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OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT OF ACADEMICS

November 12, 2026

TO: The Honorable William Arakaki
Chairperson, Student Achievement Committee

FROM: Heidi Armstrong
Deputy Superintendent

SUBJECT: Department of Education update on special education: Academic achievement, progress, growth, and strategies for continuous improvement

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Hawaiʻi State Department of Education (Department) will provide an update on the academic achievement, growth, and attendance of students with disabilities, highlighting progress, areas requiring continued attention, and the strategies being implemented to improve student outcomes. While regular attendance has increased and academic growth gaps have narrowed, proficiency in English language arts and mathematics remains low. The presentation will highlight school-level bright spots and the Department's coordinated efforts to strengthen instruction, expand educator capacity, and provide targeted supports that promote academic success.

2. DESCRIPTION

This presentation provides an overview of the Department's efforts to improve academic achievement, growth, and attendance among students with disabilities, aligned with Strategic Plan Goals 1.1 and 1.2. The update highlights progress toward Desired Outcomes 1.1.4 and 1.2.1, which focus on equitable academic achievement, continued academic growth, and regular school attendance.

3. PRESENTATION

Kinau Gardner, Assistant Superintendent of the Office of Student Support Services, will present an update on special education and ongoing improvement strategies.

Key components of the presentation include:

- Child Find and Special Education Identification: Hawai‘i’s special education identification rate increased from 10.66% in School Year (SY) 2017–18 to 12.79% in SY 2025–26, consistent with the national upward trend, although Hawai‘i’s rate remains below the national average. During this period, special education enrollment increased by 9.67%, while overall student enrollment declined by 8.57%. The presentation will also highlight the Department’s Child Find responsibilities and its commitment to ensuring that eligible students receive appropriate instruction and services to support their academic progress.

- Inclusive Practices and Access to General Education: The percentage of students with disabilities spending 80% or more of their school day in general education increased from 37.33% in 2016 to 53.88% in 2025. To build on this progress, the Department is strengthening inclusive practices while ensuring that educational placements and support are based on individual student needs.

- Student Attendance: Regular attendance among students with disabilities increased from 54.2% in SY 2021–22 to 67.8% in SY 2025–26, narrowing the attendance gap with all students from 11.9 to 9.0 percentage points. To build on this progress, the Department is supporting schools in identifying attendance concerns early, addressing barriers to attendance, coordinating individualized student and family supports, and monitoring the effectiveness of interventions.

- Academic Achievement: English language arts proficiency among students with disabilities has remained at approximately 12%, while mathematics proficiency has remained between 9% and 10%. Science proficiency rates have also remained between 9% and 10%. These results reinforce the importance of the Department’s ongoing efforts to improve access to high-quality instruction, implement evidence-based interventions, and strengthen educator capacity.

- Academic Growth: The growth gap between students with disabilities and all students narrowed from 21 to 12 percentage points in English language arts and from 19 to 7 percentage points in mathematics. While these trends indicate a narrowing of disparities, changes in growth among all students also contributed to the smaller gaps. The Department remains focused on accelerating academic growth among students with disabilities and translating that growth into improved proficiency.

- School-Level Bright Spots: Pāhoa High and Intermediate School achieved a 34-percentage-point single-year increase in English language arts growth; Lihikai Elementary achieved a 26-percentage-point increase in English language arts proficiency over four years and a 17-percentage-point gain in mathematics; and Mililani ʻIke Elementary consistently demonstrated strong proficiency outcomes among students with disabilities. These bright spots highlight promising school-level results and provide opportunities to examine practices that may inform improvement efforts across the Department.

- Special Education Initiatives and Professional Development: The Department is implementing targeted literacy and mathematics initiatives, including specialized curricula, intensive reading interventions, and university partnerships to strengthen educator expertise. Professional development and coaching emphasize evidence-based practices, Universal Design for Learning, and effective whole-group, small-group, and individualized instruction. These efforts focus on improving the quality of instruction, ensuring access to the core curriculum and grade-level standards, and increasing academic achievement and growth among students with disabilities.

- Attendance Improvement and Sustained Support: The Department will highlight school-based attendance strategies, resources to support implementation, and continued efforts to strengthen student and family engagement.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the Department's efforts to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and for your continued support.

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Attachment

c: Office of Student Support Services



HAWAIʻI STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Office of Student Support Services

Department of Education update on special education: Academic achievement, progress, growth, and strategies for continuous improvement

Hawaiʻi State Board of Education
Student Achievement Committee
November 12, 2026

Kinau Gardner, Assistant Superintendent, Office of Student Support Services

Strategic Plan Implementation Plan

Priority I: High Quality Learning For All



Goal 1.1: All students experience rigorous, high-quality learning that results in equitable outcomes for all learners.

Goal 1.2: All students learn in a safe, nurturing, and culturally responsive environment.

Desired Outcome: All student groups perform equally well academically and show continued academic growth, irrespective of background and circumstances.

Desired Outcome: All students desire to and attend school regularly.

Child Find Obligations

Intent of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Chapter 60

300.111 Child Find

(a) General Mandate

The State must have in effect policies and procedures to ensure that—

All children with disabilities residing in the State, including children with disabilities who are **homeless**, **wards of the State**, or attending **private schools**, regardless of the severity of their disability, and who are in need of special education and related services, are: identified, located and evaluated.

Mandated Action

Identify, Locate, & Evaluate

The bar for a suspicion of a disability is low. The only question that is being asked:

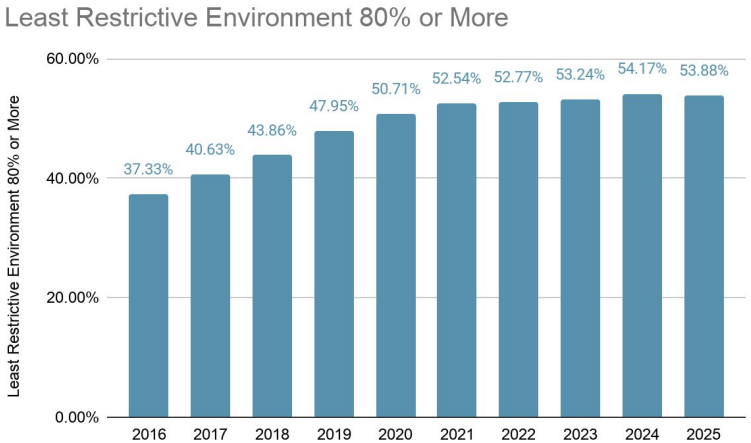
"Is there a suspicion of a disability?"

School Year	Hawai'i % of SPED (3-21)	National Average % of SPED (3-21) divided by the Official Enrollment Count	SPED (3-21) Child Count December 1 of each year	Total Student Population Enrollment
2017-18	10.66%	13.39%	19,276	180,837
2018-19	10.81%	13.83%	19,592	181,278
2019-20	11.11%	14.20%	20,125	181,088
2020-21	11.34%	14.49%	20,017	176,441
2021-22	11.35%	14.67%	19,655	173,178
2022-23	11.70%	15.20%	19,920	170,209
2023-24	11.94%	Not published	20,222	169,308
2024-25	12.31%	Not published	20,572	167,076
2025-26	12.79%	Not published	21,140	165,347
			9.67%	-8.57%

Inclusive Practices: Access to General Education

Goal 1	Goal 2
Close the achievement gap for students with disabilities (SWD)	Increase the time SWD spend in the general education classroom

*Our goals apply to all students receiving special education services, across the continuum of placements and services, as determined by each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP)



