

Public school bathroom conditions reflect poorly on state

By Calliah-Lei Pascua Bolosan

Public education in Hawaii faces many well-known challenges, but one issue continues to fly under the radar despite affecting students every single day: the condition of school bathrooms.

Every day in Hawaii's public schools, thousands of students walk into bathrooms that are dirty, unsafe, unreliable or completely unusable. It's a problem that rarely makes the headlines, yet it affects students' dignity, health and learning more than many of the issues we constantly debate.

The data of a recent student survey done by the Hawaii State Student Council's School Environment Committee shows a crisis of basic hygiene and safety in facilities across the state, revealing a clear and uncomfortable truth — our school bathroom conditions are in crisis, and ignoring them is

no longer an option.

According to the survey, 46% of students say their school bathrooms usually lack basic supplies like toilet paper, soap, menstrual products and paper towels. These aren't extras — they are the bare minimum required for cleanliness and health. No student should have to carry their own toilet paper to school or avoid using the bathroom because soap isn't available.

Maintenance issues are just as concerning. Half of students report unhygienic toilets and stalls, and 45% report broken plumbing, faucets, doors or locks. A bathroom without a working lock is not just an inconvenience — it compromises privacy, safety,

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and peace of mind.

These conditions would be unacceptable in any workplace or state building. Why are they tolerated in spaces used by children?

The environment within these bathrooms also affects student access. Sixty-five percent of students report frequent vandalism, which both reflects and reinforces a sense of neglect. Even more troubling, 65% say vaping in bathrooms routinely stops them from

using the facilities, often leading administrators to close bathrooms during instructional hours. When multiple restrooms are shut down, students must choose between missing class or ignoring their basic needs. No student should be

forced into that choice.

These problems are not isolated to specific campuses; they represent a statewide pattern. Bathroom conditions shape school climate, safety, and student well-being in ways that are often overlooked by adults who rarely use those facilities themselves. For students, however, these conditions are inescapable and deeply felt.

Fixing this issue does not require a sweeping overhaul or major new funding stream. It requires consistent prioritization. Schools need reliable systems for restocking supplies, responding quickly to maintenance issues, and ensuring that bathrooms remain accessible throughout the school day. Administrators need tools to address vaping without punishing the entire student body by shutting down facilities. Most importantly, the state Department of Education must treat bathroom

conditions as a reflection of its commitment to student well-being — not an afterthought.

Hawaii often speaks about equity, care and supporting the whole child. But equity begins with access to clean bathrooms. Care begins with providing soap and toilet paper. Supporting students begins with ensuring they feel safe and respected in the spaces they use every day.

The data speaks clearly. Students are speaking even more loudly. Hawaii's public school bathrooms are not meeting basic standards, and students are paying the price for systemic neglect. If we are serious about improving education, then we must be serious about addressing the most fundamental parts of the school environment.

Our students deserve better. And they deserve adults who will take this problem seriously — now, not later.