

# Native Hawaiian Culturally Based Education as a Pathway to Improved Learning for All

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**How to cite this paper:** Roberts, K., Fisiiahi-Thomayer, N. D., Leake, D. W., & Banks, S. K. (2026). Native Hawaiian Culturally Based Education as a Pathway to Improved Learning for All. *Creative Education, 17*, 998-1018.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2026.176062>

**Received:** April 17, 2026

**Accepted:** June 22, 2026

**Published:** June 25, 2026

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## Abstract

This manuscript describes and compares two sequential initiatives designed to improve student learning outcomes in Hawai'i's public schools by promoting the value of pono—a way of being and doing in Native Hawaiian culture that guides us to do what is right. From 2008 to 2012, Creating Pono Schools (CPS) established a schoolwide pono approach promoting prosocial behaviors and positive relationships. From 2011 to 2015, Growing Pono Schools (GPS) translated and expanded the CPS foundation through development and dissemination of the Pono Life Skills curriculum, teacher training resources, and statewide infrastructure for sustaining culturally based education. Both projects were evaluated using mixed-methods, including student surveys, teacher and principal feedback, student reflections, and school climate indicators. Student level results consistently indicated meaningful changes in belonging, responsibility, and pono-based behaviors. School climate results were also positive, with reductions in referrals/suspensions and increases in attendance and pilina (school connection) as indicated in school reports and publicly available state data systems (Hawai'i State Department of Education, 2026). We present CPS and GPS findings separately and conclude with the commonalities across both projects. We also describe how the set of Native Hawaiian values promoted through Nā Hopena A'o (HĀ), which is rooted in Hawaiian values, language, and culture, and used as the guiding framework of the Hawai'i Department of Education, can support culturally grounded learning and improve educational outcomes in Hawai'i's public schools.

## Keywords

Pono, Culture-Based Education, Nā Hopena A'o (HĀ), School Climate, Belonging, Social-Emotional Learning, Native Hawaiian Education

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Native Hawaiian Culture as a Foundational Factor in Promoting Learning for All

*Pono: a way of being and doing in Native Hawaiian culture that guides us to do what is right* (Kawai‘ae‘a et al., 2018).

Creating Pono Schools (CPS) and Growing Pono Schools (GPS) were funded by the Native Hawaiian Education Program under the US Department of Education, with a primary aim of reversing the status of Native Hawaiian students as lagging most other groups in academic success. The overarching goal was ensuring that culturally responsive learning frameworks, principles, and concepts were integrated into educational spaces, particularly around being pono (i.e., doing what is right). Through the lessons, students learn about their own culture through the lens of Native Hawaiian culture. These programs were designed to empower Native Hawaiian and all students, strengthen educator capacity to teach through a cultural lens, and preserve cultural identity. CPS and GPS intentionally focus on pono as a highly valued Native Hawaiian cultural concept that fosters positive relationships which then lead to better academic outcomes, consistent with research demonstrating the effectiveness of culturally responsive approaches in Hawai‘i (Ka‘anehe, 2020). This aligns with universal design principles that benefit all learners (Levey, 2023).

### 1.2. Research Questions and Purpose

This manuscript presents a retrospective mixed-methods program evaluation with a comparative perspective of two sequential culturally grounded initiatives: Creating Pono Schools (CPS) and Growing Pono Schools (GPS). The purpose is to examine how culture-based, strengths-oriented approaches grounded in pono and Native Hawaiian values contribute to student outcomes, school climate, and system-level educational practices in Hawai‘i.

The project team sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) What changes in student outcomes (e.g., belonging, responsibility, pono-based behaviors, and engagement) are associated with CPS and GPS participation?
- 2) How do educators and administrators describe changes in school climate, relationships, and culturally grounded practices across CPS and GPS?
- 3) In what ways does GPS extend and scale the relational and cultural foundations established through CPS?

Our intention is to share our story and the lasting impact of the two projects, supported by data associated with outcomes and impacts. In addition, the manuscript illustrates the power of culturally based education and the value of pono as associated with education and students' ability to thrive in public school systems. While people may argue that learning about and through Native Hawaiian culture in public schools is not appropriate, there is evidence to support the benefits of teaching all students through a cultural lens, which in Hawai‘i should appropri-

ately be that of the host culture (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021). Data on Native Hawaiian culture-based education illustrates that students from all cultures can learn about their heritage and develop a stronger sense of identity, belonging, and self-efficacy, all of which support their ability to thrive in school settings (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2017).

To provide a foundational understanding of CPS and GPS, **Table 1** provides a comparison of the two. It is important to note that GPS did not replace CPS but built upon it to provide a curriculum that could be shared across the state to expand the best practices of CPS. **Table 1** is followed by a discussion of both CPS and GPS.

**Table 1.** CPS and GPS Comparison.

Dimension	Creating Pono Schools (CPS)	Growing Pono Schools (GPS)
Primary function	Establish schoolwide culture grounded in pono	Curriculum & scaling
Areas of change	Relationships & climate	Instruction, pedagogy, systems
Structure	Flexible, site-responsive, non-curricular	Structured curriculum with adaptable lessons, open access, available online
Key facilitators of change	Student-led campaigns, visioning, pono as a way of being	Culture-based lessons, teacher PD, structured dissemination
Theoretical emphasis	Pono as a way of being and doing	Pono as an instructional and reflective framework
Role of adults	Relational modeling, alignment	Instructional facilitation, curriculum use
Role of students	Culture-shapers, leaders	Learners, creators, reflectors
Scale	Site-specific (3 schools)	Statewide/nationally

While CPS laid the relational and cultural groundwork to support meaningful change, GPS built upon the groundwork by developing pono-based sustainable instructional resources.

