

Want to Support COFA Students? Empower Their Parents

The Compacts of Free Association (COFA) are separate, international agreements between the United States and the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. Under these agreements, the United States military is granted access to the land, air, and seas in and around these three countries which are strategically placed in the Pacific. In return, the United States provides economic assistance to these island nations and allows their citizens to migrate to the United States without a visa.

For the [estimated 16,680 COFA migrants living in Hawaii](#), transitioning to life in these islands presents many challenges, not the least of which is an unfamiliar education system with rules, norms, and cultures different from their home countries. Chronic absenteeism, dropping out of high school, suspensions, and discipline issues are [more common among Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians](#), a group into which COFA migrants are lumped.

On the other hand, some members of the Micronesian community say there is an assumption that Micronesian students can't do well in school, or don't value education. In fact many [Micronesian parents feel their children are being "pushed out"](#) of the public school system due to discrimination and systemic barriers at some schools within the housed English Language Learner program. One stakeholder we spoke with works at a non-profit organization that serves COFA migrants believes many COFA parents are sometimes encouraged to sign a 4140 form so their children do not negatively impact a school's graduation rate. The 4140 form is known as *Exceptions to Compulsory Education Form* and is typically signed when a parent chooses to pursue homeschooling or alternative education for their child. According to our source, however, many COFA students are withdrawn from school with no verification that they will pursue supplemental education. If true, this is state-sponsored discrimination on the basis of national origin.

We believe empowering parents of COFA students is key to helping COFA students succeed in school. As young professionals working in education, we wanted to know what was being done to reach out to COFA parents so they could better support their children in school. We talked with teachers, school administrators, parents, community leaders, and various non-profit organizations to learn more about what stakeholders are doing to empower COFA parents and how successful these initiatives are.

Parental Outreach by Schools

Schools with higher populations of COFA students have made attempts to reach out to parents. One teacher at an Oahu-based high school with a substantial amount of COFA students said the school hosts a parent night at the beginning of each school year. Several Bilingual School Home Assistants (BSHAs) are in attendance to help facilitate communication with the respective Micronesian families. Attendance, however, is usually low. Parents of 9th grade students tend to be the most involved - typically more than half show up at parent night. Those numbers dwindle as the student progresses through school.

At one elementary school where almost half the student population is considered English Language Learners -- the top three languages being Marshallese, Chuukese, and Ilokano, the school organizes school-wide and grade level-specific activities to engage parents. The principal also holds coffee hours for parents to attend.

All of these events are important and should be encouraged, but its effectiveness in developing long-term relationships with COFA parents appears to be a challenge.

Interaction with parents is often more correctional. According to one high school teacher in Hawaii, if a student is absent or late, parents will receive an automated phone call that morning. If the absences continue for multiple days, individual teachers or a counselor will call the parent or guardian directly. Often times this proves difficult as many students do not live with parents but rather extended family members like grandparents, aunties, uncles, older siblings, or cousins. Parents' contacts are sometimes disconnected meaning the parent has moved, or the parent/guardian might be busy working more than one job. While home circumstances can complicate communication efforts, they do not excuse the schools from reaching out to and informing parents of their child's progress; especially their due process rights if correctional action is taken.

Cultural differences between school systems in COFA nations and Hawaii can also play a factor. According to one leader in the COFA community we spoke with, the schools in Hawaii have more power than public schools back in Micronesia. Due to cultural differences where education is perceived as a lower priority for some in Micronesia, a teacher would not visit the home of a student to speak to the parents to make the child come to school. In Hawaii, however, there are legal consequences for parents if their child is truant. COFA parents who have recently arrived in Hawaii and may not understand how the public education system functions, may not understand how to communicate with schools and the importance of communicating with school representatives.

Cultural differences can also play a factor. One leader in the COFA community told us that many COFA parents consider it the responsibility of the school and its educators to take care of their child. It is not that parents do not want to be involved, but rather they entrust schools and teachers to do their best. That attitude of deference, of "they probably don't need my help", may make it difficult for schools to develop a working relationship with COFA parents.

Despite the challenges, measures taken by schools can be effective - teachers notice and acknowledge when parents are involved the situation improves, students come to school on time resulting in an increase in attendance and participation. BSHAs act as bridges in various ways, facilitating communication between teachers and parents as well as educating schools about the cultures that COFA students come from.

