizen, volunteering, giving back to those who have supported me."

- Youth, 2021

"I'll be successful if I can find a job that I actually enjoy and create fulfilling relationships. Having money would be good too, but to me, success is mostly being content with yourself and your life."

- Youth, 2021

Overwhelmingly, youth named stability and financial security as important factors as they think about their future. Youth want to be able to support themselves and their families (current or future family), live comfortably, rely on a steady income, not worry about student debt, and be able to afford to stay in Hawai'i. Developing a sense of independence is also of importance; young people want to feel as though they have "made it" and hold ambitions of buying a car, getting an apartment or house, having a family, and travelling.



What youth want or aspire to in their futures (continued)

While young people have a clear sense of what they want their futures to enable, they vary in the academic and career ambitions they hold for themselves. As might be expected, youths' goals and the steps they are considering to attain those goals exist on a spectrum. Some youth are uncertain about their specific objectives for future, or do not yet have a clear vision for what comes next. Others are focused on the imminent goal of graduating from high school. Yet, many youth hold **post-secondary academic aspirations**, expressing interest in going to college. In elaborating on their higher education plans, some youth explicitly shared their desire to go to a four-year university, the courses or fields of study they are interested in exploring, or their hope to pursue advanced degrees. Some youth expressed enthusiasm for the unique opportunities college has to offer, while others see college as a means to an end, or a way to achieve their overarching goals. For those youth, they see it as a necessary step to the career they hope for, the higher educational pursuits they have, or the comfort and stability they crave. Many youth did not provide context around the "why" of their college-related goals.

A similar diversity in responses were offered when young people reflected on their **career goals**. Many do not have a concrete idea of what they want their careers to be. For some, this is because they are still early in their planning or are focused on near-term goals. For others, they imagine more clarity will come with continued education and exposure. Some youth have a clear sense of what they would like to do, such as become an engineer, start their own business, or join the army. Several feel a tension between what they enjoy and what they believe is a stable career path.

System Opportunities

Mental Health & Student Wellbeing:

- School system encourages students to develop a vision for themselves and understand the "why" of their goals, decentering the vision parents or teachers may have for a student.

Information & Exposure to Pathways:

- School system provides individualized counseling supports and engagement opportunities for youth, that meet them where they are in their process or planning stage. Young people who are early in their planning or are uncertain about their vision and goals could use the most support.





How youth think and feel about their future

While youth have many dreams, they also experience stress and apprehension as they think about their futures. The sources of their worry were most frequently related to general uncertainty, financial stressors, and self-doubt.



When I think about my future, a bunch of things come to mind. My career, my personal life, my friends, all of that. But challenges and barriers also come up. A challenge that I foresee in my future is my passion, or inner fire. There is no doubt that I have big dreams and that I want to achieve all of them. But what if that becomes my biggest challenge? What if I bite off more than I can chew? That's certainly something that comes up in my mind when I think about what will challenge me in my future.



Young people reported feelings of stress, overwhelm, uncertainty, or nervousness about their future. Much of this was related to feeling ill-prepared for what comes next. Some youth did not feel like they had a clear understanding of the options or pathways available to them. Others worried they do not have the adult skills to be successful on their own. For many, their sense of nervousness came from leaving their families.

Financial concerns are a tremendous source of stress for young people. Many students interested in college do not know how they will pay for it. Even those who were aware of (or have already received) scholarships, financial aid, or loans continue to feel the burden of taking on debt. Young people worry about the financial strain the cost of higher education will have on their family, particularly those from working class families, families with single income earners, or those with college-aged siblings (meaning two potential tuition payments). Financial challenges also extend beyond college. Youth often raised the cost of living in Hawai'i as prohibitive and worry about whether they will be able to afford a house, raise a family, or simply stay in the place they consider home. As previously noted, young people place high value on careers that will enable financial security; for some, the potential for stability is prioritized over finding a career path of interest. Youth who are currently trying to earn and save money have felt the impact of COVID-19, finding that places they would normally apply have been closed. In general, young people believe financial barriers will limit what they choose to pursue.



How youth think and feel about their future (continued)

Young people frequently experience a tension between what they feel drawn to do, and what they feel they *should* do. In some instances, this tension comes from societal pressures. Several youth talked about regularly hearing messages about the value of certain types of jobs or narrow versions of what career success can look like. Young people who are interested in social sciences, non-corporate careers, or non-college pathways do not feel like this vision for themselves fits the mold of what is deemed acceptable. In other cases, this tension comes from internal conflict over competing priorities. Because financial concerns are so prevalent in young people's minds, some youth feel the need to choose income and stability over careers they believe will make them happy. There is a sense that to follow one's happiness may come into direct conflict with one's ability to support themselves.

"I struggle with what I want to be because in the back of my head I always have that thought of money and if I can support myself with the kind of job and education I want. I'm worried that if I do what I want to do, I won't be able to support myself."

- Youth, 2021

"Not everything is about the money. People get greedy with it. I feel like pushing the narrative that you can only be rich and successful through academics is very detrimental to kids and children. It's detrimental to mental health."

- Youth, 2021

Young people are thinking about the stability or future viability of career options. Most hold this as a general concern. Several youth believe there are not many jobs or that there are limited industries in Hawai'i. A few shared that there are opportunities that feel out of reach in Hawai'i but possible elsewhere. Some youth are worried about how competitive the job market will be when they are ready to enter the workforce. Others spoke about pursuing careers in industries where they think there will be a higher likelihood of getting a job. For example, a few have looked at job market trends to determine high growth areas, while others talked about their intention to go into military service because of the benefits offered and accessibility of entry.

How youth think and feel about their future (continued)

Young people commonly named self-doubt as a challenge when thinking about the future. Some youth worry explicitly about **whether they are “good enough”** to accomplish their goals, including getting into college, securing jobs of interest, or pursuing the lives they envision for themselves.

“So many students who apply to college have good grades and test scores but college like stuff that makes you unique and I don’t have that. I work hard to do well academically all my life and I don’t have anything else that makes me a special applicant.”

- Youth, 2021

“My biggest challenge is me wondering if I’m good enough to get where I want to go. If my college application is good enough for the colleges I want to go to. Or, if my skill set is good enough for the jobs I want to go into. ”

- Youth, 2021



Many youth **identified themselves as the biggest barrier** they see to achieving their future goals. Whether it is from lack of self-confidence, past experiences that have diminished their sense of their capabilities, or not having the skills or supports to process and move through the negative thoughts they have about themselves, youth worry they will get in their own way.

“I think sometimes when I have an opportunity, sometimes I doubt myself or I have certain feelings about things that hold me back on experiencing more. That would have to be one of my barriers - my doubt in my mind - maybe I shouldn't be here.”

