



Rooted in Kohala: How a High School Keeps Its Students—and Future --at Home in a Thriving Rural Community

In rural communities, relationships are not just an asset; they are the lifeblood that sustains the school and its surrounding community. North Kohala's Kohala High School on the Big Island of Hawaii exemplifies commitment, ingenuity, and community values. Despite its small size and remote location, Kohala High serves as a model for small and rural schools. In 2025, Kohala High became the first small school in the nation to receive the NCAC Model Academy designation.

Dating back to its inception in 1926, Kohala High School, was a cornerstone of education in the area and holds a significant historical position as one of the island's first public high schools. Today, Kohala High serves approximately 260 students and offers a unique blend of academic rigor and real-world learning opportunities. One of the key factors behind Kohala High's success is its innovative Academy of Sustainability.

"By focusing our sole academy on sustainability, we create space for every student's unique journey. All Pathways fall under the umbrella of sustainability. This theme reflects our promise to protect and sustain our local community for generations to come," explained Dean Snelling, CTE lead and Natural Resources Teacher. The academy offers four career pathways: Natural Resources-Food Systems, Construction, Health-Nursing, and Culinary. Students in the Natural Resources-Food Systems pathway learn about sustainable agriculture practices, while those in the Construction pathway gain skills in green building techniques. The Health-Nursing pathway prepares students for careers in healthcare, addressing a critical need in rural areas. The Culinary pathway not only teaches students the art of cooking but also emphasizes the importance of using locally sourced ingredients. Each pathway provides students with practical skills and hands-on experience, setting them up for successful careers, whether they stay local or choose to move elsewhere.

Naturally, the hope is for a significant number of students to remain in Kohala and this is where community and business partners assume a pivotal role. The school has forged strong partnerships with local businesses and organizations, providing students with valuable internship and community service opportunities. This collaborative approach ensures that students are not only academically prepared but also deeply connected to their community. Kohala High School has emerged as a focal point for the community, serving as a venue for events, workshops, and cultural activities that foster community engagement. Community members often use the school's facilities for gatherings, integrating it into North Kohala's social fabric. Community Partner, Nathan Trump from Island Harvest enjoys working with the Academy students. "Working with students is the best part of being a business partner. We would not have that opportunity otherwise, and through internships, we can integrate what they are learning to other subjects and future careers."

NCAC Reviewer: "One student said, "My involvement in the academy has made me realize how much I depend on my community, and how much my community depends on me," and others discussed their community involvement and the support they receive."

Assistant Principal Kim Kosa remarked, "Our approach is rooted in the belief that strong community partnerships foster a vital sense of belonging for every student. Guided by the principle, 'A'ōhe u'i hele wale o Kohala, we commit to ensuring that every student leaves us fully prepared for their next chapter. This award is a proud reflection of the hard work and heart our entire Academy pours into our students every day."

"NCAC Reviewer: "The academy's programs clearly meet the community's needs, and academy partners offer most of the experiences. The school emphasizes social-emotional learning, self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging, and the interviewed students' emphasis on community underscored their understanding of citizenship."

As Kohala High School approaches its 100th anniversary, it carries forward its motto, "E Ala e Na Paniolo" – "Rise to the Challenge, Cowboys"- staying rooted in history and advancing its mission. Kohala High School is exploring new programs and partnerships to further enhance its offerings and provide even more opportunities for students. Plans are underway to expand the Academy of Sustainability to include additional career pathways, such as renewable energy and environmental science.

Principal Amy Stafford attributes the school's success to the tireless efforts of its teachers and staff, as well as the support of the community. "Being the first small school in the nation to achieve Model Academy status is a tremendous honor for our school and community. More than the designation itself, this milestone truly represents the continuous and tireless effort of our teachers and staff to provide meaningful, real-world opportunities for our students. Though our town and school are small, the dreams and potential we see in our students are limitless. This achievement is a shared success that fuels our commitment to their future."

NCAC Reviewer: "The advisory board's composition represents every partner category. Through work-based learning, competitions, field experiences, and capstone projects for students, the partners' collaborative spirit is clear, showcasing a significant alliance. The group now convenes formally on a quarterly schedule. It was clear that the partners were enthusiastic about the academy. Business and community partners mentioned that they often put forth suggestions specifically designed for each academy."

A healthy American future depends on vibrant rural communities. Many rural areas lose young people because of a perceived lack of opportunities and supportive environments. Kohala High School shows how public schools can counter this trend by acting as a focal point for community life. The Academy of Sustainability at Kohala strengthens collective identity and offers a hub for social engagement, cultural preservation, and shared goals. Students receive support from both school and community, fostering a sense of belonging that inspires them to invest locally. These efforts make Kohala High a model for revitalizing rural schools by addressing youth retention and deepening community bonds.

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