### 1.3. Methods

Data were collected to evaluate project implementation and outcomes. Neither CPS nor GPS were designed as research studies. However, relevant and useful data were collected using a mixed-methods program evaluation design integrating quantitative survey data, qualitative interview and reflection data, and school-level indicators for each of CPS and GPS.

#### 1.3.1. Sites and Participants

CPS (2008-2012) was implemented in three schools (elementary, high school, and alternative school), serving approximately 900 students and involving 27 teachers. Evaluation data included 304 students, 16 teachers, and 3 administrators.

GPS (2011-2015) expanded statewide access via curriculum dissemination. Evaluation data were collected from 387 students, 18 teachers, and 2 administrators across participating schools.

### 1.3.2. Grade Levels

CPS and GPS together spanned elementary through high school (K-12), with GPS curriculum explicitly designed for grades 3 - 12 with adaptations made for grades K-3.

### 1.3.3. Participation and Dosage

For both CPS and GPS, evaluation data reflect classrooms and teachers that program staff worked with directly. The selection and use of the materials was primarily decided upon by classroom teachers, with support from project staff. Thus, implementation was uneven across classrooms which introduced variability that likely influenced the documented outcomes and prevented our capacity to accurately determine the dosage received by individual students.

### 1.3.4. Measured Constructs and Survey Tools

Student surveys in CPS and GPS assessed three primary constructs:

- Pono behaviors (e.g., conflict resolution, prosocial actions such as helping peers)
- Attitudes toward school/engagement (e.g., effort, motivation, participation)
- Perceived family encouragement (support for academic effort)

Constructs were measured using Likert scales (1 - 5) with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement. GPS survey scores demonstrated high baseline means (approximately 4.0 - 4.4), indicating generally positive initial conditions.

While formal reliability coefficients were not consistently available across phases, instruments were iteratively refined to align with program content. Pre-post comparisons of student survey responses in CPS indicated statistically significant increases in pono behaviors, attitudes toward school, and perceived family encouragement, based on project-level analyses of survey data. GPS pre-post analyses did not show statistically significant increases in academic engagement, pono behaviors, or lifelong learner indicators, a result attributed partly to high baseline scores.

### 1.3.5. Data Collection

Data sources included:

- Student pre-post surveys (CPS and GPS).
- Teacher and administrator interviews.
- Student reflections and open-ended responses.
- School-level indicators (e.g., attendance, graduation, discipline) as found in school reports and publicly available state data systems ([Hawai'i State Department of Education, 2026](#)).
- CPS evaluation data were collected throughout all four years of the project.
- Most GPS data were collected during Years 3 - 4 due to Hawai'i State Department of Education data access delays.

### 1.3.6. Analytic Approach

Quantitative analyses primarily involved pre-post comparisons of survey re-

sponses. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns in relational change, cultural identity development, and school climate. Findings were integrated across data sources to identify convergent patterns.

### 1.3.7. Pre-Post Analyses and Sample Sizes

Pre-post survey analyses were conducted using available student data within each project. Due to variations in participation across schools, years, and data collection windows, analyses reflect available samples rather than fully matched longitudinal cohorts in all cases.

Sample sizes for student analyses were as follows:

- CPS: N = 304 students (survey data)
- GPS: N = 387 students (survey data)

## 1.4. Historical and Educational Context in Hawai'i

Students in Hawai'i's public schools navigate educational systems shaped by longstanding historical, social, and economic inequities. The historical context most significantly impacts Native Hawaiian students. The results of the inequities are often misinterpreted as student based deficits; however, they are better understood as indicators of systemic misalignment between schooling structures and Native Hawaiian ways of knowing (Kana'iaupuni, Ledward, & Jensen, 2010).

Native Hawaiian students in Hawai'i's public schools rank among the lowest of all ethnic groups on nearly every measure of educational success (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021; Singh, Amor, & Zhang, 2014). Native Hawaiian students are more likely to:

- Have lower levels of academic proficiency, as reflected in standardized assessments in English language arts and mathematics (Hawai'i State Department of Education, 2026; Singh et al., 2014).
- Be over-identified in special education, a longstanding pattern documented in early Native Hawaiian education assessments (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2009; Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021).
- Come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with over half of Native Hawaiian students receiving subsidized lunches compared to approximately one-third of non-Native Hawaiian students, reflecting persistent socioeconomic inequities across time (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2009; Singh et al., 2014; Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021; Hawai'i State Department of Education, 2026).
- Have among the lowest graduation rates and highest grade retention rates relative to other student groups (Singh et al., 2014; Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021; Hawai'i State Department of Education, 2026).
- Have the highest rates of juvenile arrest (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2009; Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021).
- Have higher rates of chronic absenteeism (Singh et al., 2014; HODOE, 2026).
- Have lower rates of on-time high school completion (Singh et al., 2014; Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021; Hawai'i State Department of Education, 2026).
- Have greater exposure to health and safety-related risks, including substance

use and other risk behaviors (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021).

Our work aligns with evidence that indicates that these disparities do not represent deficiencies among Native Hawaiian learners. Instead, they reflect the cumulative effects of an educational system that has historically not acknowledged Native Hawaiian epistemology—including knowledge, culture, language, and community strengths—as foundational to learning and wellbeing. When educational environments are culturally grounded and relationally anchored, Native Hawaiian students have demonstrated high levels of engagement, persistence, and success (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021).

Similarly, the Hawai'i State Department of Health (2024) has indicated that many students (not just Native Hawaiian) do not feel like they belong at school and are often truant due to bullying, harassment, and perceptions that schools are not safe (Hawai'i Health Data Warehouse, 2023). By contrast, school climates that are positive and foster a sense of belonging have been demonstrated as critical to engagement and success of all students (Hawai'i State Department of Health, 2024). CPS and GPS both positively influenced these factors, as presented below.

