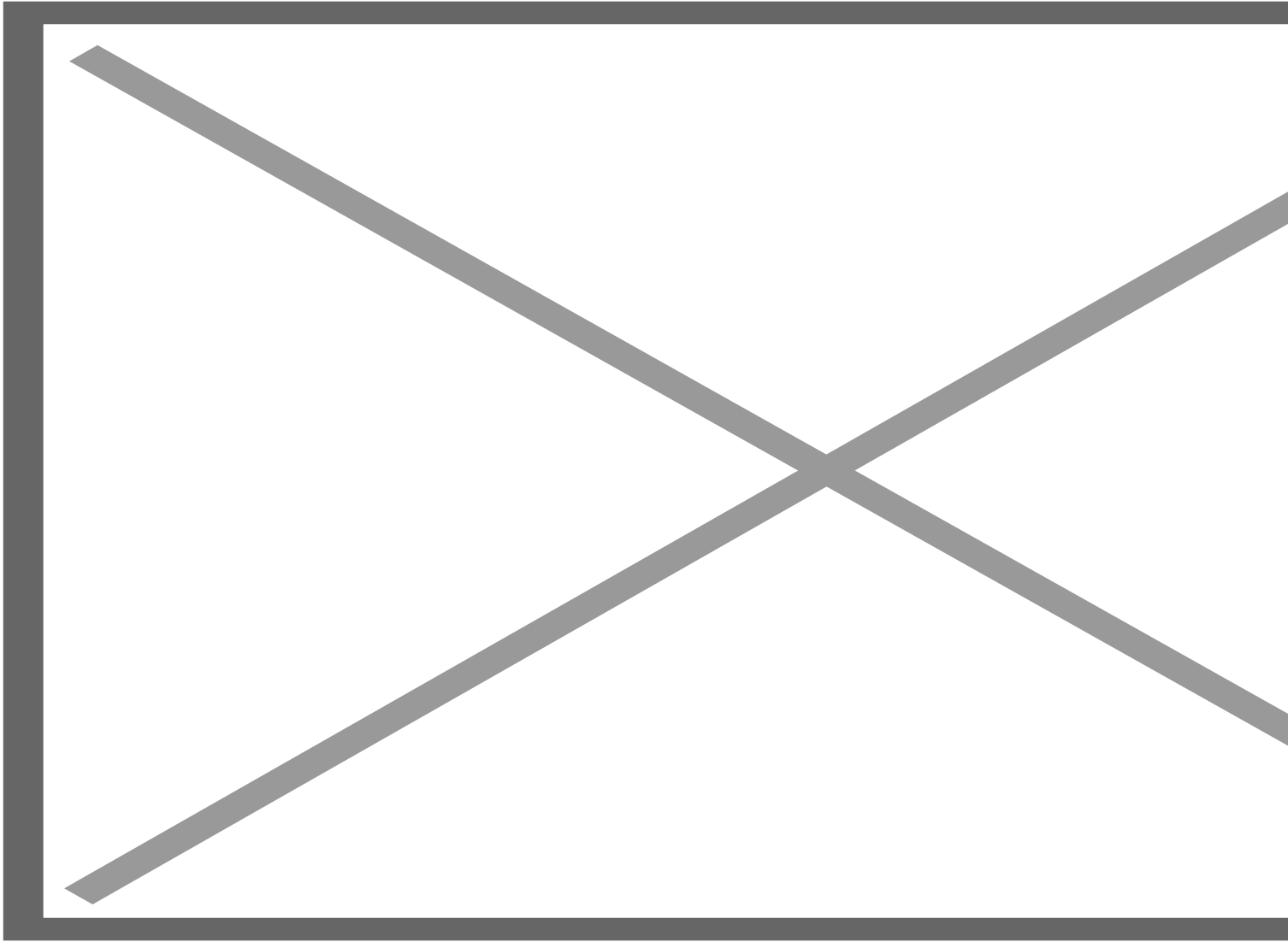


Virginia group sues Christian school serving Native Hawaiians

by [Jeff Brumley](#)

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Hundreds of Kamehameha students, alumni, and supporters gather at 'Iolani Palace in Honolulu. (Facebook)

A new lawsuit accusing a private K-12 school in Hawaii of racial discrimination against non-Native residents is triggering painful memories of colonialism across the state.

“It’s upsetting to a lot of people, and it’s upsetting to me,” said Kealahou Alika, a semi-retired United Church of Christ pastor, denominational leader, and an alumnus of Kamehameha Schools, the institution targeted in the [legal action](#).

The school, which has campuses on three islands, was founded in 1887 by a descendant of Hawaiian royalty to provide education to native-born people excluded by exclusively White schools.

A Christian school with a long-time relationship with the UCC, the institution has become a leader in reviving and preserving the Hawaiian language and culture once suppressed by US and European religious, agricultural, and corporate leaders.