- Youth, 2021

“I feel like there are so many opportunities but if I can’t find them or have the confidence to pursue them, they’re just going to go by.”

- Youth, 2021



When I imagine my future, I overthink; and that overthinking leads to a downwards-spiraling of jumbled thoughts. What career will I pursue? What college will I go to? What will my future look like? Will I not like what I see? Will I regret my choices? As the saying goes: You are your worst critic. The only thing that's holding me back is myself.



How youth think and feel about their future (continued)

Youth explicitly named the need for mental health and wellness supports to address the feelings of stress and overwhelm they are experiencing. They want to be understood and treated as whole people. They believe more consideration should be given to the emotional weight many youth carry with them into classrooms, extracurricular programs, and the world at large. They also think the stigma around mental health may keep young people from accessing resources that may currently exist.

"Self-criticism comes from parents and teachers pressuring students to be the best, and you want to focus on something other than school. Be more lenient in terms of workload - you don't know what people are going through at home. Take mental health into consideration when planning things out."

- Youth, 2021

"When students go to therapy people think there must be something wrong with them. I think schools could provide places to go to safely talk about their feelings so it's more normalized."

- Youth, 2021

"I know a lot of us are very aware of our emotions. Maybe that is being a teenager. A lot of us don't want to talk about things - [adults should try] to get through to kids on an emotional side. It affects kids and what they want to do with their future and what they think they can accomplish."

- Youth, 2021



System Opportunities

Mental Health & Student Wellbeing:

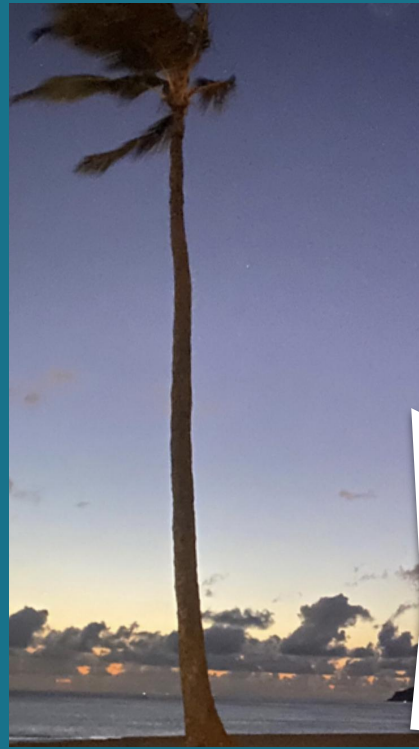
- School system assesses the mental health supports currently provided and offer more or improved resources.
- Schools prioritize youth as whole people, and focus on supporting youth in developing social-emotional skills.
- System actors collaborate to change narratives to support a positive vision of youth, their capabilities, and the possible pathways that exist for them. While some feelings of stress and uncertainty are developmentally appropriate, young people have deeply internalized the weight of financial stressors and negative messages about their abilities and prospects.



Key Influences



In time we must all make both short term and long term goals share out future to how we want it to be. My goal is to always be a student. Because as a human race we never truly stop learning we must always allow our brain to be a sponge and soak up all that is given to us by our family, friends, and coworkers.



The cold breeze sends a shiver down my spine as I sit on this empty beach. All light is slowly fading and soon everyone will be asleep. But I stay here looking at this lonesome palm tree that almost reminds me of me. It outlooks a world with millions of possibilities that I wish to see while society is telling me to go find a job and go do something with my life. The questions is how do I know what I truly want to be when I'm in this world all alone just looking for ways to be free like the leaves flowing high at the top of this lonely palm tree.

Introduction

Family

Other Adults

Peers

Environment & Community

Introduction

As the previous section discussed, youth have high aspirations and plans for their futures. And while some youth have fostered a sense of pride and faith in their own capabilities, and feel motivated to set goals and take steps towards achieving them, the development of self confidence and the ability to pursue one's plans does not exist in a vacuum. The people in a young person's life, and the environment and community that surrounds them affects their interests, behavior, opportunities, and growth.

This section discusses how family, other adults, peers, and one's environment and community all influence a young person's future goals and path forward. For many youth, these influences are positive and supportive. The people and places that surround them can be sources of inspiration and motivation. They can also offer exposure to different opportunities or experiences, guidance, and assistance. While some youth also discussed the ways in which these elements can be challenging, all spoke of their overall importance and influence as they think about and plan for their future.



According to Wikipedia, moss is "...non-vascular plants in the land plant division Bryophyta..." Very scientific. However, when I think of moss, I think of experience and knowledge. For something to form moss, it needs to be sitting in one place for a long time. Think of all the stories it has heard throughout its time being there. Think about everything that it has been through. That's what I want for my future. I want to be knowledgeable and wise. I want to be able to hear all the stories that people have told and be able to store those close in my heart. I want peace and tranquility. Just like how the moss is.



Family

Families play an important role in supporting youth to become healthy, happy, and independent by providing emotional and moral support, showing belief and trust in the youth, and encouraging autonomy and responsibility. They also have the power to positively influence students' aspirations and goals by exposing them to different opportunities or paths, and setting expectations.

In our conversations with youth, family was the most commonly mentioned influence on their values, goals, and aspirations for their futures. Young people acknowledge that their family's influence can be either supportive, challenging, or both.

When supportive, families are **positive role models; a source of morals, inspiration and confidence; a support network; and a motivator.**

"The people around me, my family and family friends, they inspire me the most. My uncles inspired me to always work hard. My aunties inspired me to always be kind and loving. My family friends inspire me to go out and have fun and take care of the planet."

- Youth, 2021

"[My mom] is always reminding me that working isn't all there is to life, which influenced me to think success isn't just being rich and having money but being content with yourself."

- Youth, 2021

"I have an amazing support system when it comes to my family. They show up for me. They support me to be a good young woman and a good person in my community. [...] They give me a boost of confidence when I need it and tough love when I need it."

- Youth, 2021

As youth observe and learn from their families, they may realize different pathways and consider what it is they dream for themselves. For example, a cousin who got a computer engineering degree and who is now working for Google inspired one student to want to do something similar. Or, a parent who works a lot and struggles financially influenced another young person to pursue a stable job that pays well.

Family (continued)


Many students mentioned that their **families have incredibly high expectations** of them - expectations to do well in school, go to college, get a good job, work hard, and be successful. For some young people, these expectations match their own expectations of themselves, come with a belief in the young person's ability, and are accompanied by help or assistance. For many others, the expectations are a source of pressure and stress. Students talked about feeling overwhelmed by the constant reminder of these expectations, or felt like their future was being planned for them. When the expectations were even more specific, such as to pursue a certain career, young people expressed feeling especially limited. Support for the young person's vision, as opposed to that of the family, is important to youth.