Although Native Hawaiian students experience persistent educational disparities, they also demonstrate resilience through cultural, familial, and community strengths aligned with their cultural identity (Antonio et al., 2020).

This is true for students of many minority groups wherein a student's cultural identity fuels their learner identity and their learner identity fuels learner agency. Conversely, when schools dismiss or marginalize cultural identity, students may struggle with engagement and self-efficacy. Research on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005), and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995) all emphasize that validating cultural identity in schools is key to fostering student agency, resilience, and academic success.

Implementing asset-based pedagogies ensures that all students—especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds—see themselves as competent, knowledgeable, and worthy contributors to the learning process. CPS and GPS do just this.

## 2. Beginnings of Pono School-Based Programs

Our pono-based educational programs began with Creating Pono Schools (CPS). The creation and implementation of CPS was deeply influenced by Dr. Lehua Veincent, who at the time was the principal of Keaukaha Elementary School, located on Native Hawaiian homelands on Hawai'i Island, with most students identifying as Native Hawaiian. Dr. Veincent initiated a school-wide Pono Campaign to embed Native Hawaiian values into student learning experiences. His work at Keaukaha Elementary established a model for community-centered education which later influenced broader initiatives.

Sara Ka'imipono Banks, who was working for the Center on Disability Studies (CDS) at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, met with Dr. Veincent and realized

that the initiative started at Keaukaha Elementary could be taken statewide and support more students and teachers. This meeting led to a discussion about applying for a Native Hawaiian Education Program grant. Sara worked with others at CDS to brainstorm ideas on how best to bring the idea of pono into schools. These ideas were brought to fruition through funding support of CPS in 2008 from the Native Hawaiian Education Program funding. CPS data and outcomes were used to inform and develop GPS.

CPS and GPS were among many other culturally responsive educational initiatives in Hawai'i's public schools across the years, which had helped create demand for a state-wide initiative. Community-based discussions led to creation of a framework inspired by Native Hawaiian culture and reflecting the Hawai'i Department of Education's core values and beliefs, approved by the State Board of Education in June 2015. This framework is referred to as Nā Hopena A'o (roughly, learning goals) or HĀ, which translates into English as BREATH with these letters standing for outcomes and values that are universal to all cultures: Belonging, Responsibility, Excellence, Aloha, Total Wellbeing, and Hawai'i (<https://hawaiipublicschools.org/about/na-hopena-a%CA%BBo-ha/>). A more detailed "Comparison of CPS and GPS findings interpreted through the HĀ: BREATH Outcomes Framework" is presented in **Table 2** on page 16.

Although the statewide HĀ policy was only officially approved near the end of the GPS grant award (2015), the work of both CPS and GPS were closely aligned with the same values. These had been promoted over the years in many public schools based on ALOHA mnemonics standing for key traditional Native Hawaiian values: A for Aloha (love, compassion, mutual respect); L for Lokahi (unity, harmony, cooperation); O for Olu'olu (pleasantness, kindness, helpfulness) or 'Oia'i'o (truth, integrity); H for Ha'aha'a (humility) or Ho'omanawanui (patience/perseverance); and A for Ahonui (patience/endurance) or Akahai (kindness).

### 3. Creating Pono Schools (CPS)

#### 3.1. Creating Pono Schools Framework

CPS was funded from 2008 to 2012 in collaboration with three schools on the East coast of O'ahu Island: Blanche Pope Elementary School, Kailua High School, and Olomana School (an alternative school for students with emotional-behavioral issues). Another partner was ALU LIKE, Inc., a non-profit promoting use of Native Hawaiian values in educational and social services.

Rooted in pono and other Native Hawaiian values and ways of knowing, CPS promoted social-emotional learning and addressed bullying through culturally based approaches centered on student voice, identity, and collective responsibility. Social-emotional learning equips students with the social, cultural, and interpersonal skills needed to build respectful, harmonious, and safe school communities (Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024). The definition of pono used in our work is aligned with living with respect and supporting harmony for all. This includes

living in balance, making right choices, and fostering positive relationships. CPS also integrated culture-based lessons that strengthen students' sense of identity, place, and community. Rather than functioning as a standalone curriculum, CPS emphasized pono as a schoolwide way of being and doing. The initiative supported schools in embedding pono into everyday interactions, expectations, and shared norms through student led campaigns, educator learning, and relational practices that fostered respect, harmony, and safety across the school community.

### 3.1.1. Sample Activities Implemented through CPS

CPS activities varied across schools but consistently emphasized relationship-building, cultural grounding, and student leadership. Activities were typically co-facilitated with ALU LIKE, Inc. and the CPS team. Examples of activities that were implemented at all participating schools included:

- Pono campaigns led by students to promote positive behaviors and shared values (see Pono Campaign 2011 at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eo\\_Tq-WkyCs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eo_Tq-WkyCs)).
- Student-led media development as a way to articulate and disseminate each school's pono vision and to promote positive messages (see <https://labor.hawaii.gov/hcrc/growing-pono-schools/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4pNvckraws>). Examples include Kailua High students producing public service announcements and a documentary about compassion/peace, and hosting "Movie & Message Night" to promote positive behavior and messages to school/community audiences.
- Ho'oponopono<sup>1</sup> inspired circle routines to support conflict resolution and relational repair.
- Positive peer mentoring initiatives.

In addition to the above-described activities at all participating schools, CPS also conducted activities tailored for each school, as described below.

- Structured 'ohana (family) engagement activities specific to Pope Elementary

### 3.1.2. Activities Specific to Pope Elementary

At Pope Elementary there were multiple schoolwide 'ohana engagement events (e.g., pumpkin carving, turkey trot, makahiki games, ipu-making). These activities were implemented in collaboration with ALU LIKE, Inc. In addition, the CPS team made a point to share photos and videos online and mailed framed family photos to participants after events to reinforce 'ohana engagement and visibility. With support from an expert with a doctoral degree in traditional Native Hawaiian landscape, the CPS team also led establishment of a sustainable school garden using traditional Native Hawaiian agricultural practices, which the students named Ka Māla Lani (our heavenly garden).

