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Hawaii News

Jack Johnson helps students shine

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Jack Johnson visited and played for Kamaile Academy, one of three Hawaii schools participating in the national Turnaround Arts program.

Students at Kamaile Academy in Waianae got brief hands-on lessons in songwriting and music Monday from local musician Jack Johnson.

The Hawaiian-focused charter school is one of three Oahu public schools participating in a national program that uses arts education to help turn around low-performing schools.

Johnson, singer Paula Fuga, ukulele virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro and actress Alfre Woodard helped “adopt” the schools as part of the Turnaround Arts program, a White House initiative led by the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. The program, now in its second year in Hawaii, also includes Waianae and Kalihi Kai elementary schools.

Johnson, whom the students affectionately call Uncle Jack, performed some of his own songs at a schoolwide assembly Monday morning before working with a few individual classes at Kamaile.

“Songwriting, I think, is a lot of fun for the kids,” said Johnson, a Kahuku High & Intermediate graduate. “I like to just show them that I’m just like them, basically. I started writing songs just about going to school in the morning, riding the bus and stuff like that. ... I just try to show them you can write a song about anything.”

Strumming a guitar, Johnson helped groups of fourth- and sixth-grade students choose a music style and melody before collaborating on lyrics for songs. The older students, for example, chose a reggae beat and composed a song about playing sports and having supportive friends — all in under 10 minutes.

“See how easy that was? That was, like, seven minutes and we wrote a song,” Johnson told the class. “If you guys gave yourselves 15 minutes, imagine the song you could write. Or take an hour.”

In addition to celebrity artists, the Turnaround Arts program helps schools hire art and music teachers, purchase art supplies and musical instruments, and train educators to integrate art with core subjects such as reading, math and science. Schools are selected by the U.S. Department of Education to receive extra resources because they are in the bottom 5 percent of schools in their state for academic achievement.

Anna Winslow, Kamaile Academy’s principal, credits the program with helping teachers and students to better focus.

“When I see the joy in the kids’ faces, it’s like they’re ready, they’re energized to get into the classroom,” Winslow said. “It’s focused energy.”

She added that she believes the arts integration strategies are partially behind a big drop in the number of so-called behavioral referrals, when misbehaving students are referred to school administrators. That tally has dropped to 45 referrals from more than 100 the year before.

Winslow said the school hopes the arts program will help improve teacher and student retention rates. The K-12 school, with nearly 900 students enrolled this fall, has high rates of transient students, and more than 90 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, a key indicator of poverty.

Some Kamaile students say the Turnaround Arts program has helped them be more expressive.

"I see students more often expressing themselves — not really in a conventional way, because before it was all about textbooks, but now I see people being more artistic in the way they express themselves in classes," said sophomore Mark Allen Boter.

Other students say they hope the arts program will help boost school spirit and pride, and increase participation in the school's annual talent show.

Turnaround Arts is funded through a public-private partnership with the U.S. Department of Education and foundations. Locally, the state Department of Education and the Hawaii Arts Alliance are program partners.