But the lawsuit filed last month by Students for Fair Admissions claims Kamehameha Schools violates the civil rights of non-native applicants and argues its admissions policy is an ineffective way to address the disparities faced by those of Hawaiian ancestry.

The group said the admissions policy makes it nearly impossible for non-Native Hawaiians to get into the institution: “We believe that focus on ancestry, rather than merit or need, is neither fair nor legal, and we are committed to ending Kamehameha’s unlawful admissions policies in court.”

The Virginia-based organization also was the plaintiff in a lawsuit against Harvard University resulting in a 2023 US Supreme Court decision striking down affirmative action in higher education.

Kamehameha Schools CEO Jack Wong and board chair Crystal Rose vowed the admissions policy will be “vigorously” defended along with the will of founder Ke Ali’i Pauahi, great-granddaughter of King Kamehameha, the first monarch to unite the islands. Her will directed her private estate to be used for the education of Native Hawaiians.

“The facts and the law are on our side, and we are confident we will prevail. In kapu aloha (sacred dedication), we will stand strong together,” they said.

Many Hawaiians, and especially those connected to the school, have been “traumatized” by the lawsuit, its similarities to anti-DEI efforts on the continent, and by the threat it poses to Native identity, said David Popham, conference minister for the UCC Hawaii Conference.

“The anger stems from the legacy of colonialism here in Hawaii, with people on the continent telling Hawaiians what to do. That is the kernel of the anger and frustration that is affecting Hawaiian folks.”

That period leading up to statehood in 1959 included the arrival of US Protestant missionaries in the 1820s and their suppression of Native religion, language, and culture. The islands’ monarchy was overthrown in 1893 by White plantation owners, followed by its annexation into the US in 1898. Economic and labor exploitation were rampant, with White-owned plantations controlling markets and bringing in wage-suppressing migrant labor from Asia.

“Kamehameha Schools was created to fill a niche with endowments built around supporting people of Hawaiian bloodlines in a colonial setting that disfavored them, moved them off their land, and moved them into poor-paying jobs,” Popham said. “So, the real impact (of the litigation) is on Hawaiian sovereignty and the fact that this is a private school established for Hawaiian children at a time when other private schools were not catering to Hawaiian children.”

Plaintiffs in the lawsuit are not identified by name, but only as “Family A” (a single mother with her White non-Native daughter) and “Family B” (a father, stepmother, and half-Asian daughter). Both children are residents of Hawaii but not born in the state.

The founder of Students for Fair Admissions, conservative legal activist Edward Blum, reported “a barrage of phone calls, emails, voicemails and other submissions” since the organization launched kamehamehanotfair.org shortly before filing the case, the lawsuit states.

The group's website claims a membership of more than 20,000 parents and students opposed to race-based admissions standards nationwide.

The Federalist Society described Blum as an author and former policy analyst with the American Enterprise Institute who also has sued the University of North Carolina, the University of Texas and the US Military Academy on admissions issues. "He is the president of the newly formed American Alliance for Equal Rights, which has filed over a dozen lawsuits challenging the use of race by corporations, law firms, venture capital firms and cultural institutions."

"The relief Blum seeks is narrowly focused on what has always been his objective: a prohibition on any awareness of race in college admissions," the ACLU explained. "If Blum gets his wish, statistical projections show white applicants will be the primary beneficiaries."

And that, in part, is the concern many Hawaiians harbor toward the Kamehameha Schools lawsuit, said Ku'uwehi Hiraishi, a former investigative journalist and reporter for Hawaii Public Radio.

The fear is of "assimilation through litigation" and the loss of the school's Native Hawaiian character, she said. "It's triggering for myself because it's potentially forcing us as Native Hawaiians into a Western legal box that strips away our indigenous rights."

And it has been tried before, Hiraishi added. A 2003 lawsuit resulted in a federal appeals court ruling upholding the admissions policy because it counters "manifest imbalances resulting from the influx of Western civilization."

The new lawsuit represents an assault on Hawaiian culture and an effort to subvert the will of Princess Ke Ali'i Pauahi, said Caroline Belsom, a retired attorney and graduate of Kamehameha Schools. "As a former student, it evokes all the things that were done to us as Hawaiians to not recognize our need to continue and sustain our culture through language and arts and music."

It's also hurtful that plaintiffs in the case feel entitled to infringe on the founder's vision for the school, she said. "Her will was to have her assets used to educate her people so they grow up to become leaders and find ways to sustain our culture."

Alika, the pastor, said he considers the lawsuit to be part of the MAGA effort to discriminate against people of color in all sectors of society.

"I see this as part of the push against affirmative action, against woke. It's an attempt to 'Make America Great Again' by going back to 1955 and trying to erase all the gains that have been made and basically go back to a time when people felt it was their America, not ours' together." —Baptist News Global