### 3.1.3. Relational Inclusion Practices Specific to Kailua High School

At Kailua High School a weekly event called "Lunch Buddies" intentionally

<sup>1</sup>*Ho'oponopono* is an ancient Native Hawaiian practice of reconciliation, forgiveness, and healing, translating to "to make things right".

brought general education students together with students identified for special education services in order to build belonging and connection through shared lunches. CPS also supported the school's initiative called "Spread the Word to End the Word" which is a student-led effort to eliminate the "R-word" ("retard(ed)") from everyday speech.

#### **3.1.4. Student Celebrations and Culturally Grounded Activities Specific to Olomana School**

CPS led quarterly activities connected to school celebrations and positive behavior supports, incorporating Native Hawaiian value-based activities, for example *lau-ima* (teamwork) delivered in group settings. CPS also worked to enhance 'ohana engagement and attendance through culturally grounded programming including 'ohana nights and showcasing of students work at various events.

### **3.2. Participants**

CPS served approximately 900 students and 27 teachers across Blanche Pope Elementary School, Kailua High School, and Olomana School. Data were collected from 304 students, 16 teachers, and three administrators through surveys and interviews.

### **3.3. CPS Evaluation Outcomes and Impacts**

Pre-postsurvey data from 304 students demonstrated significant increases in the three core constructs measured by the CPS student survey: 1) pono behaviors (e.g., talking to others to stop an argument), 2) attitudes toward school (e.g., trying hard to do well), and 3) perceptions of family encouragement to study hard.

While statistical tests provided useful descriptive trends, the purpose of this manuscript is to 1) present a framework and lessons that are culturally relevant and responsive, and 2) provide information on the impact of two sequential culturally grounded initiatives (CPS and GPS). Therefore, a high-level, integrative summary of impact, rather than a detailed statistical analysis, is most appropriate for capturing the culturally embedded, relational, and systemic nature of CPS and GPS.

#### **3.3.1. CPS Student Outcomes**

Student self-report data reinforced these findings. Across CPS sites, over 90% of students strongly agreed or agreed that CPS helped them do better in school, supported them in life outside of school, and increased their practice of pono behaviors in and out of school. Open-ended reflections further illustrated these shifts, with students describing increased kindness, responsibility, and willingness to "do the right thing even when no one is watching."

#### **3.3.2. Educator Reports on Student Outcomes and School-Level Outcomes**

Teacher data (N = 16) aligned with the student-reported changes and illustrated broader school-level impacts. All teachers reported that CPS made the school

more pono; increased collaboration among teachers, staff, and parents; strengthened the feeling of ‘ohana; and increased pono behaviors among students and staff in daily practice. Teachers also noted that these relational and cultural shifts contributed to greater academic responsibility and engagement, reinforcing student-reported improvements in attitudes toward school.

Administrator perspectives provided additional evidence of schoolwide change. One principal indicated that CPS helped teachers to “embrace Hawaiian culture as a way of life,” noting increased ownership, teamwork, collaborative visioning, and culturally sensitive ways of thinking and behaving. Another principal reported that integrating Native Hawaiian culture through CPS increased family involvement, with parent engagement becoming continuous. This principal emphasized the role of appreciative inquiry in valuing parent and community perspectives and inviting them into shared problem-solving and decision-making to support student success.

In addition to the measured survey constructs, qualitative data revealed broader relational and cultural outcomes, including reductions in bullying and harassment, more respectful peer interactions, and stronger norms around kindness and responsibility. Schools reported more positive, inclusive, and safe environments; improved student–teacher relationships; increased collaboration through ‘aha (working-together) circles; and a deeper sense of lōkahi (unity/harmony). Students also demonstrated increased cultural connectedness, including stronger ties to Native Hawaiian values and place, greater cultural pride, and a deeper understanding of pono as a guiding principle for behavior. Enhanced student leadership emerged as another key outcome, with students taking more active roles in shaping school culture, leading discussions, and designing pono-promoting projects.

### 3.4. CPS Summary

CPS established the foundation of culture and relationships first and schoolwide “acts” of pono as daily practice, along with student leadership as catalysts for improving school climate. CPS outcomes show strong educator and student-perceived benefits and measurable shifts in targeted relational indicators.

One of the most significant findings from this work is the effectiveness of the role of pono as a guiding value within educational settings. Rather than functioning as a program or curriculum, pono served as a cultural value that shaped behaviors, expectations, and relationships. Schools that embraced pono as a way of being reported increased collaboration among teachers, stronger relationships with ‘ohana, and greater willingness among staff to integrate Native Hawaiian culture into daily practice. These findings align with statewide assessments showing that Native Hawaiian students thrive when educational environments reflect their cultural identity, knowledge systems, and community contexts (Kana‘iau-puni et al., 2021).

Overall, CPS demonstrated that centering pono as a shared cultural value can strengthen relationships, improve school climate, and create the relational foun-

dition for sustainable, culturally grounded educational change.

### **3.5. CPS Limitations**

There are several mentionable limitations that should be considered when assessing these findings. The evaluation relied primarily on self-report data which do not have high reliability. The authors chose to present the findings through the lens of the culturally grounded purpose of CPS which emphasized relational change over the power of statistical analysis. Administrator perspectives came from only three principals, which limits broader generalization. Finally, CPS was implemented within communities with high concentrations of Native Hawaiians; this may limit the transferability of findings to schools with smaller populations of Native Hawaiians.