An additional way for schools to better understand and define the problem is to collect accurate and transparent data on the absenteeism, school discipline, and attrition rates of COFA students.

Third party organizations have recognized deficiencies in the Department of Education's offerings and stepped in to meet some of these needs.

Civil Society's Efforts

Sunday's Project is a program begun in 2009, funded by the DOE, and run by Parents and Children Together (PACT). Although originally held on Sundays, Sunday's Project now meets every Wednesday from 8:00am to 10:30am at a designated public school for 15 weeks each semester. Workshops (conducted with interpreters) aim to educate parents and facilitate discussion about important topics in Hawaii's education system. Topics often address concerns raised by schools and service providers, and can range from the importance of accurate and consistent paperwork reflecting the child's name as it appears on official documents to establishing a daily routine for children. Other topics may include but not limited to:

- How to create a supportive environment at home
- How to help your child make the most of school
- How to be an engaged parent at school and in the community
- How to approach parent-teacher meetings and raise concerns with the teacher.
- The right to ask for an interpreter
- Important school terms like General Learner Outcomes, Standards-Based Education, standards, rubrics, and benchmarks.

Educational programs like Sunday's Project that target parents have the potential to make a positive impact. The program, however, is not without its challenges. Cohorts can begin with up to 60 parents; the majority of whom are Chuukese and Marshallese. The duration of the program is fifteen weeks, and in order to graduate, participants must complete a minimum of twelve sessions. Not all parents attend the required amount of workshops and complete the program.

Recruitment is also a challenge. Program organizers go to schools to recruit parents as they drop off their children, but many parents do not come to school with their children in the morning. More parents could be reached if there was better coordination with schools and the DOE to identify and recommend parents for the program, in particular parents of students who are at risk or have a high rate of absenteeism.

Other community organizations and programs that bring adults in the COFA community together around youth education include [Marshallese Education Day](#) and the [Micronesian Youth Summit](#). The two events are organized by the community for the community. Marshallese Education Day brings together all Marshallese students in K-12 schools to celebrate education accolades. The Micronesian Youth Summit is organized by We Are Oceania to embrace, empower, and engage Hawaii's youth. This event is not exclusive to students of Micronesia, but to all students in

intermediate and high schools across Hawaii. Both of these events coordinate sessions for parents in navigating the education system.

Empowering COFA parents, however, should not rely solely on schools or community organizers in Hawaii.

Pre-departure and post-arrival orientation

COFA migrants should be required to take a pre-departure orientation in their home countries *before* arriving in Hawaii so individuals and families understand the challenges they will face and have a basic grasp not only of the education system and its expectations, but also of society, culture, the health care system, job market, legal rights, and other important facets of life.

Follow-up sessions should continue even after arriving in Hawaii. Newcomers need time and guidance to put theory into practice and learn the intricacies of living in Hawaii. This would also be an opportunity to connect COFA migrants with specific needs to community service providers. Governments of both the United States and the three COFA nations should help to finance these orientations to allow smooth transitions for their citizens.

Educating teachers and host communities

While it is critical for COFA migrants to learn the lay of the land in their new surroundings, it is also vital for host communities to understand, reach out to, and support our newest neighbors.

Many public schools hold workshops to educate teachers about Micronesian culture. When interacting with Marshallese and Chuukese students, for instance, a teacher should avoid touching the student's head or demanding eye contact. In other Micronesian cultures, students show respect by blinking and not talking when a teacher speaks to them. A teacher in Hawaii who doesn't know these cultural norms may be easily frustrated by a student's perceived refusal to respond or engage.

Of course, empowering COFA parents extends beyond education. If a parent is working two or three minimum wage jobs - including night shifts - just to make ends meet, he or she may not necessarily have time to attend school parent nights or be as involved in her child's education as they may want to be. Healthcare, minimum wage, accessibility of interpreters and translators, affordable housing, food security, racial discrimination and stereotypes - it all matters. The impacts of these issues are eventually felt by the most vulnerable in our community, many of whom are children from COFA nations trying to succeed in Hawaii's public school system.