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Hawaii Schools Face Skyrocketing Micronesia Student Enrollment

Teachers Overwhelmed With Lack Of Resources

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POSTED: 5:02 pm HST February 25, 2005
 UPDATED: 5:19 pm HST February 25, 2005

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HONOLULU -- Latest figures show the population of Micronesia students in Hawaii needing help with English as a second language has more than doubled in the past year.

Education officials say the numbers are "startling." Honolulu has the largest population of Micronesia students, and it's at the high school level where the transition is the toughest, officials said.

Belste Phillip is from the Marshall Islands.

"My grandparents brought me here. They want to live here. They say it's a better education," Phillip said.

Fukusawa Sigrah arrived from Kosrae six months ago. He has five brothers and a couple of sisters and wants to eventually go back home.

Beverly Killion is from Chuk Island. She has been in Hawaii for five years.

These are some of the faces of Micronesia. Micronesia is a geographic area in the Western Pacific with different cultures and different languages.

The DOE said in one year, the number of Micronesia students jumped from more than 2,500 to close to 6,000.

One of the biggest frustrations for teachers is that a lot of the students aren't even literate in their own language. KITV 4 News was told school is not mandatory in some islands and if the students don't know how to read or write in their native tongue, learning English can be that much more difficult, particularly if you are thrown into a 9th-grade biology class.

In Cindy Reves' English as a second language class of 30, the value of education is different among the various groups.

"I have several Micronesia students who stay after school and work really hard and I have others who come to school sporadically and don't bring supplies," Reves said.

You also can hear the frustration in Shirley Lum's voice. She has been teaching English as a second language for decades.

"I'm trying my best and yet I feel I'm shortchanging them. I am just overwhelmed by the numbers, by the lack of resources that I have," Lum said.

She thinks it's time the DOE set up new special newcomer schools, where immigrants can adjust before mainstreaming into the regular school system.

Hawaii is supposed to get federal money to help offset the impact of so many Micronesians immigrating to the state. Congress did provide several million dollars last year. However, it didn't cover the actual cost and the money went to Health and Human Services. Nothing went to the public schools.

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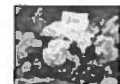
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