## **4. Growing Pono Schools (GPS)**

### **4.1. GPS Framework**

Funded from 2011 through 2015, GPS built upon the foundation laid by CPS. While CPS functioned primarily as a K-12 school-based relational and campaign-oriented culture initiative, the goal of GPS was to improve the academic engagement and outcomes of Native Hawaiian youth while positively impacting school climate through online dissemination across Hawai‘i. GPS began with the development of curriculum materials. These later evolved into a comprehensive curriculum package called Pono Life Skills. All of the final materials, curricula, and lessons are designed with a focus on culturally and place-based character education. Many of the GPS lessons integrate Native Hawaiian values through mo‘olelo (story), ‘ōlelo no‘eau (wise sayings, proverbs, or traditional expressions), and experiential place-based activities. They are designed to deepen connections to self, place, and community, while increasing participants’ sense of belonging.

### **4.2. Participants**

GPS was available online to schools across Hawai‘i, so the exact number of teachers and students who interacted with the materials is not available. However, the GPS evaluation included the collection of data from 387 students, 18 teachers, and 2 principals between Fall 2013 and Spring 2015.

### **4.3. Sample Curriculum Materials and Activities Implemented through GPS**

GPS began with the implementation of various activities including 1) student leadership and media projects, including video production, public service announcements, and schoolwide campaigns such as the “E Ola Pono Campaign”; 2) a Youth Leadership Institute, where students engaged in slam poetry, storytelling, and activities that elevated student voice and belonging; and 3) ‘āina (land)-based learning, including school gardens (e.g., Kealakehe Elementary School), lo‘i (wetland taro growing area) and fishpond restoration partnerships, and other Ka Māla

Lani-type efforts focused on hands-on, community-based stewardship and the revitalization of Hawaiian cultural knowledge.

*Simultaneously, other curriculum materials were developed including:*

- Teacher lesson guides with step-by-step instructions.
- Student reflection sheets and journals.
- Cultural stories and mo‘olelo integrated into lessons.
- Hands-on activities and experiential exercises.
- ‘Aha circle protocols for group dialogue.
- Classroom posters and visual reminders of pono values.
- Family and community engagement suggestions to extend learning beyond the classroom.

The initial materials, curriculum, and activities developed and implemented ultimately led to the development of the Pono Life Skills Curriculum. The Pono Life Skills Curriculum includes five categories of lessons, with multiple lessons included under each category. The five categories are:

#### **1) ‘Ike Piko‘u—Sense of Self**

Lessons in this strand help students explore personal identity, strengths, values, and emotions. At the same time, identity is rooted in cultural heritage, genealogy, and home values. Activities encourage self-reflection, emotional regulation, and confidence in expressing one’s thoughts and feelings.

#### **2) ‘Ike Honua—Sense of Place**

Students learn about their relationship to the land, their school, and their community. By learning about and experiencing their place, students develop a deeper understanding of where they come from and are more motivated to care for the environment and their community. Lessons emphasize belonging, responsibility to place, and understanding how one’s actions affect the larger environment.

#### **3) ‘Ike Kuana ‘Ike—Sense of Community**

This set of lessons focuses on empathy, compassion, and respectful interactions. Students practice listening, understanding different perspectives, and building harmonious relationships. Through these shared activities and service to their classroom, school, or community, students develop a strong sense of belonging and learn the value of contributing to the well-being of others.

#### **4) ‘Aha—Working Together**

Collaborative circle-based activities teach students how to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and make collective decisions. These lessons strengthen teamwork and reinforce the value of lōkahi (unity).

**5) K-3 Lessons**—Developmentally appropriate lessons tailored for younger learners, many of which overlap with the themes above.

### **4.4. Select Exemplary Lessons from the Pono Life Skills Curriculum**

While over 50 lessons were developed under GPS, the 13 described in **Table 2** are considered exemplary and included in the Panorama Education’s Playbook. The Panorama Education’s Playbook is a nationally based professional learning li-

brary, demonstrating the transferability and relevancy of GPS lessons to an audience outside of Hawai'i. Please note that each of the 13 lessons has a hyper link to take you to the online lesson.

**Table 2.** 13 GPS lessons included in panorama education's playbook.

1. Aloha Tree	Focus: Daily acts of kindness, belonging, and community building.
2. Common Ground	Focus: Identifying shared values and experiences to strengthen relationships.
3. Culture Collage	Focus: Exploring personal and cultural identity through visual expression.
4. Goal Setting: The SMART Way	Focus: Setting meaningful, achievable goals using the SMART framework.
5. I Belong: The Four B's	Focus: Understanding belonging through four key dimensions.
6. Multiple Intelligences: Smart in Many Ways	Focus: Recognizing diverse strengths and ways of learning.
7. My Mixed Plate	Focus: Identity, diversity, and the unique "mix" that shapes each student.
8. Perspectives: To Each Our Own	Focus: Understanding different viewpoints and practicing empathy.
9. Story of My Name	Focus: Exploring personal history, culture, and identity through names.
10. The Many Pieces of Me	Focus: Identity development and self-reflection.
11. Uncovering History Through Names	Focus: Cultural and historical meaning embedded in names.
12. Who I Am	Focus: Self-awareness, identity, and personal strengths.
13. Words to Live By	Focus: Values, guiding principles, and pono-aligned decision-making.

These 13 lessons represent clear alignment with: identity development, belonging, cultural grounding, social-emotional learning, and strengths-based education. The lessons are adaptable, culturally grounded, and effective across diverse school contexts, which helps explain why GPS was chosen for national dissemination.

It is important to note that the GPS curriculum is presented online in two slightly different formats. In the Ulukau Hawaiian Digital Library, Pono Life Skills (Grades 4 - 12) materials are presented in four categories from the original lesson book (Sense of Self, Sense of Place, Sense of Community, and Sense of Belonging) (<https://ulukau.org/gsd12.81/cgi-bin/cbeolapono?e=010off--00-1--0--010---4----0-11--11en-----00-3-1-000--0-0-11000&a=d&cl=CL1>). However, the Growing Pono Schools website (<https://cde.hawaii.edu/growingponoschools/>) has the most updated version of the lessons. Included are the original four categories for Grades 4 - 12 described above, with a separate Grades K-3 set added to encompass the full K-12 range.

