

SECOND OPINION by Cliff Slater
Honolulu Advertiser, April 17, 2006.

We are determined to be poor in education

The reason public education in Hawai'i continues to struggle and falter is simple: Parents really do not care enough to do anything about the issue.

Close to a decade ago ("The tragedy of Hawaii education" 6/15/97), I pointed out that in Education Week's 'Quality of Teaching' survey, Hawaii ranked dead last.

While there does not appear to have been a subsequent survey, according to a recent Education Trust report, 33 percent of Hawaii classes in the core academic subjects are being taught by teachers lacking at least a minor in the field — the sixth worst performance among the 50 states.¹

The only relevant way to compare the different states' student achievements is using the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), "the Nation's Report Card."²

Back then, combining Hawaii's NAEP scores for reading and math had put us ahead of just three states—Mississippi, New Mexico and Louisiana. Since then we have made no progress³; today's rankings are as poor as nine years ago.

In 1997, I pointed out how badly the U.S. did in comparison with other countries and that has not changed either.

This comparison is important because it is not as though Hawaii is the fourth worst state, while the U.S. is a high scoring nation. Instead, the latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) scores for education performance place the U.S. one-third from the bottom of the table, sandwiched between Hungary and the Slovak Republic, with Finland, Korea, and the Netherlands w-a-a-y up at the top.⁴

Think about that: At a time when educational attainment is essential for our children to get decent jobs, Hawaii has one of the lowest public education scores in the developed world.

It is not as though we were not warned. Over 20 years ago, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued "A Nation at Risk"⁵ stating that, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves ... The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer."

We have ignored the warning nationally and solved the problem by bringing in Mexicans to do the hard manual work we do not want to do, and Indians and Chinese to do the hard intellectual work that we do not want to do. That leaves our students with the easy and mediocre work for which our nation's public education system has so well suited them.

We have also ignored the warning in Hawaii with the result that, in general, our graduates are just not sufficiently educated to cope with the burgeoning knowledge economy we now have.

Why have Hawaii parents stood still for this?

It is simply that they just do not value education sufficiently. We know that from those parents who prefer band practice to science lessons for their kids,⁶ from the 90 percent of parents who do not take advantage of available free tutoring,⁷ and from the 99 percent of those parents whose children attend failing schools and are thus eligible for school choice but fail to take advantage of it. Finally, we also know it from a total lack of parental activism for change in public education.

All it would take for matters to change is for a couple of hundred parents to chain themselves to the Capitol building, go on a hunger strike and the death grip that union leaders have on public education would disappear in short order; there is nothing that gets an elected official's attention quicker than irate constituents.

Cliff Slater's footnoted columns are at: www.lava.net/cslater. He wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.

¹ ["All talk, no action." Education Trust.](#)

² <http://www.ed.gov/programs/naep/index.html>

³ Combined eighth grade reading and math scores. Available at: <http://counts.edweek.org/sreports/qc04/reports/gradesum-t1.cfm>

⁴ www.lava.net/cslater/OECDeducComp.jpg

⁵ <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html>

⁶ [Honolulu Advertiser, October 18, 2002.](#)

⁷ [Honolulu Advertiser, November 30, 2005.](#)