Students raise awareness about vaping risks through visual arts campaign

Waiakea High Health Academy students organized a protest to raise awareness about the dangers of vaping. Most recently, the school organized a poster contest that challenged students to write catchy slogans, create images discouraging vaping, and educate the community about its health impacts. The Health Academy took it a step further and organized a protest where students could showcase these signs and get the word out to a broader audience.

Although the school has made multiple efforts and held multiple events in the past few years since the teenage vaping epidemic took off, this specific protest took a unique approach to the situation,” said McCann. “As teenagers, we look to our friends for advice, which is why it’s important for us to surround ourselves with other healthy teens. Witnessing the Health Academy students preaching their passions really impacted the way all grade levels view vaping."

The campaign definitely raised awareness and was eye opening for the students who created the videos and their peers,” digital media teacher Don Yamamoto said. “At first they thought it was a cool project, not fully understanding the reach it would have. But now students know that vaping has chemicals that can cause serious health problems. They had no idea about the dangers of vaping.

Waiakea’s digital media classes continue to create these PSAs and submit them to Olelo’s Youth Xchange video competition. To view some of the videos created by Waiakea High students, visit bit.ly/2x5Wka7.

Waiākea High students have waged an aggressive campaign to raise awareness about the dangers of vaping. Over the past two years, they have implemented a multipronged approach involving the school’s digital media classes, Health Academy and school-wide activities.

Sophomore and digital media student Taylor McCann has seen the impact of these efforts firsthand, sharing, “I noticed that after students were able to see their friends educate themselves on the threatening effects of vaping, they felt inspired and motivated to do the same. Since then, I can confidently say I see much less vaping among people I know.”

Waiākea High received a grant in 2017 to assist with its anti-vaping campaign from the Hawai’i Public Health Institute (HIPHI), the organization that has led the 808NoVape campaign. The funds were used to purchase prizes for a poster contest and equipment to help students create public service announcement (PSA) videos. In 2018, junior and senior media students created videos that ran in movie theaters and were widely shared on social media platforms.

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“Although the school has made multiple efforts and held multiple events in the past few years since the teenage vaping epidemic took off, this specific protest took a unique approach to the situation,” added McCann. “As teenagers, we look to our friends for advice, which is why it’s important for us to surround ourselves with other healthy teens. Witnessing the Health Academy students preaching their passions really impacted the way all grade levels view vaping.”
Kealakehe Intermediate students in Kecia McDonald’s class identified garden samples during a unit on rat lungworm disease designed to help students connect with their learning.

I am constantly asking myself, what else can I do to support my students during their middle school years?

It is important to remember the amount of change these students are going through. The physical changes are obvious. I saw my son enter sixth grade baby-faced with a voice to match, and exit eighth grade at 5’9” sporting a rich baritone and slight mustache.

While hormones may affect typical tween/teen behavior, we can also blame the teenage brain. Although not changing in size, the brain is undergoing major developmental rehaul in the adolescent years, which involves pruning unused connections and firmly wiring new ones.

This means the brain is susceptible to a lack of impulse control and rational thinking, while prone to risky behavior and peer pressure. However, the adolescent brain is also capable of optimal learning and can readily take up an instrument, learn another language and master other new skills.

Middle-level students are poised for incredible bursts of development in these years. To support them in this growth it is important to be mindful of social and emotional learning in addition to academic performance. We can do this both at school and at home by growing their sense of place and belonging as they go through these middle school years using the ‘āina as an access point.

Let them have opportunities to get to know the land around them and make connections to their learning. Last year, my class studied rat lungworm disease and after exploring the school garden, they developed posters and informational brochures to share with their families and the community. They took great pride in being citizen scientists and “experts” who could teach their families about safety protocols.

Here are a few additional tips for educators and parents to keep in mind as they work with adolescents:

- **Keep communicating.** It’s not that your child or student is questioning you, it’s that they are questioning everything. Demonstrate discussion skills such as listening to understand and honoring multiple perspectives.

- **Manage stress, manage extremes.** As neuroscientist Frances Jensen elaborates, the biology of brain development makes teens “more susceptible to the effects of substances and stress.” Teach your student stress management and discuss mental health. Be aware of extremes.

- **Practice the pause.** Normal brain development includes impulsivity and increased emotional response. Model appropriate responses to their heightened emotions, and guide them to reflect and think further before acting on impulse.

- **Extend the understanding.** Share brain development information with your student. This will increase self awareness while creating opportunity for empathy toward classmates experiencing the same issues.