That said, students acknowledged that having the ability to pursue whatever one wants is a luxury or privilege. As mentioned earlier, students are focused on their future stability, security, and financial independence - important considerations that several students said their family also stress. For example, one student said, "My parents don't have a specific goal for me but they expect me to make logical choices in what I go into so I can support myself."

When talking about what motivates them to achieve their future goals, many **students talked about wanting to make their family proud**.

Several mentioned the sacrifices or investments their families made

on their behalf, and the responsibility they felt because of this. Others spoke of younger siblings, nieces, and cousins that look up to them and for whom they want to be a positive role model. A couple students, who talked about how they weren't supported by their families, said they were motivated to prove them wrong, to become something and be successful in spite of their family's lack of belief in them.



"A lot of my family [...] always told us [they] expected us to excel in sports and education. At times it can be a little overwhelming when they're constantly putting it in your ear that you need to become better at [something] or you need to study harder. And I know they have these expectations of me because they love me, but at the same time they can be overwhelming."

- Youth, 2021

"My parents really influenced my goals. They always told me they wanted me to be an engineer or doctor, to build a huge house for them as an engineer. That made me lean towards wanting to become an engineer even though I kind of don't want to."

- Youth, 2021

Family (continued)

In general, **it's important for families to offer the right balance of encouragement.** Students need support *and* opportunities to develop greater autonomy and independence. Students feel like they can thrive when their families show encouragement while supporting the young person's ideas and dreams, and when they leave space for the student to explore and learn on their own. Students feel discouraged when there is too much pressure, little independence, a lack of support, or feelings of apathy about their future.

"Parents can be challenging when they are uninvolved do nothing, but it's also challenging when they do things FOR their kids instead of WITH them. Parents who strike the right balance [...] help students be more independent and responsible."

- School Staff, 2021

BRIGHT SPOT

One school is encouraging greater autonomy and independence in students by transitioning from communicating with parents about school requirements, news, events, and updates to communicating directly with students their senior year.

School staff corroborated that parental involvement and influence is a big factor in students' college and career aspirations. One staff person said, "For some counselors, when they talk to students about going to college, they have to convince both the student and their parents." While another noted that some students have parents who encourage college and have a lot of resources their child can use in getting there. Staff emphasized the importance of engaging families in supporting the young person in planning for their future, including communicating more with families, working to understand their priorities or concerns, and aligning support around the youth's future goals.

System Opportunities

Family Engagement & Collaboration:

- Schools understand the expectations and priorities that parents/caregivers hold for their young people. Families are engaged as indispensable partners, so that they not only feel included, but experience a strong sense of belonging where their ideas and efforts are acknowledged and valued. Discussions on differences in goals and expectations take place, and come from a place of trust and open communication.
- Students' future goals are centered; school staff and parents/caregivers are aligned and work in partnership to support youth aspirations.

Other Adults

Other adults, such as **teachers, community-based organization staff, and community members** were named as important people in students' lives that can provide guidance as students think about and plan for their futures.

Students talked about **teachers** who really care about them and go out of their way to support their students both academically and emotionally. These teachers do so by **building relationships with the youth, advocating for them, sharing extra opportunities and resources, or pushing them to try something new, take risks, and explore their interests**. Many of the students spoke of their teachers fondly, acknowledging the influence that they have had on their plans as well as their success. These students shared that they looked up to their teachers and felt like they could go to them for support.

"What led me to my understanding were my science teachers who offered me the most opportunities. [...] The people who keep an eye on you [...] force you to do science fairs and encourage you, take you through the steps. That helped me understand that I like doing this."

- Youth, 2021

"I have one teacher who helps me with my goals. She makes assignments around goals. She asks about future goals - it pushes me and supports me as well."

- Youth, 2021



On the other hand, some students didn't have such positive relationships with their teachers. One student said, "I've had teachers who have made me feel like I'm capable of anything, as well as teachers who encouraged a way of thinking that wasn't good for me." Others said their teachers didn't help them to feel confident or that they focused too much on academic success.

BRIGHT SPOT

One student shared that at the start of the pandemic teachers were more understanding and generally supportive of student needs beyond academic engagement. They appreciated that teachers acknowledged what was happening outside of the classroom, encouraged students to take care of themselves, and emphasized the importance of their general well being.



System Opportunities

Mental Health & Student Wellbeing:

- School leaders promote a school-wide culture that is centered on care and relationship.
- Teachers and other school staff take time to develop relationships with students as individuals.

Other Adults (continued)

Community-based organization (CBO) staff can also serve as caring adults invested in the youth's future, and this may be especially important for youth who are less engaged by school or who might not have a supportive family. One young person said, "I have case workers who care about me. They just want me to succeed like any worker wants you to in this type of program." Other youth talked about the support they receive from CBO staff to set goals and work towards them.

Several students wish they had more ways to interact with adults in their communities. Students see community members as potential additional sources of advice and support as they navigate high school and opportunities thereafter. Students also noted the importance of seeing people that are similar to them achieve their goals. One youth said that having these role models helps them visualize what they want to be, see an example, and maybe make a plan to get there too. Students also talked about relationships or connections to community members as a way to expand their professional network that could lead to real opportunities, such as a job.

"I was lucky to get accepted to AVID where we do mock interviews with people in our community who are the ones hiring people. But all students deserve that opportunity - to be able to speak with adults and have their voices heard."

- Youth, 2021

System Opportunities

Information & Exposure to Pathways:

- Community organizations collaborate with schools to provide additional post-high school support, resources and opportunities to students.
- Schools provide more opportunities for students to interact and connect with individual community members (e.g. inviting classroom guest speakers, supporting mentorships).

Peers

Positive peer interactions and relationships can serve as a source of inspiration and contribute to greater individual confidence in youth.

Many young people were quick to name their friends when asked who has influenced or inspired their future goals. These students mentioned having similar interests as their friends, which gave them the feeling that they were working towards their future as a group, instead of alone. Students also talked about classmates and upperclassmen that served as **role models**. When they saw other students work hard and succeed it encouraged and motivated them to do the same.

Activities and programs that foster peer relationships, such as clubs, band, ROTC, sports teams, and community-based programs, provide additional opportunities for students to interact with other youth who have similar interests or goals. Youth talked about valuing these spaces to meet new people, build camaraderie, and ultimately **learn from one another**. Some youth expressed interest in having more ways to connect with other students, especially since they are going through the same things and can relate to and understand one another. Students also valued formal peer mentorship opportunities, where they could learn from upperclassmen or serve as teen college counselors. Students found these opportunities to learn from their peers more accessible than learning from teachers or adults at times.

