

Public Education in Hawaii: Perception is Not Reality

 by Kerry L. Erisman — July 21, 2020 in Education



"We must not allow other people's limited perceptions to define us."

— Virginia Satir



In 2012, we received orders to PCS to Hawaii for the first time. We were so excited with the thought of living in paradise with our two elementary school-aged boys. The sun — the beaches — the ocean — the hiking. It was the dream assignment. Then, the bombshell hit. “Public education in Hawaii is a disaster,” a neighbor told us. “You will have to put your boys in a private school.” “Your boys will be discriminated against by the locals,” another said.

Suddenly, the prospect of Hawaii didn’t sound as good. We were going to have to spend tens of thousands of dollars for our boys to attend a private elementary school. We were going from one of the finest school districts in the nation in Northern Virginia to a “disaster.”

Fast forward to 2020, and we are in the last month of our second tour in Hawaii. Our oldest son graduated last month from Leilehua High School in Wahiawa, located a few miles from Schofield Barracks, home of the mighty 25th Infantry Division. Our other son just completed eleventh grade at Leilehua. Guess what? Leilehua High School is a public high school in Hawaii. Guess what else? From 2012-2014 during our first tour in Hawaii, our boys attended Kainalu Elementary School in Kailua, a public elementary school in Hawaii.

Wait...what happened, you ask? How could you put your boys in the disastrous public schools in Hawaii? Why didn’t you enroll your boys in private schools? Well, when I was “warned” about the Hawaiian education system, I started to do research. We’ve been in the Army a long time, and there are many misperceptions out there. We’ve all heard them through the years and have learned to take them with a grain of salt.

As we researched public and private elementary schools in Hawaii, we found many more similarities than differences. I also spoke with spouses who actually spent time in Hawaii and who had school-aged children. What I found was that the negative perceptions about Hawaii’s public schools were unfounded and shared by those who never stepped foot on Oahu.

We enrolled our boys in Kainalu Elementary School in Kailua. What immediately struck me about Kainalu was the Principal coming out of her office, introducing herself, and asking our boys questions with a genuine interest. On top of that, the next time we saw the Principal she greeted both boys by name. That was a first for us, as our boys had already attended three different elementary schools. The Principal set the standard, and the rest of the school followed suit. Our boys had the most loving and caring teachers that a parent could hope for. They truly cared about our boys’ education, and they made sure it was the highest quality. The extracurricular activities at the school were also phenomenal. Remember, we were coming from one of the best school districts in the country, but in reality, there was no comparison. Kainalu Elementary School far outshined our experiences in Northern Virginia.

Leilehua High School is the third high school our boys have attended. The first two high schools were excellent, but the schools are no match for Leilehua. It again begins with the Administration and feeds down to the faculty and staff.

From the Principal to the newest teacher, there is genuine caring and the assurance that they are preparing our children to be productive members of society.

I started this blog with a quote — “We must not allow other people’s limited perceptions to define us.” Remember that when you hear misperceptions about duty assignments or the quality, or lack of quality, of an education system. Do your own research and speak with people who have first-hand knowledge of the schools. I have provided many military spouses with my direct observations and perceptions of the Hawaiian education system, and when I followed up with them later, their experiences were very similar to ours.

Our boys attended nine different schools, including three different high schools. Hawaii was our favorite elementary school and our favorite high school, hands down. If you get orders to Hawaii, reach out to the school’s Administration and speak to the Principal and Vice Principals. Speak with military parents who currently have students in the school.

The recent graduation at Leilehua High School drives this point home. We have spoken with friends from schools on the mainland who were extremely disappointed with the lack of effort during their limited Covid-19 graduations. Some schools did absolutely nothing. Leilehua High School, facing the same constraints as all other schools with no formal graduation ceremony allowed, shined. Leilehua High School orchestrated a well-planned, memorable event that included the faculty and staff lining the road around the high school waving to graduates, holding signs and giving shakas (a Hawaiian hand symbol used to express approval and solidarity). The Administration, faculty and staff went out of their way to ensure our graduates would not forget this very important milestone in their lives.

So, what can you do? Once you arrive in Hawaii, get involved in the schools. Volunteer your time and join the PTA/PTO/PTSO. I served as the secretary and president of the PTA at Kainalu Elementary School and as the secretary and president of the PTSO at Leilehua High School. Volunteering will give you a close-up look and will give you further insight into the day-to-day operations of the schools. It also gives you a chance to make a difference.

Finally, be skeptical of rankings that place a large emphasis on a few irrelevant test scores. These rankings do a disservice to all schools, because they fail to consider the human factor. A school's Administration, faculty and staff make the school what it is, not test scores. We can skew any numbers to make something look good or bad, so keep that in mind when looking at questionable rankings.

If you are fortunate enough to receive orders to Hawaii and have school-aged children, ignore other people's limited perceptions. Instead, have a great tour in paradise, get involved and watch your children thrive in Hawaii's public schools!

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