My sons have shared their stories of school trips to fishponds, heiau, petroglyphs and the volcano. Going to their favorite beach or on a nature walk also gives them the opportunity to share both what they have learned and what they love. These outdoor experiences can give students and our children the opportunity to be the expert while reinforcing their pride of place and a sense of connectedness to the community.

Kecia McDonald (@mcdonald_kecia) is the curriculum coordinator and leadership teacher at Kealakehe Intermediate School in Kailua-Kona. She is also a #PublicSchoolProud mom of two teenage boys and previously taught teen health.
Student Voice: Big lessons behind tiny homes

HIDOE’s Leadership Institute awarded a $10,000 Innovation Grant to Kealakehe High School STEM educator Justin Brown. His project provides students the opportunity to work with local architects and construction workers to design and build a tiny house while learning about the social and community impacts of homelessness, transient living and user needs. Kealakehe High freshman Jasmine Alip reflects on her experience and what this opportunity means for her and her peers.

As a part of Kealakehe High’s Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Academy, we’re given many opportunities to participate in community projects and competitions. One of these opportunities includes competing in the Tiny House Design Challenge hosted by SSFM International, Inc. in partnership with the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and mentor architect Shaun Roth.

We’re learning about various aspects of architecture, engineering and construction through an Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) course so we can apply that knowledge to the tiny house challenge. We’ve drawn up concept sketches and blueprints and we’re using industry-standard computer software such as Revit and AutoCAD. Currently, we’re making physical, scale models of our tiny houses. We’re all freshmen now, but the plan is to actually construct the houses by the time we leave high school. However, the ultimate goal with this project is to be able to help solve homelessness in Hawai’i. It’s heartbreaking to families in need on the street, suffering financially because they’re mentally and/or physically unable to secure a job. The homeless crisis hits close to home for me and many others, and I think that it’s important to give back to the community and be a part of the solution. As we’re learning how to design affordable housing, we can develop, design and build homes for those who don’t have one.

Jasmine Alip is a freshman at Kealakehe High School and is in the STEM academy pathway.
How to make a difference in our public schools

Editor’s note: This piece by Art Souza was initially published in 2004 in Kai Hohonu, a self-described “newsletter of the civic forum on public schools.” Souza was the principal at Honokaa High and Intermediate School at the time and went on to become complex area superintendent for West Hawaii. Sixteen years later, the message still resonates today.

Often times I am asked what are my most important responsibilities as a school principal? What comes to mind immediately is my commitment to ensuring student achievement providing for a physically and emotionally safe environment in which all of my students can maximize their learning, and providing programs and opportunities for students to learn and exercise commitment to civic responsibility and citizenship.

At the heart of what we do as educators is our belief in personal responsibility and our determination to “make a difference.” Public education is a public concern and the students are our community, today and in the future. During this legislative session our political leaders will be grappling with issues that will “reform” education as we know it in our state. Much emotion and thought will be spent battling over issues as diverse as governance and financial management of our schools. In all this discussion what I hope is not lost is that the business of schools is not about control but rather about making a difference. Recently I was approached by anonymous donors wanting “to show a commitment, to make a difference.” They asked me to draw up a proposal that in my eyes would make a significant impact upon the academic and social needs of our students. We set about creating a vision to transform our current inadequate school library into a state-of-the-art research center. Included in our dream was the creation of a new, interactive computer and technology production center. We submitted our proposal and on Dec. 15, I was presented with a check for $250,000. Our dream will now become a reality for students of Honoka’a High and Intermediate School.

Few of us can afford to bestow gifts of this magnitude upon our chosen public school. Fewer still might bequeath that sum of money anonymously, seeking instead recognition of the act. The task of “fixing” public education does not lie solely in creating a new structure but rather the task should be in ensuring public trust in our public education system. I would suggest that the real work is in making public schools the business of entire communities. Ensuring the public trust most importantly means that as educators we must strive to do all we can to enable and encourage every segment of our communities to make a difference. Making a difference need not be of the scale implied by a huge monetary donation. Commitment and difference-making are within the reach of us all.

To make a difference may mean to become full participants in the teaching and learning process at your local public school. It can be as simple as encouraging a youngster to do well in school, to participate in after-school leadership and athletic activities, and for homework to be completed and on time. It means as parents and community leaders we ensure that our children know the importance of education, the need for exemplary social behavior, and citizenship on campus and in our community. The difference might be a letter to a teacher or a principal or a legislator that supports or praises what has transpired in the classroom. What happened at Honoka’a serves as a good reminder of our collective responsibility: We can all make a difference—in our public schools, in our communities, and in our state.