

Aging isle schools disrupt classes, teachers say

Deteriorating campus facilities across the state need more than routine fixes

By Victoria Budiono

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For teachers across Hawaii, classroom interruptions aren't limited to ringing phones, student chatter or disciplinary issues. They say the biggest obstacle to learning is often the classroom itself.

Broken air conditioning, termite infestations, aging electrical systems and deteriorating buildings have become familiar challenges. Teachers say delayed repairs and aging infrastructure leave students trying to learn in classrooms that are far from ideal as the new school year begins today.

While crews completed more than 150 maintenance projects statewide this summer, educators say schools need more flexibility to hire local contractors, especially on neighbor islands where travel and logistics can cause delays.

The state Department of Education said it is investing more than \$140 million this summer in preventive maintenance, safety upgrades and repairs to reduce disruptions during the school year.

But teachers say many campuses need more than routine fixes. They argue decades- old schools require major reinvestment as failing electrical, plumbing and structural systems continue to create recurring problems that disrupt

teaching and learning.

Jennifer Kaaikala, a special education teacher at Lana'i High & Elementary School who has taught on the island for 26 years, said deteriorating facilities undermine the state's message that student learning is a priority.

About four years ago, Kaaikala said she and her husband spent their own time removing termiteinfested shelving from the school's front office after a maintenance request went unanswered.

"When I carried those shelves out, it was almost like the termite droppings looked like liquid pouring out," she said. "I left a path all the way out to the sidewalk."

Although some buildings on campus have since been fumigated, Kaaikala said her building has yet to receive treatment. Termite droppings still fall onto her desk, forcing her to keep drinks covered. She recently opened a box of nearly new wooden math learning tools and found termites had eaten through the tray and damaged the materialsinside.

Kaaikala said teachers often spend their own time and money cleaning and sanitizing classrooms before students arrive — both to improve learning conditions and make the spaces safer for themselves.

Lana'i High & Elementary School teacher Karen de Brum also described a temporary electrical repair put in place after an underground

>> Air-conditioned classrooms still a challenge. A6

transformer failed in 2022. Crews determined aging underground lines were allowing water intrusion and causing repeated transformer failures. As a workaround, power was rerouted from the school's auto shop through an exposed line across campus and

Kamida said delays — whether the responsibility of DOE, DAGS or the school itself — can send the wrong message to students about accountability.

"Students need these things, and they bring them up, but then it keeps getting pushed aside," he said.

through the boys' locker room to another electrical hub, forcing students to stop using the space.

“DOE has come by and said this is janky and shouldn't stay this way. OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) came by and said it's unsafe,” she said. “Nothing has been done since 2022.”

In a newsletter to constituents, state Rep. Mahina Poepoe (D, Molokai-Lanai-Hana) said she secured a \$3 million appropriation for “portable classrooms and facility improvements,” according to state budget documents at Lana'i High & Elementary School. Teachers said school administrators have not provided them with information about the funding or how it will be used, raising questions about the timeline and communication surrounding the project. Poepoe did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

At Honaunau Elementary School in Kona, secondgrade teacher Anika Agerlie said deteriorating facilities have disrupted instruction. In February, she reported a section of her classroom floor that appeared to be sinking beneath the carpet.

Although crews responded quickly, Agerlie had to move classrooms while workers drilled into the floor, which the state Department of Accounting and General Services later determined was damaged by a combination of rot and termite damage.

Agerlie said the incident reflects what she sees as a reactive approach to school maintenance.

“It's always, ‘This is broken. We need to fix it,’ instead of maintaining it so it doesn't become a bigger problem later,” she said.

DOE officials acknowledged that maintaining the state's aging schools remains a long-term challenge, estimating its deferred maintenance backlog at approximately \$1.2 billion. The backlog includes overdue repairs and replacements for roofs, plumbing, electrical systems, structural components and other aging infrastructure.