Some youth have had little experience with positive peer interactions and mentioned being bullied or excluded by classmates. Others talked about feeling peer pressure to take drugs or party, or noted that their peers distracted them from their goals. A few youth also talked about the toxic side of social media: when it encourages youth to compare themselves with their peers, which contributes to negative feelings of self worth.

Those youth who do have close, supportive friends, really spoke about them as an important **source of confidence and perseverance**. One student said, “My friends. Definitely. No matter what. Even if me and my friends have doubts in my goals or career or getting into college, we’re gonna be alright. We’re gonna think through it and solve our problem.”

“When I see other students working harder it pushes me to work harder. If I’m not doing as much as I can or challenging myself. If these students are able to achieve this, then I should be able to achieve my goals.”

- Youth, 2021

BRIGHT SPOT

A student who is a part of AVID mentioned being paired with a junior or senior peer mentor when they were a freshman and sophomore, and then having the opportunity to mentor an underclassman when they were a junior and senior.

Environment & Community

A young person's surrounding environment can also influence their values, opportunities, and future plans. When students **feel a strong connection to their environment or a sense of belonging in their community it positively impacts the goals they have for their future as well as their conviction to achieve them.** Generally, students spoke about their communities, their culture, and Hawai'i with love and pride, though many did acknowledge real systemic challenges: the high cost of living and lack of diverse job opportunities. These broader systemic issues influence students' expectations of what they can achieve, what opportunities they are able or want to pursue, and what choices they may have to make to pursue their goals.



The island is a part of me and I hope that I can do it proud. Honoring where I came from while also using it to shape my future.

Students expressed a deep connection to the land, their island, their community, and their home. As mentioned earlier in the report, many of the goals that young people aspire to include living in Hawai'i and being able to have a positive impact on their community. Many school mission statements include a similar objective and encourage connection and responsibility to one's community. One student talked about how their school teaches students to care for and love their "place" by holding a community trash clean up or having students help pick up the football field and bleachers after a game.



"I don't know where I'll end up, but for me, this is my home and this is the place I enjoy the most, so I'm not that interested in leaving it. I don't have a connection to anywhere but here."

- Youth, 2021

"I will own a farm and provide food and medicine to the community as well as educate the community on healthy eating and lifestyles. I want to be a positive impact on my community and the land."

- Youth, 2021



Environment & Community (continued)

The high cost of living and perceived lack of diverse job opportunities in Hawai'i stood out as substantial barriers or considerable factors for young people's future plans. Many students feel like they have to leave home and Hawai'i, at least for some time, to access opportunities, make more money, and eventually be able to afford living in Hawai'i. Several pointed to the impact of tourism and gentrification on their communities, and in turn, their options. Others felt like it was just a symptom of living on a small island.

"The more people that market this place as a vacation spot the more it will be hard for us to live here and be Hawaiian here. The fact that it's hard to be Hawaiian in Hawaiian places is heartbreaking."

- Youth, 2021

"I think I have some opportunities but there's always more opportunities elsewhere... For a lot of other careers and other people, they really want to leave. I don't blame them because there aren't a lot of jobs."

- Youth, 2021



Despite this reality, several students felt determined to stay in Hawai'i, and "fight" so others are able to do so. These students said they can't imagine themselves anywhere else and, even with how expensive it is, they'd work multiple jobs to be able to stay. Another said, "There is a struggle here that only we can solve. [...] there's only one way to see myself and it's here fighting the fight. [...] It's always going to be my home and I'm not going to let someone kick me out."

School staff also discussed how students are impacted by the high cost of living in Hawai'i, observing that students often aim to secure a high paying job so that they can afford to stay in Hawai'i. Other young people anticipate needing to leave the islands to build skills, education, and experience, and then return to Hawaii when they have a higher earning capacity.

"Money, especially because in Hawai'i things are so expensive, drives a lot of students' decision-making."

- School Staff, 2021

"I have a lot of students come and say they want to be an engineer because they make a lot of money."

- School Staff, 2021

Narratives & Expectations

Young people internalize the stories that they hear - be it broad societal narratives about a community or population of students, or the implicit and explicit messages youth receive directly from those around them, especially influential adults in their life. **These beliefs and messages matter and influence how how young feel about themselves and their capabilities.** While in many instances, others' expectations can serve as a positive influence, in some circumstances, external voices can do harm. Some youth spoke about trying to break away from narratives or expectations that others imposed on them. Others simply acknowledged their existence. A couple said that these narratives and low expectations might be influencing their peers' confidence in self.



System Opportunities

Mental Health & Student Wellbeing:

- Communities and schools collaborate to provide positive narratives and stories about a community and its people that focus on assets and what the community and its people can achieve.

"We have a lot of students fail. [Schools] think students aren't going to make it. In our community there aren't expectations for our achievement. Our community has also started to believe it. [...] It's become normalized that that's what's going to happen."

- Youth, 2021



School System Levers



Becoming a nurse will have many setbacks. A challenge that I see in the future is getting good grades, getting into nursing school, and obtaining hours and hours of clinical work. The gate represents the many challenges that I will have overcome. The green part of the leaves shows the positives of becoming a nurse and the brown shows that there will always be some bad in the good and you must persevere to overcome it.



Going off the beaten path can be stressful and can lead to many more battles and barriers but we as a people must realize that you can only go upward from Rock bottom. Some barriers and challenges that I believe I'll encounter is injuries and being lazy and falling behind in the classroom.

Introduction

Academic Relevance

Life Skills Preparation

Exposure to Pathways

Access to Information & Resources



Introduction

As discussed in the *Youth's Future Goals and Aspirations* section of this report, young people have ambitious dreams, but consistently expressed concern and nervousness about making the transition from high school to college or career. The school system, and all of the supports, resources, and opportunities that it offers young people, of course play an important role in helping youth to feel better prepared and set up for success. When reflecting on how their school has or has not supported their overall development and plans for the future, youth identified four areas where schools can contribute to their preparedness and post-secondary success:

- **Academic relevance:** Students spoke of the importance of alignment between what they are learning in school and their intended future plans or job opportunities.
- **Life skills preparation:** Young people fear that they have not learned the adult skills that they will need to be able to support themselves independently, including social-emotional learning (SEL) skills as well as more practical life skills like financial literacy and early job readiness skills. School staff also spoke about the importance of SEL development for student success after high school.
- **Exposure to pathways:** Young people need greater support to understand the possibilities and pathways that exist beyond high school.
- **Access to information & resources:** Students talked about wanting more information and resources as they plan for and pursue their future goals.

