Some native Hawaiians are forgotten at Kamehameha Schools

by M Fujii

Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.

-John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States

The Kamehameha Schools admissions policy is an interesting topic of debate. While many recognize Kamehameha Schools for its involvement in the case of John Doe v. Kamehameha Schools, there are other negative aspects of the admissions policy. For example, applicants from lightly-populated areas of Hawai‘i often cannot attend Kamehameha Schools because of the low admittance quota set for their area. Also, there is the problem of applicants who are denied admission due to being diagnosed with psychological/physical disabilities. If Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop intended to improve the health of native Hawaiians and hoped for all native Hawaiian generations to have the kind of education offered at Kamehameha Schools, why are native Hawaiian students from rural areas and disabled native Hawaiians being excluded from an education at the school she created?

The admissions policy was created by the Bishop Estate trustees when Kamehameha Schools was founded in 1887. Using the thirteenth article of the Princess’s will (posted on Kamehameha School’s official site, KSBE.Edu), the trustees devised the current policy that moves the children with native Hawaiian blood to the top of the list of applicants. The policy states that preference would also be given to orphans and indigence children. Many people who knew the princess say that Pauahi meant for all disadvantaged native Hawaiians to be properly educated, with the money from the trust fund she left behind.

The admission policy states that Pauahi’s official will declares that native Hawaiian students be considered first for admission to Kamehameha Schools. The mission and statement of purpose of Kamehameha Schools can be found on the official joint-website of Kamehameha Schools & Bishop Estate, KSBE.edu. The official mission and statement of purpose declares:

Kamehameha Schools’ mission is to fulfill Pauahi’s desire to create educational opportunities in perpetuity to improve the capability and well-being of people of Hawaiian ancestry [. . .].

Kamehameha Schools admits children who show potential and who are able, in a timely and satisfactory manner, to meet all academic, physical and religious activity requirements, which together comprise the fundamental nature of a Kamehameha education. Kamehameha admits children on the premise that they have the intent and ability to graduate from Kamehameha (5 & 9).

How is ignoring the education of special needs students improving “the capability and well-being of people of Hawaiian ancestry”? And why should native Hawaiian students with disabilities be excluded from “the fundamental nature of a Kamehameha education” when Pauahi intended for all native Hawaiian children to be well-educated? Was Kamehameha Schools not created to educate the native Hawaiian youth who will be the leaders of tomorrow? If the goal of the princess was to take the native Hawaiian children from each generation and teach them to become “good and industrious men and women” (Bishop, par. 14), then how is it that the Bishop trustees have forgotten about the 40% of native Hawaiians who are disabled?

However, on the “Questions and Answers About Admissions Policies” page of the Kamehameha Schools & Bishop Estate website, there is a quote from Princess Pauahi’s husband Charles Reed Bishop indicating that Kamehameha Schools encourages only the elite-potentials to apply. Charles Bishop was appointed by Pauahi to become President of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Estate Board of Trustees and was also the therefore carried out much of his late wife’s orders. In a letter to Samuel Damon, Bishop wrote:

[ . . . ] it was intended and expected that the Hawaiians having aboriginal blood would have preference, provided that those of
suitable age, health, character and intellect should apply in numbers sufficient to make up a good school (par. 11).

One can clearly see that Charles Reed uses the phrase “suitable age, health, character and intellect” in this statement, which any person would take to mean smart and non-disabled students. It seems that Kamehameha School caters to the needs of the native Hawaiian student who has no special needs and who can achieve high academic achievements.

In 1975, Kamehameha Schools implemented a system that separates the state of Hawai‘i into seven different districts. The seven districts are: O‘ahu, Moloka‘i, Lana‘i, Kaua‘i, Ni‘ihau, West Hawai‘i, and Hana, Maui. For each district a quota is set, limiting the number of applicants that can be admitted from that district. Each quota depends on the percentage of native Hawaiians who are residents in that district. Kamehameha Schools works with the Department of Education to collect data on the number of native Hawaiians in each district (KSBE.Edu, 17-18). Paulsen gave this example: if a district has a native Hawaiian population of 30%, then 30% of the total number of applicants accepted to Kamehameha Schools will be from that district (Paulsen). This is not fair because in rural areas, the percentage of native Hawaiians will generally be lower than other areas. This results in a fewer number of students from rural areas being accepted to Kamehameha Schools, in comparison with heavily-populated areas such as Honolulu. Thus, it is much more difficult for applicants from rural areas to achieve admittance to Kamehameha Schools.

