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Major Effort Is Under Way to Revive and Preserve Hawaii's Native Tongue

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KE'EAU, [Hawaii](#), April 14 (AP) — Portraits in the school's library are not of United States presidents but Hawaiian royalty, from King Kamehameha to Princess Ka'iulani. Near the classroom door rubber slippers are tidily lined up by the students, who go barefoot. The calendar shows it is the month of "Malaki."

Hawaiian language and culture fill the hallways and playgrounds of Ke Kula 'O Nawahiokalani'opu'u Iki and define the mission of the school with the sizable name — Nawahi for short. English is allowed only during the one-hour English class.

A major effort is under way to revive and preserve Hawaii's native tongue — courses in various subjects are taught entirely in Hawaiian.

The language was nearly wiped out after being banned from schools across the islands for nearly a century. In 1983, when a small group of educators began a Hawaiian language revival program, fewer than 50 children spoke the language. Today, the rhythmic, fluid sounds of Hawaiian are used proficiently by more than 2,000 children.

"It's important because I'm the only one in my family who speaks Hawaiian," said Leiali'i Lee, a 10th grade student at Nawahi, one of 23 immersion programs in the state. "I can make a difference and I can revive my language."

While fluency is still rare — just 1 percent of the state's 180,000 public school students attend immersion programs — Hawaiian words are commonplace around the islands, from vowel-filled town names such as Ka'a'awa and 'Aiea to popular fish like mahimahi. There is a weekly radio news report in Hawaiian. Tourists often are greeted in the language even before stepping off the plane. Hawaiian is finding its way into more books and Web sites. And it is taught as a second language at many island schools, public and private.

The immersion schools carry this teaching further, of course.

Nawahi, which has nearly 200 students from preschool through 12th grade, was founded in 1994 as a laboratory school affiliated with the [University of Hawaii](#) at Hilo. Students are taught Hawaiian traditions and culture, such as growing sweet potatoes, building canoes and understanding the land.

The school has succeeded despite financial and political challenges, and skepticism about educating in Hawaiian, the only indigenous language in the United States that is an official state language.

In the tiny school library, books are in Hawaiian, including many originally in English. With very few children's books available in Hawaiian, parents paste translations on top of the English text. Critics say

students could be held back by learning a language that is not “viable” in today’s world. But school officials say Nawahi students have exceeded peers in standardized English tests.

“What people don’t realize is that we speak English,” Akala Neves, a junior, said. “Right after we leave this campus, it’s English. When we go home, we speak English. So we have so much English.”

State Senator Clayton Hee, a longtime supporter of Hawaiian language programs, was encouraged to speak only English while growing up, like many other Hawaiians. He learned Hawaiian in college and now uses it proudly and often.

“It gave me a sense of identity. It gave me a sense of pride,” he said.

Kapa’anaokalaokeola Oliveira, an assistant professor of Hawaiian at the University of Hawaii, also expressed encouragement about the once-forbidden language. “Today, I think there’s a revitalization,” Ms. Oliveira said. “People are encouraging their children to speak Hawaiian.”

Still, Hawaiian is far from being saved.

In 1896, three years after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, a law was enacted, stating, “The English language shall be the medium and basis of instruction in all public and private schools.”

“That was a real death knell,” said Albert J. Schutz, author of “The Voices of Eden: A History of Hawaiian Language Studies.”

“That meant the younger people weren’t using it anymore, and it was only the older people that spoke the language.”

As the Hawaiian elders died, so did the language.

A rare exception was the island of Ni’ihau, where because it was privately owned and isolated from the state’s rules, Hawaiian thrived through the years. Ni’ihau currently has about 160 residents, all of whom speak Hawaiian.

With extinction looming elsewhere, a resuscitation movement began in the 1970s. In 1978, Hawaiian was re-established as an official language of the state. In 1990, the federal government adopted a policy of recognizing the right to preserve, use and support indigenous languages.

Today, as hula and Hawaiian music spread beyond the islands, even non-Hawaiians are picking up the language. About a fifth of the students at Nawahi have no Hawaiian blood, like the blonde, freckle-faced freshman Kemele Lyon.

“The reason I love to speak Hawaiian,” she said, “is because I think it’s the most beautiful language I have ever heard, and every sentence is like poetry.”

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