Overall, students and staff acknowledged that some learning opportunities, supports, and resources are available in the above areas; however, they are not always equitably distributed or used by all young people. Some students couldn't actually recall if certain resources were available to them, while others felt like they didn't know how to access them. Young people and staff both recognized that there is room for improvement and additional ways that schools can focus on supporting student development in academics, life skills preparation, exposure to future pathways, and access to information and resources.

Note about COVID-19: It is important to note that Covid-19 has fundamentally changed the school experience. While understanding changes in students experience caused by the pandemic were not a focus of the evaluation, we documented themes we heard from students in Appendix B.

Academic Relevance

A common theme from youth related to academics was the importance of alignment between what they are learning in school and their intended future plans or job opportunities. Many students mentioned **relevant coursework, hands-on learning opportunities, and career academies as being helpful in working toward their futures.** Academic coursework was useful for students both for helping students identify subject areas that they are interested in as well as identifying areas they are *not* interested in. Hands-on learning opportunities such as internship programs, early college courses, and field trips had lasting effects on students' interests in pursuing certain college and career pathways.

"The classes that I took the past few years also influenced me because [...] if I think it's interesting and I can see myself doing something like that [then] I am drawn to those careers. The classes that are more boring to me, I can't imagine myself pursuing that."

- Youth, 2021

Youth shared mixed feelings about career academies. **Some students valued the academy model's close connection to prominent industries in Hawai'i and the opportunities that the academies afforded them to learn in more depth about subjects and careers within their academies.** School staff echoed these advantages, pointing out that the prescribed pathways within the academies allow students to build deeper understanding and skills in a particular field.

"I was in the Medical pathway; it had a lot of opportunities for us to try different things. I did a pharmacy externship, studying administration of drugs and worked in the pharmacy for three to four months [...] There was a lot of opportunities for me to grow in the medical field in my pathway."

- Youth, 2021

"With the academy model, the discussion of career and what [career] you want to go into comes up sooner. Students do a lot more projects that force them to research a job and think about why they want to do that."

- School Staff, 2021

Other students emphasized that the academy model felt limiting or felt that it was challenging to select an academy so early on (in 8th or 9th grade). Some students said they realized an academy wasn't a good fit for them after they had selected it, but that it was hard to change. Other students were interested in topics that fell into more than one academy and felt torn about having to choose. Still other students admitted that they had no idea what types of careers they were interested in pursuing around the time that they had to choose an academy.

Academic Relevance (continued)

School staff acknowledged that the academy model can be restrictive and present a challenge for students who are less sure about their future goals. Some staff raised concern that the career academies create adverse incentives - ultimately rewarding students for successfully completing the requirements within an academy versus supporting students with developing skills and gaining experience within a subject area they are truly interested in. One school staff member said that there was a level of ‘competition’ between staff members of different academies to ‘keep’ high performing students even if a student expressed interest in transferring academies.

In general, **students want more agency in deciding what they are learning in school.** Youth feel that the current system is too standardized and “one size fits all.” Some suggested having more exploratory courses instead of core classes or prerequisites. A lot of these students felt that the core classes were repetitive year after year or irrelevant to their particular future plans. Additionally, a few students mentioned that the way classes are taught doesn’t work for them. One student said, “Not everyone can learn by just talking at them.” This relates to the value of project-based or multimodal learning experiences that engage students with different learning styles and interests.

“I am a firm believer that high school should be exploratory in nature. [At Academy schools] kids get rewarded for being ‘completers’ of a course of study and some schools’ view is that students need to stay in whatever pathway they initially enroll in, but when I was a sophomore in high school I didn’t think this would be my career.”

- School Staff, 2021

Students and staff spoke about the **level of rigor or alignment between their high school coursework and that of college-level courses.** Students considering college as a post-high school pathway raised concerns about their academic readiness and ability to succeed in college-level courses. Teachers acknowledged that the rigor of their classes is not always as high as they would like it to be, but that they have to “meet students where they are at.” One school staff member explained: “for example, in an English class, we should be teaching literary analysis, but if the students can’t write an email, we have to start with the basics.” One staff member emphasized a need for closer coordination and collaboration between high schools and colleges (especially community colleges) to clarify what ‘college readiness’ looks like and develop specific examples to ensure high school staff are targeting their time and resources towards the ‘right’ things to support their students to be academically successful in college.

Life Skills Preparation

Students are excited about and eager for opportunities to develop important and practical life skills in school. This includes a wide range of skills, from social-emotional learning (SEL) to financial literacy. When asked to what extent high school felt relevant to their future goals, several youth spoke to the **important relationship building and responsible decision-making skills that they learn in school**. However, some youth felt that their school does not emphasize the development of these skills enough, sharing that the academic focus is much more prevalent. Others seemed to have opportunities to develop these skills in advanced classes or special programs. For example, one student said that they learned important time management skills and developed a strong work ethic in their AP courses. Another student mentioned a school group that their parents enrolled them in that covered important steps in preparing for college and noted that other kids didn't have this same opportunity.

When it comes to SEL skills, school staff are in agreement about their overall importance. Many schools' mission statements focus on effectively preparing students for their futures through academic achievement and character and social-emotional development. **School staff look for students to demonstrate college- and career-ready skills as signals that they are ready for their next steps after high school**, including responsibility (attendance, meeting deadlines), communication (email etiquette, tailoring communication to audiences, asking for help), and self-motivation (goal setting, demonstrating interest or involvement in activities, clubs, community, etc.) To school staff, students' SEL skills can indicate a readiness for next steps. Seeing students who regularly demonstrate goal setting, responsible decision-making, and positive coping skills is an indication that they are ready to successfully transition from high school to college or career.

Despite its acknowledged importance, the anxiousness and uncertainty expressed by young people potentially indicates a need for greater SEL support and attention in schools. Staff agreed there is more that schools could be doing to help students feel confident in themselves.

System Opportunities

Mental Health & Student Wellbeing:

- School leaders and staff build social and emotional learning opportunities more intentionally into school, classroom, and counseling activities.



Life Skills Preparation (continued)

In addition to SEL skills, **students overwhelming expressed a yearning for opportunities to build skills for adulthood that aren't currently offered**, such as making a budget, filing taxes, getting insurance, buying a car or home, etc. Many students connected their feelings of fear about graduating or overwhelm about being on their own to not having a good grasp on these basic life skills. A couple youth wondered if these skills could be more intentionally incorporated into their high school coursework or their Personal Transition Plans.*

"The basic adult skills that you need to be living in a society to buy a house, or investing, or paying taxes, or even insurance... I don't have those skills that a lot of adults have. I think I'm going to have a hard time learning those and worried I'll make mistakes that will cost me in the future."