#### 4.5. GPS Evaluation Outcomes and Impacts

GPS evaluation data were collected from 387 students, 18 teachers, and 2 principals between Fall 2013 and Spring 2015. Similarly to CPS, GPS evaluation data were collected through a mixed-methods design that included student pre-post surveys (measuring GPS impact on pono behaviors, engagement, and lifelong learning), teacher and principal interviews, and school-level indicators such as achievement, graduation, and school climate. Due to delays in Hawai'i State Department of Education Data Governance approval, most evaluation data were col-

lected during Years 3 and 4 of the project.

Evaluation tools were iteratively refined alongside curriculum development and piloting, ensuring alignment between instructional content and measurement instruments. Across data sources, GPS outcomes closely mirrored the CPS findings: relational, cultural, and attitudinal shifts were more visible qualitatively than statistically. Student surveys showed high baseline Likert scores (approximately 4.0 - 4.4 out of 5), which limited detectable statistical change; however, qualitative evidence consistently indicated improvements in engagement, responsibility, and pono-aligned behaviors.

#### **4.5.1. GPS Student Outcomes**

Students participating in GPS demonstrated stronger empathy, compassion, and respect, along with improved emotional regulation and a deeper sense of identity and belonging. These outcomes aligned with the Pono Life Skills lessons emphasizing ‘ike piko‘u (sense of self), ‘ike honua (sense of place), and ‘ike kuana‘ike (sense of community). Students also reported increased cultural pride, stronger connection to Native Hawaiian values and place, and a deeper understanding of pono as a guiding principle for behavior and relationships.

GPS was also associated with reductions in bullying and harassment, with students demonstrating more respectful peer interactions, greater willingness to intervene or seek help, and stronger norms around kindness and responsibility. Students took on more leadership roles as well, showing increased confidence in leading discussions, participating in collaborative decision-making, and initiating pono-promoting actions within their school communities.

#### **4.5.2. Educator Reports on Student Outcomes**

Teachers and principals indicated that students became more caring, respectful, and pono-minded with peers. They reported decreases in fighting, bullying, teasing, and disciplinary referrals, along with stronger feelings of ‘ohana and emotional safety in classrooms. Educators also noted improved engagement and leadership, particularly among students who had previously been marginalized in traditional academic spaces. Teachers emphasized that students were applying Native Hawaiian values—such as kuleana, ho‘ihi, and mālama—across subjects and social contexts, echoing CPS administrator reports of cultural worldview shifts among staff.

#### **4.5.3. School-Level Outcomes**

Across schools implementing GPS, school-based impacts reflected measurable improvements in climate, belonging, and relational well-being. These findings align with broader research on culturally grounded, Native Hawaiian-based educational approaches, which consistently show that integrating Native Hawaiian values strengthens student engagement, reduces harmful behaviors, and improves school connectedness.

Schools reported more positive, inclusive environments; stronger student-teacher relationships; and increased collaboration through ‘aha (working-together) circles. Teachers described deeper rapport with students, more positive

classroom climates grounded in aloha and kuleana, and stronger peer relationships. Students demonstrated increased willingness to participate in collaborative activities and showed improved peer mediation, self-regulation, and pono-aligned interactions across grade levels. Many students also reported greater pride in being Native Hawaiian, greater pride in living in Hawai'i, and increased motivation to contribute positively to their school and community.

#### **4.5.4. Quantitative Highlights**

Although mean increases on student surveys were not statistically significant, possibly due to high baseline scores, several school-level indicators illustrated positive trends. For example, graduation outcomes were strong: Kailua High School maintained diploma graduation rates of approximately 94% - 98% across project years, and Olomana School reached 100% diploma graduation by Year 3.

#### **4.6. GPS Summary**

GPS built on the foundation established through CPS by centering pono, culture, and relationships as the basis for schoolwide transformation. Evaluation data collected through student surveys, educator interviews, and school-level indicators showed that GPS supported meaningful shifts in student engagement, cultural connectedness, and relational well-being. Although quantitative changes were limited by high baseline scores and delayed access to state-level data, qualitative findings consistently demonstrated improvements in pono-aligned behaviors, emotional safety, and student leadership. Teachers and principals described students as more caring, respectful, and pono-minded, with fewer conflicts, stronger peer relationships, and increased willingness to participate in 'aha circles and collaborative decision-making. School-level indicators also reflected improvements in climate, belonging, and cultural pride, with several schools showing gains in academic achievement and strong graduation outcomes. Together, these findings indicate that GPS deepened the cultural, relational, and behavioral shifts initiated through CPS and expanded the reach of the work through the Pono Life Skills Culture-Based Lessons.

#### **4.7. GPS Limitations**

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting GPS findings. Due to delays in Hawai'i State Department of Education Data Governance approval, most evaluation data were collected in Years 3 and 4, limiting the ability to capture change across the full project period. Student survey data showed high baseline scores, which reduced the likelihood of detecting statistically significant gains despite qualitative evidence of growth. As with CPS, much of the evaluation relied on self-report data from students and educators, which may reflect social desirability or existing relationships within school communities. Finally, as with CPS, GPS was implemented within specific Native Hawaiian school communities which may limit the transferability of findings to communities with low concentrations of Native Hawaiians.

## 5. Summary Comparison of CPS and GPS

**Table 3** presents the alignment of CPS and GPS findings with the HĀ: BREATH outcomes framework, highlighting how key data themes correspond to indicators of student well-being, belonging, and identity.