Students must apply for admission to Kamehameha Schools each year. All Kamehameha students who have been accepted to Kamehameha Schools in previous years are subject to this test as well. In order to continue receiving an education at this well-known school, students must be re-admitted to Kamehameha Schools for their high school years. According to the admissions page of KSBE.Edu, Kamehameha Schools receives an average of 900 applications for the ninth grade every year at the Kapalama campus (KSBE.Edu, 9). For the 2007-2008 school year, at the Kapalama Campus on Oahu, there is a total of 130 open spaces, whereas at the Maui Campus and the Hawai‘i Campus there are 24 and 48 open spaces, respectively, for the 2007-2008 school year. That gives each applicant a 1 in 7 chance of being admitted to this prestigious school.

Generally, the majority of applicants from rural areas do not achieve the same high marks as students who hail from wealthy schools, such as Punahou High School or Moanalua High School. In addition, the testing and interview is difficult and stressful to many people. For the Kapalama campus, students’ grades, previous extracurricular activities, reading comprehension, general mathematics, and writing ability are examined. The admissions department also requires that all applicants submit two teacher references. Applicants are then ranked based on individual scores and greatest need of the student.

Students who are accepted from rural areas face additional problems because the school reserves its boarding facilities for neighbor island students only. Students from the other side of the island of Hawai‘i must commute from their homes everyday. The Hawai‘i Campus and Maui Campus both do not currently offer boarding to its students. Because of the lack of boarding facilities available, students who live as far away as in Kohala, which is about 2 hours from Kamehameha Schools Hawai‘i Campus, must commute each day to school.

In 2006, the number of diagnosed disabilities was at its all-time high. Back in 1887, when Kamehameha Schools was founded, there were not as many disabilities as compared to the world today. However, today, in Hawaii alone there are 150,000 people who have disabilities. Of that count, an estimated 65,000 are native Hawaiians. These people have all sorts of disabilities, ranging from mental to sensory (visually-/hearing-impaired, deaf) to self-care (bathing, getting dressed, etc.) to physical disabilities (University of California, 1). Unfortunately, the number of disabled Hawaiians is only rising. As Ann Pobutsky, Robert Hirokawa, and Florentina Reyes-Salvail reveal in “Estimates of Disability Among Ethnic Groups in Hawaii”, a report for the Hawaii State Department of Health, native Hawaiians have a higher disability rate than any other ethnic group in Hawaii (par. 1). The researchers of the document report:

[...] Native Hawaiians [...] have the worst health in Hawaii compared to other ethnic groups [. . .] Native Hawaiians have death rates 4 times higher than all other ethnic groups combined, as well as high rates of chronic diseases and debilitating conditions such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease (18).

From this report, we can see that native Hawaiians have many health problems. Compared to Filipino, Caucasian, Japanese, and other ethnicities, native Hawaiians have a much higher death rate due to disabilities.

Upon examining Kamehameha Schools, it was discovered that although this elite private school is ADA-approved, it has no special education program. And for that matter, the school does not
accept students with special needs. The only time Kamehameha School officials deal with students with special needs is when a student who has already been accepted to the school becomes diagnosed with a disability. Even then, the school does not personally help improve the health of the students. The school works to enroll the student in Assets School, a private institution for special education students, or contracts out for professional third-party help. Paulsen explains, “Generally, depending on the nature of the diagnosis, the students can stay at the school. [The school] contracts out for psychiatric help.”

In its current state, the policy means little for the future of native Hawaiian youth if it will only cater to the brightest and healthiest of native Hawaiians from highly-populated areas. It is agreed that Kamehameha School is justified in their mission to preserve the native Hawaiian heritage and its place in modern society by educating the native Hawaiian youth of tomorrow. However, Kamehameha Schools seems to have forgotten the native Hawaiians who are physically-/psychologically-disabled. They also seem to have forgotten the Hawaiians from areas in which an education such as the one offered at Kamehameha Schools is unheard of. Can the policy be modified to help these native Hawaiian youth achieve greatness in the world? Or, is Kamehameha Schools only a place for the “best” of native Hawaiians?

As Felix Adler once said, “We cannot adopt the way of living that was satisfactory a hundred years ago. The world in which we live has changed, and we must change with it.” It is time for a positive change for these disadvantaged students who want to attend Kamehameha Schools.

WORKS CITED


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