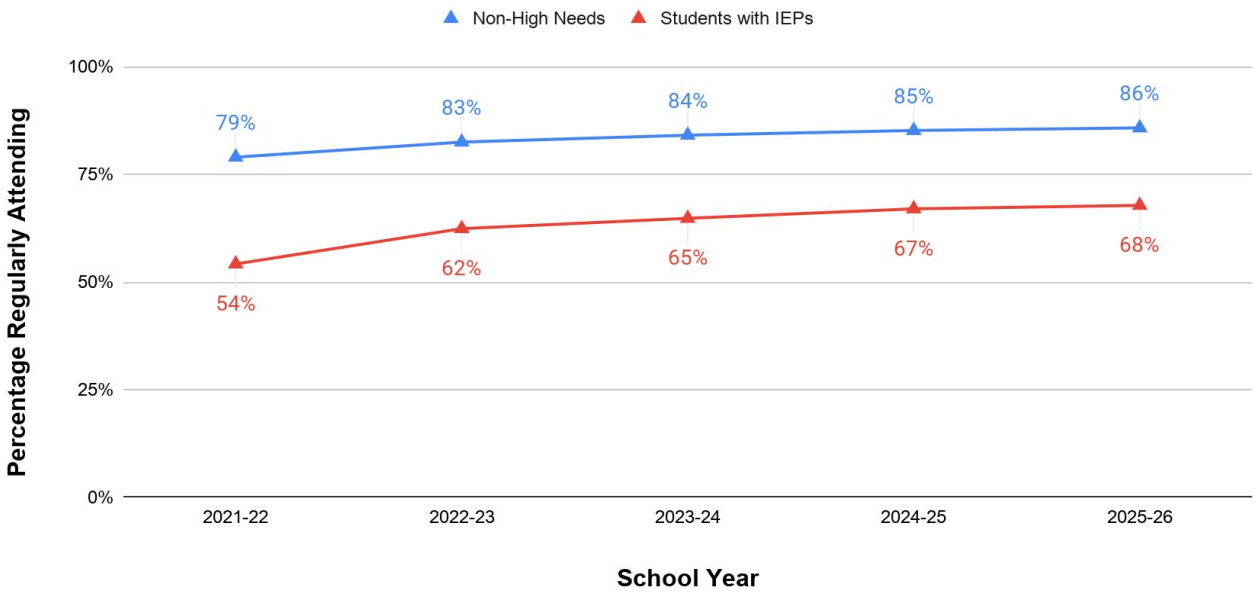
- Leadership in equity and excellence
- Shared beliefs
- Student-centered decision making
- Strong Tier 1 instruction
- Creating access through accommodations, modifications
- Collaborative teaming and planning
- Effective use of educational assistants
- Quality specialized supports

Student Attendance

Trends and Progress Over Time

Attendance SY 2021-22 through SY 2025-26: Non-High Needs and Students with IEPs

Source: ARCH ADC KPI Dashboard

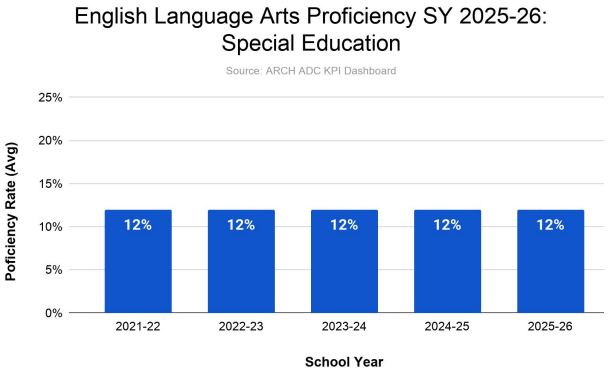


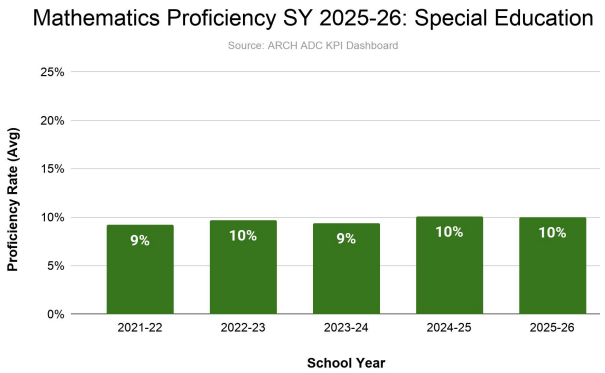
School Year	Difference - Non-High Needs and Students with IEPs
2021-22	25%
2022-23	21%
2023-24	19%
2024-25	18%
2025-26	18%