**Table 3.** Comparison of CPS and GPS findings interpreted through the HĀ: BREATH outcomes framework.

HĀ Outcome	CPS evidence	GPS evidence
<b>Belonging</b>	<p>Teachers reported that CPS fostered a stronger feeling of ‘ohana, with increased collaboration among teachers, staff, and parents and an increased sense of shared responsibility for caring for students together. A principal described schoolwide changes including greater teamwork and participation in shared decision-making and visioning, indicating strengthened collective identity and belonging at the adult/community level. Students also reported strong perceived benefits of participation, which function as belonging-adjacent indicators of engagement and connection to school.</p>	<p>GPS included curriculum content explicitly addressing belonging and inclusive learning environments (e.g., “Sense of Belonging—Creating Pu‘uhonua”), strengthening the program’s direct instructional alignment to belonging conditions.</p> <p>Teachers and students reported a strengthened ‘ohana-like climate, strengthened students’ sense of belonging and resiliency, and connection; example activities included “No One Eats Alone” and inclusive assemblies reinforced welcoming norms. These systemic improvements fostered a sense of safety and resiliency, reflected in student feedback where a learner noted feeling “strong” and capable of “changing in a good way”. These patterns align with HĀDOE social-emotional learning guidance emphasizing HĀ as the foundation for designing supportive environments rooted in local mo‘olelo and community gifts.</p>
<b>Responsibility</b>	<p>CPS reported significant pre-post increases in students’ pono behaviors and attitudes toward school (e.g., trying hard to do well), along with increased perception of family encouragement to study hard. Teachers perceived that the changed climate and strengthened collaboration supported students in being more academically responsible and engaged. Activities included “E Ola Pono” which empowered students to take kuleana (responsibility) by designing and implementing campaigns that reduce bullying and promote pono behaviors in school and community.</p>	<p>GPS pre-post analyses did not show statistically significant increases in academic engagement, pono behaviors, or lifelong learner indicators, a result attributed partly to high baseline scores (ceiling effects). However, student open-ended responses and educator reports described increased responsibility, future orientation, and pono decision-making (e.g., taking responsibility for actions; thinking about the future).</p> <p>Student surveys indicated gains in pono behaviors and attitudes toward trying hard with a student reporting “I learned how to become a good role model and better person in life.”; teachers linked climate shifts to academic responsibility and engagement.</p>
<b>Excellence</b>	<p>Students reported that participation in the program helped them perform better in school and strengthened their pono practice both in and out of the classroom. While not strictly framed as an academic intervention, these student reports align with teacher observations of increased engagement and responsibility. Educators noted that the shift toward a more positive climate served as a vital enabling condition, allowing students to focus more effectively on their academic growth and personal accountability.</p>	<p>GPS reported academic indicators using publicly available school reports (SSIR) and GPRA-aligned categories. The report notes increased science proficiency in participating elementary and middle schools between baseline and third-year school data (with one high school reporting no change in science proficiency). GPS also reported high school graduation and on-time completion rates for participating high schools across baseline through third-year reporting windows. Although causal attribution is not possible from these data, the reporting suggests that culture-based climate and instruction support can coexist with and may contribute to conditions for academic persistence.</p> <p>Schools reported on GPS-aligned efforts with schools noting higher attendance, rising test scores, and increased pride.</p>

## Continued

<b>Aloha</b>	CPS students reported that participation helped them practice more pono behaviors in and out of school, and over 90% agreed/strongly agreed that the project helped them do better in school and in life outside school. Teachers described the school becoming ‘more pono’ and students and staff practicing pono in daily life, indicating aloha as enacted relational practice (care, respect, positive communication).	Teachers observed students becoming more caring toward one another and reminding peers about pono behavior, with decreases in fights, bullying, teasing, and referrals reported in many contexts. Student comments emphasized positive identity and prosocial behavior (e.g., being a role model, caring for family and classmates). These findings position aloha as enacted relational practice rather than abstract value statements.
<b>Total Well-Being</b>	CPS reported improvements in school climate indicators and included behavioral indicators such as suspension rates and attendance. The report documents decline in suspension rates across sites and reporting windows (e.g., Pope Elementary baseline to Year 3; Kailua High and Olomana baseline to Year 1) alongside school climate measures including student safety and well-being. These trends align with the program’s focus on proactive relational climate building rather than reactive punitive responses.	GPS teachers reported improvements in climate and reductions in relational harm, and at least one teacher reported attendance consistently above 95% with students eager to come to school and learn—an indicator consistent with well-being and engagement. These outcomes align with HIDOE’s emphasis that supportive social-emotional learning environments are tied to student wellness and engagement.
<b>Hawai‘i</b>	A principal described that CPS participation supported staff in embracing Native Hawaiian culture “as a way of life”, with changes in culturally sensitive thinking and behavior, and strengthened family involvement through relationship-centered processes. These findings reflect a culturally grounded approach to schooling that aligns with later HĀ policy intent emphasizing learning environments that reflect Hawai‘i’s context.	GPS institutionalized culture-based practice through curriculum, professional learning, and dissemination infrastructure. The report documents statewide distribution of curriculum resources through the GPS website and jump drives, integration into educator professional learning contexts, and planned continued availability through Ulukau. GPS also highlights statewide campaign infrastructure (E Ola Pono) as a venue to promote culture-based learning and reduce bullying through student-led campaigns.

## 6. Discussion

The findings from Creating Pono Schools (CPS) and Growing Pono Schools (GPS) highlight the transformative potential of culturally grounded, relational approaches in public education systems serving Native Hawaiian students. Across both initiatives, students, educators, and administrators reported meaningful shifts in school climate, relationships, and cultural engagement, elements that research identifies as essential for fostering belonging, well-being, and academic persistence among Native Hawaiian learners. These results align with statewide educational priorities such as Nā Hopena A‘o (HĀ), which emphasize holistic student outcomes including belonging, responsibility, excellence, aloha, total well-being, and Hawai‘i.

