

# Air conditioning in classrooms limited by aging infrastructure

By Victoria Budiono

[ybudiono@staradvertiser.com](mailto:ybudiono@staradvertiser.com)

Among the concerns teachers raise about aging school facilities, one issue surfaces repeatedly across multiple islands: air conditioning.

For some schools, the challenge isn't the air conditioning units themselves but the aging infrastructure needed to support them — like at Kealakehe Elementary School in Kailua-Kona, where teacher Jill Jacobs said roughly 80% to 85% of classrooms still lack air conditioning because the electrical system cannot handle the demand.

Without reliable cooling, some teachers have taken matters into their own hands.

At Lana\_i High & Elementary School, Jennifer Kaaikala and one of her students bought portable fans for the classroom after its air conditioning stopped working in December; at Lahainaluna High School on Maui, Ashley Olson spent about \$650 of her own money on two window air conditioning units after classroom temperatures reached the mid-80s by 9 a.m.

"It's hard to concentrate," Olson said. "You can't do the work you're trying to do ... The bottom line is that quality education, which includes climate control, is not expensive. Ignorance is a lot more expensive."

At McKinley High School, Shaun Kamida said many classrooms still lack air conditioning, making the first weeks of the school year — when temperatures are among the hottest — especially uncomfortable for teachers and students.

The complaints come nearly a decade after former Gov. David Ige launched the state's "Cool Classrooms" initiative.

In 2016, Ige pledged to cool 1,000 classrooms, saying students could not be expected to learn effectively in overheated classrooms. The Legislature later appropriated \$100 million for classroom cooling, electrical upgrades and other heat-abatement work,

campuses over a century old.

A 2025 state audit found the DOE could not fully account for the original \$100 million air conditioning initiative because of incomplete records, inconsistent documentation, staff turnover and the transition to a new project database.

Auditors estimated about \$105 million was ultimately spent on heat-abatement projects at 53 schools, resulting in air conditioning installations in 838 classrooms. They said incomplete records made it difficult to determine the initiative's full scope, although DOE later identified several additional schools that also received funding.

The audit also found many schools continue to rely on temporary cooling measures because aging electrical infrastructure often must be upgraded before permanent air conditioning can be installed.

DOE said it continues to invest in cooling projects statewide, including air conditioning upgrades at Robert Louis Stevenson Middle School in Makiki as part of more than 150 maintenance projects completed or underway during summer break.

The department told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser that recent investments have also supported air conditioning and other critical infrastructure projects at neighbor island schools.

In an email, DOE said upgrading aging schools is challenged by contractor availability, shipping delays, material lead times and travel logistics, but it remains committed to providing students and staff with "safe, functional and supportive learning environments."

with additional financing approved in 2017 to accelerate the effort.

But cooling Hawaii’s public schools has proven more complicated than simply installing air conditioners. Many campuses require costly electrical upgrades before cooling systems can be added. Hawaii’s public schools average about 61 years old, with more than 50