I remember nervously speaking with deep sincerity, gratitude, and meaningful reflection around my school’s vision, Relationships are the heart of all learning, as I stood here a year ago and accepted the 2019 Hawai‘i State Teacher of the Year award.

While those beautiful relationships have allowed me to fall in love with the work of being an educator, I have come to understand from this unforgettable year that I owe my students and community so much more. As educators and leaders, we have the elevating responsibility of helping all students discover joy in connecting their greatest passions with the world’s greatest needs. Making this a reality within the spaces and roles that we each serve rests on two fundamental shifts in our behaviors and mindsets: intentionality, and the raising of our expectations.

First, learning from the experiences and reflections from various leaders and educators this past year made

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Jessica Adkins
Maui High School
@2Jessicaadkins

Kai Ah Hee
West Hawai‘i District Office

Virginia Leilehua

Baldwin–Kekaulike–Maui

I am #PublicSchoolProud because the teachers and staff at Maui High School put students first, the administrators value innovation and the students #choosetoinclude.

Honoka‘a–Kealakehe–Kohala–Konawaena

Grandparents, parents, myself, siblings, children, grandchildren all attend(ed) Hawai‘i public schools across the state. What a blessing to have free and open access to academic preparation for post secondary study. We celebrate in our careers as an attorney, electrical/mechanical engineer, counselor, systems analyst, nurse, economist, chef, and teacher :-)
Growing up as a struggling student, I was embraced by the loving compassion of Hawai‘i public school teachers who taught me to thrive. Education is the life-force that grants positive change in humankind. In the roles of HIDOE student, educator, and parent, a feeling energizes me... I am unabashedly #PublicSchoolProud.

What makes me #PublicSchoolProud is the PEOPLE that make up this community worth serving – teachers, students, families – wonderful people who see the beauty in quality education for all and work hard to nurture dreams into reality. I thank all of those people – you make me #PublicSchoolProud!

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I am #PublicSchoolProud because as teachers, we are uniquely positioned to witness the magic and creativity of the future through the perspective of our students. We are offered these little glimpses into how they will solve problems and make connections. It is hopeful – comforting even – to see their resilience and strength.

Every day, I choose to teach because I believe in the power of education to open minds, hearts, and opportunities. That’s why I am #PublicSchoolProud.
Our keiki come to us from every type of family, every ethnicity, every socioeconomic status. They come with varying degrees of experiences, backgrounds, and knowledge. However they come, we love them all. They are ours and we do what is best for them each and every day...no matter what. #PublicSchoolProud

My experience as both a graduate of and educator in Hawai‘i Public Schools has affirmed my belief in the profound power of education to inspire, uplift and empower all children, from all walks of life, for a successful and bright future. Come one, come all. #PublicSchoolProud

As both an alumni of and teacher within the Hawai‘i Public Schools system, I am proud of the unique opportunities that are available through Career and Technical Education programs. The edification gained in these hands-on courses teaches invaluable life skills. CTE students are ready for the world of work!

I am very proud to be a Wai‘anae Intermediate teacher and to represent my students. I work towards creating a new generation of young adults who are community stewards and at the forefront of revitalization. I believe that having an outdoor classroom is essential for students to connect to place.

As a public school student and teacher, I've been fortunate to have been supported by an amazing “village.” They are the teachers, students, parents, administrators, support staff and friends who have encouraged me to challenge myself and who have allowed me to learn from them.
The annual Hawai‘i State Teacher of the Year award represents HIDOE’s highest teaching honor. This year we’ve doubled the number of teachers being recognized for their excellence — from eight to 16 finalists, representing each of our complex areas and one finalist from charter schools. One outstanding educator will be named the 2020 Hawaii‘i State Teacher of the Year on Oct. 25.

To help introduce this year’s finalists, we’ve dedicated this issue as an HSTOY special edition. We asked them: What makes you #PublicSchoolProud as either an educator, HIDOE alumni, or both? We also asked them to share a photo that exemplifies who they are as a teacher and, for fun, what artist they’re enjoying listening to these days (look for the music note ♫ in their profiles).

The collective talent, passion and dedication of each of the honorees is a great source of pride for Hawai‘i public schools. Mahalo and congratulations!

### Hana–Lahainaluna–Lāna‘i–Moloka‘i

**Kau‘i Spitalsky**  
Lahainaluna High  
♫ Keali‘i Reichel  

#PublicSchoolProud to be teaching our future leaders of Hawai‘i!

He oia mau nō ka pono o ka lāhui kanaka i ka na‘auao Hawai‘i.  
#kulakaiaponi‘olelohawai‘i  
#eolaka‘olelohawai‘i

### Kailua–Kalāheo

**Crystal Stafford**  
Kalāheo High  
♫ Billie Eilish  

I have such amazing students! They are kind, intelligent and hard-working. I appreciate so much that they thank me for teaching them everyday as they leave my class. Excited for the future that these great kids will create! #PublicSchoolProud

### Pearl City–Waipahu

**Jennifer Yamaguchi**  
Pearl City Highlands  
♫ Ed Sheeran  

The teachers I had at Waimalu Elementary, ‘Aiea Intermediate and ‘Aiea High School encouraged me to be the lifelong learner and teacher I am today. I am inspired by the exciting and positive things happening in all classrooms at every school: in our complex, island and state.

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**Editor’s Note**

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**Teachers: Hawai‘i’s future is in your hands**

I am so excited that we take the time to pause each year to honor our Teacher of the Year awardees who represent our workforce of over 13,000 dedicated teachers statewide. The Hawai‘i Department of Education is an ecosystem with students, teachers, educators and support staff working in symbiotic relationships to serve our state’s children.

Our teachers are at the “tip of the spear,” providing Hawai‘i’s haumana the knowledge, skills, and abilities for success in their future endeavors. As Nadia Lopez — a New York City special education teacher — once stated, teachers are “the bridge to brilliance!”

The Department’s emerging strategic plan, built around five promises to Hawai‘i’s students over the next decade, has students at its core and teachers at the forefront in designing schools to meet student needs. This year’s awardees are innovators who serve as role models to educators around the globe.

Each and every teacher deserves our respect and deep appreciation for the hard work they do each day to help Hawai‘i’s keiki thrive.

Bravo to this year’s awardees and brave to all of Hawai‘i’s teachers. I am proud of each of you and wish you continued success. Mahalo for your compassion, your brilliance, and your unique ability to awaken joy, creativity and learning in our most precious resource — our children.

Catch up on past episodes of “Talk Story with Dr. K” featuring conversations about the Grow Our Own Teachers initiative and innovation grants available to teachers.

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