- Youth, 2021

"Our school doesn't teach us any of that. They teach us history, math, how to solve for x and y, science, [...] but becoming an adult they haven't taught us - how to file our taxes or what to look for when buying a car or home, or applying for a credit card or getting your first debit card, or budgeting - and I feel like that's why so many people are scared of graduating and becoming an adult."

- Youth, 2021

Other students talked about **early job readiness skills** that they would like to develop. Some youth mentioned a class that offered training in job interviews or writing cover letters and how valuable this was. However, it seemed that these experiences were not accessed by all students. Students and school staff both noted that schools can better leverage community resources to provide opportunities for young people to develop these skills. Partnering with local employers or organizations to offer professional development training, conduct mock interviews, or even connect youth to internship opportunities are examples of activities offered in some schools, programs, or classes, but not others. According to school staff, paid internships are essential for many students who cannot afford to work for free.

*HIDOE defines Personal Transition Plan as an individually designed and custom tailored plan of action for each high school student to move successfully from high school to post-secondary and/or career venues. The plan is supposed to include elements of goal attainment, identification of available resources to students, evidence to support the plan of action taken by the student, and a student self-evaluation component. The design of the PTP takes into account that the student, parent, and school personnel have a shared responsibility in the development and execution of the PTP during high school. A PTP is supposed to be initiated with students when they enter the 9th grade.

Exposure to Pathways

In order to feel confident in their next steps, young people need support to understand the available pathways for achieving their goals. Overall, in our research, there was acknowledgement that resources and information about pathways largely do exist, but do not always successfully make their way directly to young people.

Schools play a vital role in transmitting information to students about possibilities that exist for young people after they graduate high school. College and career centers coordinate and arrange a variety of college and career exposure opportunities for students throughout the school year, including: field trips to colleges and workplaces, college and career fairs, and guest speakers (who are often school alumni and/or community members). Many schools offer internship opportunities or support students in identifying their own internship opportunities. Academy Model schools often have a freshman academy, which introduces 9th graders to subject area academies that give students a ‘taste’ of subject areas they may choose to delve deeper into.

“Sometimes the guest speakers at school...some classes bring in alumni in different fields. Hearing about how their experience growing up here is similar to ours, how far they’ve gone with their passion, what they’re interested in. That kind of inspires me.”

- Youth, 2021

“I visited a few colleges on a school trip and seeing the other students walking around I thought, I want to do that.”

- Youth, 2021

However, **exposure to career paths, encouragement to pursue certain professions, and invitations to participate in hands-on learning opportunities were either not equitably available to or inconsistently accessed by all young people.** While some students valued career fairs and career days they experienced on their campus, other students could not recall having the opportunity to attend any career events. One student mentioned that while they did not have career fairs at their school, military recruiters regularly tabled on campus. Additionally, the range of learning opportunities offered by academies differed depending on which schools youth attended. As previously noted, while some students lauded the practical experiences their academy afforded them, others did not feel their schools offered the same degree of exposure or opportunity.

Additionally, many youth feel they do not fully understand the range of career opportunities they might consider. Several youth who are uncertain about what they want to do in the future attribute their lack of clarity to a lack of information; they sense there are possibilities they simply do not know about. Some feel that only a narrow range of jobs are highlighted or emphasized in schools, limiting their perception of what is possible.

Access to Information & Resources

Hand in hand with exposure to existing pathways is arming youth with information and resources to plan for and pursue their future goals. **Youth consistently expressed that, while they conceptually know that many planning supports exist, they either don't know how to access them or don't feel that the resources are made as readily available to them as they could be.** For example, several students indicated that they felt they had to take initiative to seek out counselors and ask for their help before information was shared with them. This observation was corroborated by one school staff member, who said some counselors look for students to demonstrate a level of proactiveness before engaging them in individualized support. Several school counselors acknowledged that they feel overwhelmed by the number of students they support and their limited bandwidth does not allow them to spend as much time providing individualized support to students as they would like to. Other students acknowledged that their limited knowledge about opportunities prevented them from seeking advice or support, because they weren't even sure what questions to ask or what type of support to ask for.

System Opportunity

Information and Exposure to Pathways:

- Schools provide more individualized counseling support that equitably reaches all students. This may mean a lower student to counselor ratio so each counselor's workload is more manageable. It may also mean that counselors develop equity-based practices to direct their time and attention to students who most need their support.

"If you knew what you wanted to do, there were a lot of resources and guides for you. But for me, I didn't think that far ahead and so I didn't really take advantage of those resources. It's really up to you if you want to get to a certain college or career path, it's up to you to communicate it to your guidance counselors and use the resource. I think our High School had a lot of opportunities, but i didn't take advantage of them."

- Youth, 2021

BRIGHT SPOT

One school counselor relies heavily on relationship-building with students to better support them in setting goals and working toward those goals. This counselor pairs relationship building with a dedication to learning about the breadth of scholarship opportunities and other future-oriented programs so that they can act as a conduit to connect students to those programs and opportunities that might be of most interest to them. This counselor "wants every student to pop into a head" of a school staff member who may know about or learn about opportunities that might be of interest to students.

Access to Information & Resources (continued)

Another support used to help students plan for their future is the Personal Transition Plan (PTP). This is required for every graduating senior and serves as a consistent avenue through which schools guide students through putting thought into and preparing for their post-high school futures. That said, many focus group participants shared that while the PTP was introduced during their freshman year, they were largely ignored during students' sophomore and junior years and then reintroduced during their senior years when they needed to be completed. This may mean that students are losing out on two years of time to prepare or take concrete steps to achieve their future goals.

Finally, young people are very concerned about the financial costs of attending college. **Students perceive a high cost of attending college, lack a clear understanding of the full extent and types of financial resources available to them (public grants, public and private loans, and scholarships), and don't feel that they are well supported to effectively access those resources.** Statewide FAFSA completion data confirm that students need more support here. The FAFSA, which determines eligibility for many types of aid, was 59% among high school seniors in Hawai'i for the 2019-20 cycle. This is also an area where families should be engaged. Since school staff shared that some families don't encourage college due to financial concerns, families may benefit from events or meetings with counselors and students to discuss available financial support. School staff also shared that students whose parents do support their going to college or who have college-going experience tend to already have resources and information to support their child on that journey. On the other hand, students from families without college-going experience may lack those existing resources and need more outside support to successfully navigate the college admissions process. While schools don't have control over college costs or the availability of financial aid resources, they can better support students and families with understanding and accessing financial aid.