A key theme of CPS and GPS is the importance of student voice and student leadership. Both programs encouraged students to take active roles in shaping school climate through campaigns, discussions, and pono-based actions. Students reported that the work helped them make better choices, improved their relationships, and enabled them to do better in school and life. This student-driven aspect

of CPS/GPS helped foster responsibility, self-advocacy, and agency, attributes associated with positive academic and personal outcomes. In addition, teachers described notable increases in student engagement and a deeper sense of shared *ku-leana* across the school community.

The data also demonstrate that culturally grounded social-emotional learning can be more impactful when rooted in the cultural values of the community. CPS/GPS outcomes, such as reductions in suspensions and improvements in perceptions of safety, reflect national evidence that relational, restorative, culturally aligned practices outperform punitive disciplinary approaches (Cantera-Rios et al., 2024; Payne & Welch, 2015). In Hawai'i, where Native Hawaiian students are disproportionately represented in suspensions and juvenile justice systems, these findings underscore the need for systemic approaches that honor cultural frameworks and emphasize relational repair over punishment (Kukahiko et al., 2024).

Importantly, the long-term impacts of CPS and GPS reveal that culturally grounded work can extend beyond the life of a project. Administrators reported that *pono* became part of the school identity and that changes persisted years later. The integration of CPS insights into GPS, and then into the development of the Pono Life Skills Culture Based Lessons, demonstrates how initial efforts served as a foundation for more formalized, scalable culture-based resources. These lasting outcomes reinforce the importance of investing in school capacity-building, not just program delivery.

At a broader systems level, CPS and GPS illustrate how strengths-based approaches can reframe how Native Hawaiian learners are understood within public schools. Rather than focusing on deficits or disparities, the work centers cultural identity, community relationships, and Indigenous ways of knowing as assets. This shift aligns with the wider movement toward indigenous education models in Hawai'i, including the growth of Hawaiian language-medium education, the implementation of HĀ, and the increasing recognition of place-based and culture-based learning as best practice (Kawakami, 1999; Kukahiko et al., 2020; Taira & Maunakea, 2023).

Finally, the journey of CPS and GPS also highlights challenges and opportunities for the future. Implementing culturally grounded approaches requires time, trust, and ongoing support for teachers and leaders. It requires honoring community partnerships and ensuring that professional learning is rooted in cultural understanding. Sustaining these efforts will depend on continued collaboration across schools, communities, and educational systems, as well as commitments to long-term investment.

This manuscript illustrates a developmental pathway for culturally grounded school change. CPS established foundational relational conditions with shared language, belonging, and collective responsibility, by embedding *pono* as school-wide practice. GPS translated these foundations into curriculum and dissemination infrastructure capable of reaching schools across islands and sustaining access through teacher training and durable materials.

HĀ provides a coherent outcomes framework for interpreting this work because it treats belonging, responsibility, excellence, aloha, total well-being, and Hawai'i as interdependent outcomes strengthened through learning environments and adult practice, not through isolated interventions. While CPS predates HĀ policy adoption, CPS's relational and cultural emphasis aligns closely with HĀ's intent; GPS's curriculum and dissemination approach provides one model for translating culturally grounded outcomes into structured lessons and effective practices for educators.

In summary, the outcomes of CPS and GPS underscore the transformative potential of culturally based education grounded in pono and Native Hawaiian values. The programs contributed to stronger relationships, improved school climate, and increased student engagement—outcomes that not only support academic success but reflect the holistic well-being and identity of students. As Hawai'i continues to advance culture-based education, the lessons learned from CPS and GPS offer a powerful roadmap for creating learning environments where all students can thrive.

### **6.1. Implications for Native Hawaiian Wellbeing**

CPS and GPS suggest that culturally grounded learning environments can support student engagement and wellbeing by strengthening belonging, relational accountability, and meaningful connection to community and place. The Hawai'i Department of Education's guidance similarly emphasizes that social-emotional learning design should be grounded in HĀ and built from community mo'olelo and gifts, positioning culture and relationship as foundational conditions for learning and wellness.

### **6.2. Limitations and Future Directions**

This manuscript has multiple limitations. First, relevant data for student participants, such as discipline, attendance, and academic achievement, were unavailable or inconsistent across years, limiting the scope of quantitative comparisons. Second, as curriculum, lessons, and activities were developed, evaluation tools were refined to ensure alignment, resulting in inconsistencies between early and later data collection instruments. These limitations reflect the historical evolution of the work rather than deficiencies in the CPS or GPS initiatives or in the data collection practices employed.

Future work would benefit from the following:

- More consistent, multi-year data collection across participating schools,
- Expanded use of culturally grounded assessment tools aligned with HĀ,
- Deeper examination of long-term impacts on student identity, belonging, and academic trajectories, and
- Continued collaboration with the Hawai'i State Department of Education to integrate culture-based indicators into statewide reporting systems.

Despite these limitations, the available evidence provides a strong foundation

for understanding the value and impact of pono-centered, culturally grounded educational approaches.

## 7. Conclusion

This manuscript shares our story and the impact of CPS and GPS. The work emphasizes the importance of culturally grounded approaches to learning and their relevance to improving outcomes for Native Hawaiian students in Hawai'i's public education system.

CPS established a foundation in culture, relationships, and schoolwide pono practice; GPS translated and expanded that foundation into curriculum, structured lessons, and broader dissemination aligned with HĀ as an outcomes framework. Together, CPS and GPS demonstrate that culturally grounded approaches can strengthen school climate, belonging, and pono-based behaviors, conditions essential for Native Hawaiian students to thrive and meaningful learning for all.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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