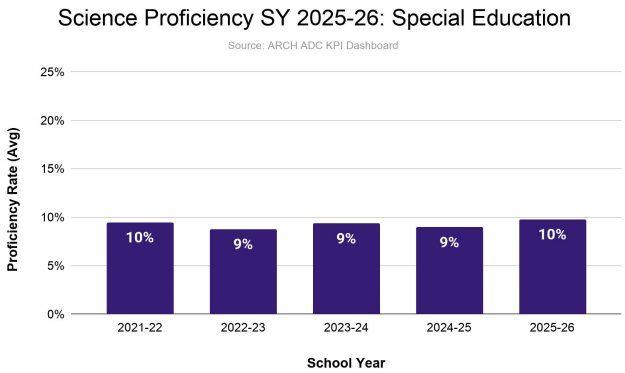
The regular attendance percentage point gap between Non-High needs students and Students with IEPs has been decreasing since SY 2021-22.

Academic Achievement

English Language Arts, Mathematics and Science







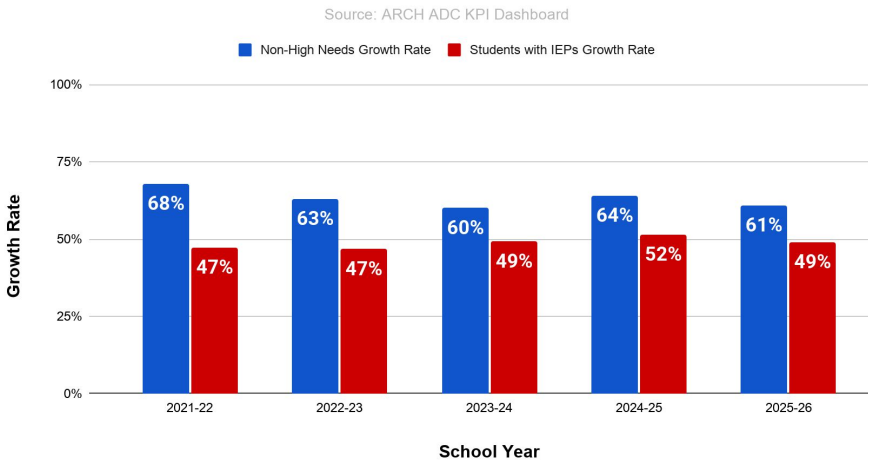
Trends and Comparisons

- Students with Individualized Education Programs' (IEP) proficiency rates for English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics and Science have remained at about the same levels for the past 5 years (around 12% for ELA, 9 - 10% for Mathematics and 9 - 10% for Science).
- Proficiency rates in ELA are slightly higher than for proficiency rates in Mathematics and Science.

Academic Growth

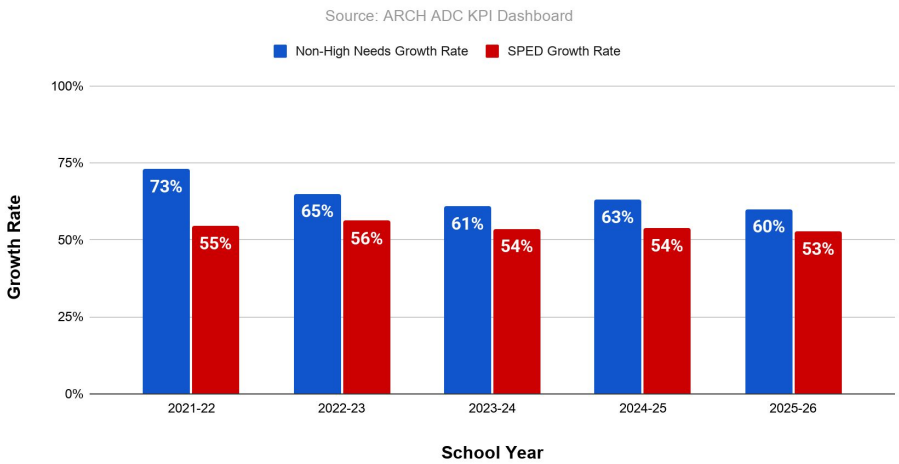
Trends and Progress Over Time

English Language Arts Growth Rate: Non-High Needs and Students with IEPs



School Year	Difference between Non-High Needs students and Students with IEPs
2021-22	21%
2022-23	16%
2023-24	11%
2024-25	13%
2025-26	12%