BRIGHT SPOT

One school that previously engaged only seniors and their families in "senior conferences" expanded the conferences to juniors and their families during the pandemic. The junior conferences were successful in getting students and families to think about, discuss, and create plans further in advance. This created opportunities for students and families to explore multiple college pathways and identify and apply to scholarships. The school plans to continue to offer conferences to both juniors and seniors and their families.

"Some students have parents who encourage college - they have a lot of resources that they take advantage of...the most successful students are the ones in the know."

- School Staff, 2021



System Opportunity



Family Engagement & Collaboration

- Schools facilitate deeper engagement of parents/caregivers of students who have less access to information and resources.

System Opportunities

Introduction

Mental Health and Student Well-Being

Family Engagement & Collaboration

Information & Exposure to Pathways



Introduction

Reflecting and drawing on the findings shared throughout this report, this section considers opportunities and potential strategies for the system to provide greater support to youth so that they can fulfill their most ambitious dreams. While this year's evaluation did not include a systems-level approach, we hope that education leaders, collaborators, policymakers, and funders will engage with the findings and begin to examine what the implications and opportunities are for the larger system. The following section is meant to support this reflection to surface potential shifts in the system.

Three key system opportunity areas emerged when reviewing the evaluation findings:

1. Mental Health and Student Well-being
2. Family Engagement and Collaboration
3. Information and Exposure to Pathways

Youth and school staff noted opportunities as well as gaps related to these areas, particularly for youth who are disproportionately affected by ongoing disenfranchisement and marginalization, and who have inequitable access to opportunity and resources. Drawing on ideas and suggestions from these conversations with youth and staff, as well as general best practices from the field, this section expands on these potential areas for the system to focus on.

Mental Health and Student Well-Being

Youth's mental state, and the supports they have to cope with the challenges they face, correlates to their [ability to persevere](#) in challenging situations. Finding ways to better support students' social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs does not hinder or supplant academic rigor. Attention to these skills and supports can combat the self-doubt youth see as a barrier, and build the resilience and confidence necessary for young people to succeed after high school.

How can the system better support student mental health and well-being?

- **Examine the mental health supports currently provided to young people, and deliver more or improved resources.** Schools should evaluate whether existing plans and programs designed to address youth wellness are sufficient, accessible, culturally responsive, and appealing. Those who do not offer services should plan to do so.
- **Prioritize mental health and social-emotional learning at the school, complex, and district level.** Collecting data on SEL and student well-being can enable actors at the school, complex, and district level to reflect on what trends are visible, what lessons can be learned, and where targeted improvements are needed. More data can inform a deeper understanding of available or needed resources, accessibility of resources, student needs, school climate, or existing program effectiveness, and can be used to develop action plans and measurable goals.
- **Support professional development opportunities for teachers and school staff in mental health, social-emotional skills, building relationships, and examining bias.** School personnel can help or hinder student mental well-being; those who are adequately resourced and trained can make appropriate health referrals, integrate SEL opportunities into their pedagogy, and engage youth and their families in meaningful and collaborative conversations about student supports. Additionally, professional development that addresses bias in schools and classrooms can help teachers and school staff center equity, discontinue harmful practices, and build enriching spaces for young people.
- **Emphasize a positive vision of youth, and celebrate a diversity of pathways.** Young people would benefit from a range of affirming stories, including stories that celebrate the variety of careers paths that exist and those that change the narrative around what college is, who it is for, and how it is relevant to their lives. While narrative change alone will not address historic or engrained negative messages, community-wide support of young people, their vision, and their capabilities are critical for students to have a positive concept of themselves and who they can become.
- **Involve the community in developing holistic approaches.** Assets and resources may already exist within the community that can be better leveraged to support young people. System actors can create or strengthen partnerships to support mental health needs and address gaps that may exist in serving students.

Family Engagement & Collaboration

Schools and community-based organizations (CBOs) serving high school-age youth should be intentional about how they engage and collaborate with families given the enormous influence they have on student values, interests, and aspirations. [Research](#) consistently shows that family engagement in schools contributes to positive student outcomes, including improved student achievement, decreased disciplinary issues, and improved school environment.

Family engagement and collaboration should be included as a main strategy and core value at the system level. Dedicated funding, the adoption of quality standards, and the provision of training and capacity building around family engagement may be important steps. As Panorama points out in their [Comprehensive Guide on Family Engagement in Schools](#), while there is no one-size fits all approach to family engagement, it's clear that random acts of engagement are not enough. Districts, schools, and CBOs must systematically involve families and use strategies that engage families meaningfully, continuously, and equitably.

How can the system advance more meaningful engagement and collaboration with families?

- **Recognize families' areas of expertise, including their expectations and hopes for their student, guidance and support methods, and aspects of their home culture.** Building a foundation of trust with families, where families' ideas, efforts, desires, concerns, and culture are valued and understood will allow schools to better support students. Frequent communication and engagement will enable schools and families to better discuss, support, align, and collaborate on expectations and pathways for students.
- **Communicate with families about available post-high school options and pathways, especially those with less access to information and resources.** Providing information about different pathways (e.g. community college or trade schools) and how to navigate systems (e.g. college admissions and financial aid) is important for families to be able to support their children. It's critical to prioritize deeper engagement with those families who experience inequities in access. System leaders should make sure information is available in multiple languages and formats, and collaborate with CBOs to leverage existing relationships in an effort to reach specific and underserved populations.
- **Center the young person's goals and interests.** Ultimately, the priority is the young person, and supporting them to be healthy, happy, and independent. This may mean balancing the importance of family engagement and influence with an understanding of how to provide support when family expectations are misaligned with student needs or goals. Centering students and the vision they have for themselves is important to encouraging their autonomy.

Information & Exposure to Pathways

Young people need a better understanding of the pathways available to them, as well as the information and resources for how to plan for and achieve their future goals. There is more that can be done to ensure that all students are aware of the resources available to them, receive support with determining how to best take advantage of the resources available, and have equitable opportunity for exposure to college and career pathways.

What strategies could the system advance to increase information and exposure to pathways?

