

The Maui News

Kishimoto: Kihei school is 'absolutely needed'

Superintendent comes to Maui: New administrator holds community meeting



State Department of Education Superintendent Christina Kishimoto outlines her vision for Hawaii schools during a meeting at Pomaikai Elementary School on Friday afternoon. -- The Maui News / MATTHEW THAYER photo

Hawaii's new Department of Education Superintendent Christina Kishimoto is *"currently getting up to speed on how to advance"* work on the long awaited Kihei high school.

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from Committee Chair Carroll

“It’s absolutely needed,” she said during a state Board of Education community meeting at Pomaikai Elementary School in Kahului on Friday afternoon.

She said that the South Maui school is anticipated to open in 2021 — a year sooner than education officials had said last year. However, throughout the years, various opening dates have been projected. The process has frustrated parents and community members as the school has been in the planning for decades and had, at one point, been projected to open in 2014.

Currently, South Maui students are bused to Kahului to attend Maui High School.

“This means we have a couple of years, and we know that Maui High will grow in enrollment,” Kishimoto said to around 80 teachers, parents, education staff and students in Pomaikai’s library. *“How do we plan out for the next few years?”*



State Board of Education Member Kili Namau‘u speaks at the beginning of Friday’s meeting. -- The Maui News / MATTHEW THAYER photo

She said that things need to be looked at — including resources, classroom space and teachers.

In a report to Maui County in June, the state DOE said that a notice to proceed is expected in January on work at the school site mauka of Piilani Highway near the intersection with Kulanihako'i Street. The work involves grading, erosion controls and underground utility infrastructure.

Kishimoto said after the meeting that she would rather not have the school funded in phases but understands that the state cannot spend the money all at one time.

She said that the state Legislature has shown commitment for the project. (Lawmakers secured \$63 million for the building of the school during the legislative session that ended in May.)

"I think we have their backing and I'm excited about that," she said.

Kishimoto officially introduced herself to the Maui community Friday after assuming her job Aug. 1. She most recently served as superintendent and chief executive officer for Gilbert Public Schools in Gilbert, Ariz. She has a three-year contract in Hawaii and will be paid \$240,000 annually.

Among other issues that she touched upon was the temporary suspension of bus service for 380 students at Baldwin High, Iao Intermediate and Lahainaluna High schools at the beginning of the current school year due to a shortage of drivers. The approximately five-week service suspension ended Sept. 11. The issues began before Kishimoto's tenure.

"I wish we did not have to start the school year that way," she said.

After Friday's meeting she said: *"I can never ensure or assure nothing will ever happen with buses. Buses are notoriously an issue around the United States, not just Hawaii or just in Maui."*

But she added that she has a process she is working through to hopefully try to prevent the stoppage of service, which involves looking at bus fees, what kinds of partnerships the DOE needs based on the services required as well as being *"very open to ideas on how we do our work."*

During Friday's meeting, she praised Maui County schools for their achievements in college readiness for students and pointed out several factors including graduation rates increasing at four Maui District high schools (the district has a

total of seven), with Upcountry's King Kekaulike High School seeing the greatest increase last school year over the previous year.

Attendees at the meeting were allowed to ask questions of Kishimoto and Board of Education members, including new Maui member Kili Namau'u, who began July 1.

Questions included getting more support for Hawaiian language immersion schools.

Namau'u, who is the head of Punana Leo O Maui, the Hawaiian language preschools, said that a new office for Hawaiian education has recently been established under the state superintendent's office, allowing for more of a voice.

"We have come a long way, especially in the last couple of years," she said, but *"we still have a way to go."*

Namau'u said that she will make immersion education a priority while on the board.

Kishimoto added that, in the department's strategic plan, department officials will be looking *"at next level work we need to do,"* which includes addressing Hawaiian language immersion.

Community members also shared their concerns about the school system and working conditions for teachers.

Haiku Elementary School 4th-grade teacher Theresa Haberstroh spoke regarding how she and other teachers are overworked and underpaid, with many of them working on the weekends and while they are at home. She said that Hawaii public school teachers are some of the lowest paid in the nation.

"How can we keep our people here if we are so underpaid and we are so overworked? We need our quality teachers here," Haberstroh said.

Earlier Friday, Kishimoto paid a visit to some Maui schools, including Puu Kukui Elementary in Wailuku, where 146 T-shirts that read *"Baldwin Bears in Training Class of 2030"* were given to kindergarten students as part of a program to build school pride.

A local company, K2O+, donated the shirts to help the state Department of Education's public school system, according to a news release.

* Melissa Tanji can be reached at mtanji@mauinews.com.

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Ralph Kayona

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Kristin Holmes · Windward Community College

Totally agree! When I moved here in 1984, I didn't have children and I assumed that by the time I did there would certainly be a high school by then...never happened!

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