Mathematics Growth Rate SY 2025-26: Non-High Needs and Students with IEPs



School Year	Difference between Non-High Needs students and Students with IEPs
2021-22	19%
2022-23	9%
2023-24	7%
2024-25	9%
2025-26	7%

2025–26 School Level Academic Success

- **Pāhoa High and Intermediate** had the largest single year gain in any Key Performance Indicator (KPI) with a 34 percentage point increase in Language Arts Growth.

- Students at **Lihikai Elementary** had the largest sustained four-year gains in Language Arts proficiency (+26 pts) and ranked among the top five in Math gains (+17 pts).

- **Mililani ʻIke Elementary** stands out as a bright spot school with students outperforming expectations in Language Arts and Math by the largest margins statewide, even after accounting for differences in socioeconomic status.

Special Education Levers

Goal 1.1

All students experience rigorous, high-quality learning that results in equitable outcomes for all learners.

Goal 1.2

All students learn in a safe, nurturing, and culturally responsive environment.

Lever 1: Evidence-based interventions and practices; specifically designed instruction based on data from each student on an IEP (data based individualization)

Lever 2: Training and coaching, targeted professional capacity-building

Lever 4: Actionable data practices (using data to guide instruction and interventions)

Lever 3: Universal access to high leverage instruction, access to core curriculum

Lever 6: Integrated family and community partnerships, family collaboration and learning

Lever 5: Safe, supportive and accessible learning environments

Desired Outcome

All student groups perform equally well academically and show continued academic growth, irrespective of background and circumstances.

Desired Outcome

All students desire to and attend school regularly.

Special Education Initiatives and Professional Development


Waiāhole Elementary School



Honouliuli Middle School

Program areas

- **Math professional development**
- **Literacy: Intensive intervention**
- **Literacy: University reading interventionist program**
- **Teachtown**

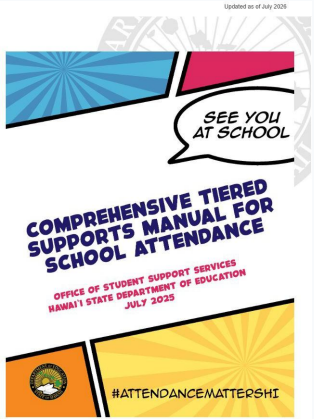
- Targeted training and coaching
- Systematic, evidence-based practices
- Universal Design for Learning
- High leverage practices
- Supportive learning environments
- Access to core curriculum for all learners
- Focus on mastery of grade level standards
- Delivery of high-leverage specially designed instruction
- Whole-group, small-group and individualized instruction

Attendance Tips and Resources

MANUAL & FRAMEWORK

Tiered Supports Manual

Comprehensive manual providing guidance on tiered support systems for school attendance.



STRATEGIC ROADMAP

Attendance Roadmap

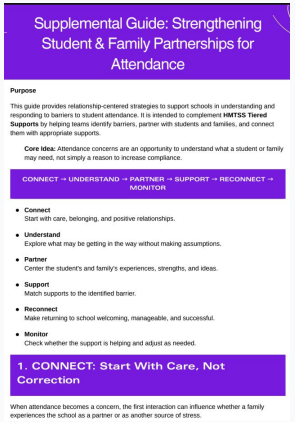
Actionable strategies and proactive solutions for schools to improve attendance metrics.



PARTNERSHIP GUIDE

Student & Family Guide

Relationship-centered strategies to address barriers and partner effectively with families.



What Support Can the Board Provide?

- **Sustained commitment:** Support the Department's multiyear implementation of the six special education levers to improve academic achievement and student growth.
- **Resources and capacity:** Support investments in professional development, instructional resources, and staffing necessary for effective and sustainable implementation.



Waikīkī Elementary School