Over the past five fiscal years, DOE said it has invested approximately \$2.27 billion in public school improvements and major repairs, averaging about \$454 million annually through the state's Capital

“Later, later, later. Then students think it's OK to procrastinate or not do what you're supposed to do — that responsibility doesn't matter.”

Routine repairs are targeted for completion within four months, while larger maintenance projects — such as adding electrical outlets or replacing air conditioning systems that are not covered by an existing private maintenance contract — do not have a set deadline.

DAGS IDENTIFIED schools in Lanai, Molokai and Hana as among the most difficult to maintain because of travel constraints, staffing limitations and material availability. The department said it currently manages roughly 250 to 350 open work orders across neighbor island schools, with requests increasing by about 5% annually. As of June 30, Hawaii island had the most outstanding work orders with 378, while Kauai's district office had the highest total among individual district offices with 346.

For teachers like Jill Jacobs at Kealakehe Elementary School on Hawaii island, backlogs are reflected in everyday disruptions on campus.

A construction project that was promised when she arrived at Kealakehe Elementary in 2016 only began last school year, while the school's cafeteria kitchen has remained unusable for years because of what she was told was a gas leak. Meals are prepared elsewhere and transported to campus, leaving students to eat in a hot cafeteria with little ventilation.

During heavy rains, Jacobs said, the school's main entrance floods, forcing students to walk through ankle-deep water.

“They're sitting there with wet shoes,” Jacobs said. “They're thinking about their wet feet instead of learning.”

She also cited deteriorating sidewalks that have created accessibility challenges for students and led to injuries among staff.

Jacobs said her principal once hired an emergency plumber to repair a leaking water main over a weekend, but the school later learned the cost would come out of its own budget because the repair bypassed the state's maintenance process.

Improvement Program. But the department said needs outpace funding, with rural and neighbor island schools facing additional challenges because of geography, staffing and logistics.

Responsibility for school facilities shifted under Act 51 of 2004, which transferred authority from DAGS to DOE beginning in 2005. DOE assumed direct responsibility for facility maintenance on Oahu, while DAGS continues to provide repair, maintenance and construction management services for neighbor island schools.

Under a “service level agreement,” DAGS is to handle most repair and maintenance work for neighbor island schools, including plumbing and electrical repairs, painting and service contracts such as air conditioning maintenance. Schools remain responsible for routine upkeep and custodial tasks. Repair requests are prioritized by urgency, with emergency work orders addressed first, followed by trouble calls and regular maintenance requests.

Repair timelines are based on the severity of the issue. Emergency problems that pose immediate health or safety risks — including power outages, broken water lines, sewer overflows and fire alarm failures — require a response within two hours, a temporary fix within 24 hours and a permanent repair within three days. Trouble calls, which include serious disruptions such as water leaks, broken windows, unsecured doors or electrical shorts, require a response within 48 hours, a temporary repair within 72 hours and a permanent fix within five days.

However, educators said some repairs have lingered beyond the deadlines. Maui teachers reported unresolved broken windows that allowed outside noise to disrupt classrooms, while Hawaii island teachers cited longstanding issues including leaks and ceiling damage, with some requests taking weeks or months to address.

At McKinley High School, Shaun Kamida said a cafeteria door damaged during a police chase remained broken for nearly a year, while other campus renovations have stretched on for years.

“It doesn’t show that DOE cares about the safety of the conditions for their staff and students,” Jacobs said, adding that the division of responsibilities between DOE and DAGS can make neighbor island schools feel overlooked. “It makes it feel like the schools on Oahu are more important than the neighbor island schools. We have so many schools here that have been neglected.”

In an email to the Honolulu Star-Advertiser, DAGS said increasing the state’s small-purchase procurement threshold could help reduce maintenance delays.

The current limit, set at \$5,000 under administrative rules adopted in 1995, has not changed despite inflation that would make equivalent projects roughly \$10,000 to \$11,000 to address today, making it harder to attract contractors for smaller projects.



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