- **Resource individualized counseling support that equitably reaches all students and a smaller counselor to student ratio.** Adoption of equity-based counseling practices encourage counselors to direct their time and attention to students who most need it, including those who are not getting support elsewhere or who don't think to ask for help. A smaller caseload would ensure counselors develop relationships with each of their students, have in depth conversations about students' interests, hopes, goals, concerns, and obstacles, and have time to stay up-to-date on available scholarships, resources, and other supports.
- **Provide earlier interventions focused on college and career planning that are consistently administered across schools and grade levels.** Students would benefit from more frequent and continuous activities that build their understanding of the college and career pathways, support their planning, and connect them to resources sooner. For example, reflecting on grade level objectives from Hawai'i P-20's [College, Career, and Community Readiness Expectation](#) or regularly using PTPs may allow youth to continue to build on knowledge and plan for next steps far enough in advance.
- **Increase investment in hands-on, project-based learning opportunities.** These types of learning experiences help youth make tangible connections between the classroom and career and can expose youth to various pathways they would have otherwise not experienced. These opportunities can also feel more accessible to different types of learners, meaning students may experience success and expand their thinking on what pathways are attainable.
- **Build stronger connections between schools, community-based organizations, and local business.** Partnerships with community businesses or chambers of commerce may enable more internships, work-based learning opportunities, and valuable career connections, especially for students who don't plan to attend college. There may also be ways to more purposefully engage partners at community centers, public libraries, or CBOs who could provide mentorship and 'āina-based learning, and supplement the work that schools are doing to support students. More broadly, all system actors should reflect on how bias, historical disinvestment in certain communities, and ongoing inequitable distribution of resources may contribute to disconnects in resource awareness and use.

Appendices

A: Full List of Research Questions and SubQuestions

B: Impact of COVID-19 on Students' School Experience

C: How to Use This Report

D: Resources for Systems Opportunities

E: Photovoice Submissions

Full List of Research Questions and SubQuestions

Overarching Research Questions

1. How do high school students think about their future?
2. What gets in the way of young people achieving their life goals?
3. What helps young people achieve their life goals?

Youth-Focused Research SubQuestions

- A. What are your goals for the future?
- B. What people or experiences have influenced or inspired your future goals?
- C. What people or experiences have helped you to figure out what steps to take to achieve your future goals?
- D. How and where have you gotten exposure to the various academic or career opportunities that you are considering pursuing?
- E. What, if any, academic/career options feel out of reach to you? Why?
- F. To what extent has high school felt related to your future goals?
- G. Who or what makes you feel confident that you can achieve your future goals?
- H. What types of expectations do important people in your life have about your future?
 - I. When you think about your future, do you imagine yourself in Hawai'i or somewhere else? Why?
- J. What barriers or challenges are on your mind when you think about your future?
- K. What is your personal motivation for achieving your future goals?

School Staff-Focused Research SubQuestions

- L. Does your high school have a clear vision connected to work and collegiate opportunity? What is it?
- M. What are the interventions (provided by the school or other partners) that your high school offers to help students figure out what steps to take to achieve their future goals?
- N. Beyond the data that you currently collect on student success, what are the signs and signals that you look for to see if students are ready for steps after high school?
- O. What is your school's expectation for students? How far are current students from that expectation?

Impact of COVID-19 on Students' School Experience

COVID and the abrupt switch to remote learning in 2020 has had an impact on students' school engagement and success. Academically, youth acknowledge that online learning has been a huge challenge and that they aren't able to learn or engage in the same way that they could when they were learning in person. They observed that they (and their peers) are 'falling behind.' Several students mentioned that the online learning environment made it harder for teachers to identify or see when students were struggling: "In school it's not too bad because they can see if you are struggling but if you are at home they can't see it." School staff members agreed that students were less engaged and acknowledged that being fully remote made it challenging for school staff to build relationships and connections with students. Even getting some students to regularly attend online classes or participate in classroom activities has been a challenge. School staff also observed that many students took on additional responsibilities in their homes—such as caring for their siblings or doing chores—that interfered with their schoolwork.

Outside of academics, due to schools being physically closed, many extracurricular activities—those that provided a sense of belonging, community, and connection to their school for many students—shut down, stripping many students of a social support system and source of happiness. The more widespread effects of COVID, such as economic turmoil, exacerbated students' feelings of uncertainty about their futures.

"They feel unprepared. The last year and half was pretty much taken away from them so some of them are just not ready to move on from HS. Some have shared that...it was still pretty unclear what life would look like. Will they go to college in person or online. Couldn't envision what they're future would look like so it was hard for them to commit."

- School Staff, 2021



"Being online while taking classes limits what you can learn. I feel like I haven't learned as much as I should have."

- Youth, 2021

"I have some classmates who started their own small businesses during the pandemic. That was cool. But then other friends weren't doing well...For them it's more complicated."

- Youth, 2021

How to Use This Report

This report presents findings about how youth are thinking and feeling about their future, and what they experience as helpful or challenging as they pursue their life goals. We encourage your team to reflect on these findings in two rounds. First, we invite you to reflect on the findings to make further sense of them in your context. Then, we encourage your team to reflect on the system opportunities presented in this report to spark ideas about what *specific* actions your team can take to address the issues and challenges that may be present in your context. After reflecting, we invite your team to write down 1-3 actions that you want to commit to trying out (see the template in slide 54).

Round 1: Reflecting on the Findings in Your Context

- Which findings stand out to you as either consistent or inconsistent with your understanding of the youth experience in your context?
 - *For the student experiences that were consistent:* What are the key influencers/drivers of these experience in your context?
 - *For the student experiences that were inconsistent:* Why do you think that is? Where might more information be helpful to understand whether this is a pattern in your context?

Round 2: Reflecting on System Opportunities

The report lifted up three main system opportunity areas: 1) Mental Health and Student Well-Being; 2) Family Engagement and Collaboration; 2) Information and Exposure to Pathways. With your team, reflect on these areas of opportunities and consider the following questions:

- What might better supporting student mental health and well-being look like in our context?
- What might more meaningful family engagement and collaboration look like in our context?
- What might increasing information and exposure to pathways look like in our context?
- *For all of the above:* What *specific* policies, practices, resources, relationships, mental models do we need to shift/enhance to improve experiences and outcomes for students?
- *For all of the above:* What obstacles might our team encounter in shifting policies, practices, resources, relationships, mental models? How can we overcome them?

How to Use This Report

Action Planning

To close the reflection, we invite your team to think about and write down 1-3 actions you want to commit to in order to improve students’ experiences and outcomes in your context.

Our team commits to the following actions...

Action	Who will own this action?	What resources are needed to support this action?	By when?
1.			
2.			
3			

Resources for Systems Opportunities

The following resources were used to inform thinking around recommendations for system opportunities:

- [CASEL Fundamentals of SEL: What Does the Research Say?](#)
- [Hawai'i P-20 Pathways](#)
- [U.S. Dept. of Education: Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health Needs](#)
- [Pew Research Center: Anxiety and Depression Among Teens](#)
- [SEDL: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement](#)
- [Panorama: Family Engagement in Schools](#)
- [Hawai'i P-20 College, Career, and Community Readiness Expectations Guide](#)