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## EDITORIAL | ISLAND VOICES

# Column: Education can keep keiki from growing into criminals

By Lorenn Walker • Today

Hawaii does deserve to be a safe community, as columnist Lee Cataluna rightly said ([“Aiming to be the world’s safest place,” Star-Advertiser, May 3](#)). What Cataluna, and others, need to understand when it comes to criminal behavior is that we must address the causes of crime systemically beginning with better education.

We have to stop trying to simply punish our way into creating a safer community. Punishment does not prevent long-term criminal behavior. If it did, Hawaii would not have more than 5,000 people locked up today.

Most people in prison have been there before. The majority of those sentenced to prison are eventually released, and they repeat crime.

We know who is in our prisons and who keeps coming back into to them. Generally, they are people who were in the juvenile justice system.

Who are the people in the juvenile justice system? Juveniles who abuse alcohol and drugs are the primary population in the juvenile justice system.

Who are the juveniles that abuse substances and end up in the justice system? Juveniles who have learning problems tend to abuse drugs and alcohol more than others.

More than 16,000 students in Hawaii schools have learning difficulties. Some of these students never find a way to succeed in school or the community. Children like adults are socially driven. Most of us are motivated by a sense of belonging to have friendships. Instead of getting involved with academics and school activities with other students who are busy learning at school, youth

who struggle to learn instead find companionship with those who are not academically successful. Usually it is lower achieving students who are suspended from school.

Eventually some underachieving students with learning difficulties also develop substance abuse problems that bring them into the juvenile justice system, and some land in the adult criminal justice system. This is how schools become “pipelines to prison.”

Students who have been pushed out of school are often put into special programs and alternative schools for “at-risk youth.” These programs introduce them to more peers struggling with the same disadvantages they suffer. Few positive role models are offered for these learning challenged youth. While there are some outstanding programs like Adult Friends for Youth in our community, significant widespread effective academic and social help for underachieving students is sorely lacking.

Finally, as adults enter the criminal justice system, the former underachieving students are punished more instead of educated.

The average grade level for an incarcerated person in Hawaii is the sixth grade (some claim that it is actually only fourth to sixth grade). What other fact do policymakers need to understand that we must address education if we are to make our community safer?

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Being uneducated does not condone criminal behavior. Many uneducated people would never break laws and become incarcerated, but here we are talking about who is in our prisons, and most are those who have failed at school.

The cost to put these formerly underachieving students into prison is high. Hawaii spends about \$250 million a year on incarceration. Per capita we are ranked as the 17th-highest spender on prisons in the United States.

We have a safety problem that prison is not going to fix, and usually only makes worse.

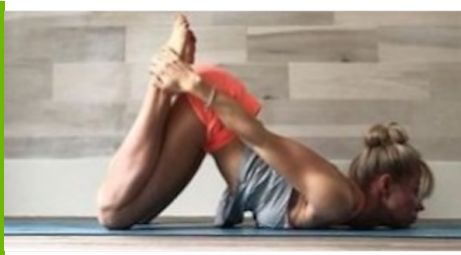
The next time you read about an atrocious criminal act by someone with a long history of arrests and incarceration, remember that person probably has the grade level of a 12-year-old.

Ask yourself: What is our government doing to help struggling youth find a place in schools that appreciates, values, and teaches them? We all deserve a better system and safe community.

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**Loren Walker is an associate professor of practice in the Public Policy Center, University of Hawaii.**

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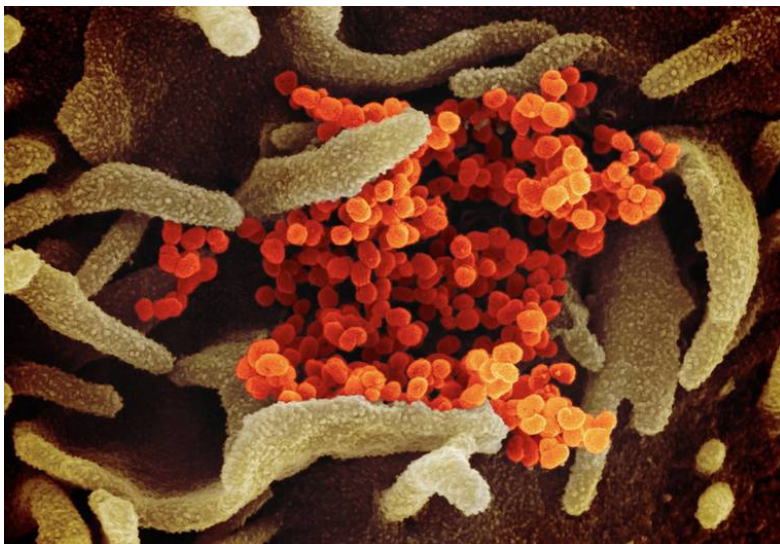



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