



KE KULA ‘O NĀWAHĪOKALANI ‘ŌPU ‘U IKI LAB PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial Award

As the pioneering Space Shuttle Challenger astronaut Ellison S. Onizuka inspired the Asian diaspora to explore “brave new worlds,” Hawai’i’s Ke Kula ‘O Nāwahīokalani ‘Ōpu ‘U Iki Public Charter School is creating a bright future for AAPI youth by embracing history and culture.

As a four-decade tradition, Nāwahī was conceived as a beacon for Hawaiian Language Education, providing young people with a sense of their identity and rich heritage. Their mandate is to restore Hawaiian as a living, breathing language. Knowing where one comes from is the key to knowing where one can go.

As the most developed school teaching through Indigenous language in the United States, Nawahi connects young people to linguistic identity, as Hawai’i is the only one of the fifty U.S. states that allows for a non-English language to be utilized as a fully operational voice in public education administration. This is crucial to prevent the “othering” of the region’s youth.

Nāwahī’s day-to-day activities are implemented in Hawaiian native language, from assemblies, secretarial and janitorial work, grounds keeping, and its commencement ceremonies and other events. Classroom work follows the same model, from preschool through to grade 12.

With a foundation in the Punana Leo O Hilo language, the Nāwahī School has transformed decades of governmental resistance and attempts to assimilate, into reform that celebrates identity, and fosters higher standards of learning as the result. And these goals, in the current climate, need to be addressed more than ever.

Nāwahī accomplishes their mission in a number of innovative ways. They enroll an entire family in the program rather than individual students to make it completely immersive. They promote the concept of honoring the Ancestors through the achievements of their descendants. They emphasize collective, communal work. And, they treat all students, regardless of gender, with equal rights and responsibility.

The O’ Nāwahīokalani ‘Ōpu ‘U Iki Lab Public Charter School... like Ellison Onizuka before them, boldly going where Indigenous Education has never gone before.