

WANT TO SUPPORT COFA STUDENTS? EMPOWER THEIR PARENTS

BY JANELLE FUNTANILLA,
MARTIN MOORE, JASON SHON

Janelle Funtanilla is a licensed social worker and has worked in the field of youth development for over a decade.

Martin Moore works as an academic support specialist for continuing education and training at the University of Hawaii's Kapi'olani Community College.

Jason Shon is high school program director at the Pacific and Asian Affairs Council, a non-profit dedicated to developing engaged global citizens among Hawaii's youth.

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 US military is granted access to the land, air, and seas in and around these three Pacific island nations. In return, the US provides economic assistance to these island nations and allows their citizens to migrate to the US without a visa.

For the estimated 16,680 COFA [migrants](#) living in Hawaii, transitioning to life in these islands presents many challenges, not least of which is an unfamiliar education system with rules, norms, and cultures different from that of 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 in 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 English Language Learner (ELL) program. One person we talked with who works at a non-profit organization that serves COFA migrants believes many COFA parents are encouraged to sign a 4140 form so that their children do not negatively impact a school's graduation rates. The 4140 Exceptions to Compulsory Education Form is typically signed when a parent chooses to pursue homeschooling 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 According to our source, however, many COFA students are withdrawn from school with no verification that they will pursue supplemental education.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.

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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 high populations of COFA students have made some attempts to reach out to parents. One teacher at an Oahu high school with a substantial number of COFA students said the school hosts a parent night at the beginning of each school year. Bilingual School Home Assistants (BSHA) are in attendance to help facilitate communication with Micronesian families. Attendance, however, is usually low. Parents of 9th grade students tend to be the most involved—typically more than half who show up at parent night. Those numbers dwindle the older the student gets.

At one elementary school where almost half the student population is designated as ELL and the top three languages are Marshallese, Chuukese, and Ilokano, the school organizes school-wide and grade level-specific activities to engage parents. The principal also holds coffee hours.

These events are important and should be encouraged, but their success in developing long-term relationships with COFA parents appears to be mixed.

Interaction with parents is often more correctional. According to one high school teacher, if a student is absent or late, parents get an automated phone call. If the absences continue for multiple days, individual teachers or a counselor will call the parent or guardian and try to talk to a person. Often this is difficult as many students don't live with parents but rather grandparents, aunties, uncles, older siblings, or cousins. Parents' numbers are sometimes disconnected, the parent has moved, or the parent/guardian might be busy working two jobs. While home circumstances can complicate communication efforts, they do not excuse the schools from reaching out to and informing parents of their children's progress, and especially their due process rights if correctional action is taken.

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 in other Pacific islands. This person told us a teacher would not visit the home of a student to talk 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 just arrived in Hawaii and don't understand how the public education system works may not understand the process or the importance of communicating with schools.

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

Despite the challenges, measures taken by schools do help—teachers notice that when parents are involved, the situation improves: students come to school on time, attendance increases, and students stay longer. BSHAs act as bridges in various ways, facilitating communication between teachers and parents as well as educating schools about the cultures that their 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 have stepped in to fill some of these needs.

The role of civil society

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 range from the importance of paperwork and spelling one's name consistently as it appears on official documents to establishing a daily routine for children. Other topics include:

- 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 15 weeks, and in order to graduate, participants must complete a minimum of 12 sessions. Not all parents attend the required amount of workshops and complete the program.

Recruitment is also a problem. 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 struggling

academically or have high rates 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](#).

Empowering COFA parents, however, shouldn't 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 the US 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 American life.

Follow-up sessions should continue even after arrival. Newcomers need time and guidance to put theory into practice and learn the nuances of living in the US. This would also be an opportunity to connect COFA migrants with specific needs to community service providers. Governments of both the US and COFA nations should help to finance these orientations to help ensure as smooth a transition as possible for their citizens.

Educate 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 students, for instance, a teacher should avoid touching the student's head or asking for 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, they don't have time to attend school parent nights or be as involved in their child's education as they may want to be. Health care, minimum wage, accessibility of interpreters and translators, affordable housing, food security, racial discrimination and stereotypes—it all matters, and 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.

Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization.