

SEEQing knowledge

LEARNING THROUGH THE
LENS OF SUSTAINABILITY



BY LINDSEY KESEL
IMAGES BUFFY CUSHMAN-PATZ

Wide-eyed students huddle around the massive trunk of a sprawling monkeypod tree, the social epicenter of campus, waiting to get their photos taken for the yearbook. It's Wednesday, a free dress day at SEEQS middle school in Kaimukī, and the students are wearing whatever they please: tank tops, dresses, aloha shirts and hoodies. There is a girl wearing a wreath of flowers on her head and a few boys sport fedoras. The eclectic mix of styles aptly reflects the school's spirit of individualism and the creativity running rampant within its walls. Each student takes a seat in front of a colorful, hand-painted SEEQS school logo, smiles (or not) and says, "SEEQS!"

SEEQS is a startup charter—an independently operated public school—offering integrated, sustainability-based education to sixth, seventh and eighth graders. Its acronym, School for Examining the Essential Questions of Sustainability, may sound like an ultra-progressive approach to education, but its motto of, “seeking questions, seeding futures,” is grounded in much more than abstract thinking, composting and yoga. It's a strategic mix of interdisciplinary studies and collaborative opportunities that develops and tests students' skills and intelligence beyond the classroom. It's a safe haven where students are encouraged to begin defining and shaping their role in the local and global communities, where educators focus on intentional skill building and champion originality and imagination.

Startup charters must submit a comprehensive plan detailing the school's mission, vision and methods. The institution undergoes regular evaluations to ensure that academic, operational and financial goals are being met. Like other charter schools, SEEQS has more operational freedom than a traditional public school and is held to high standards of accountability. The school is open to anyone on the island, although there is a waiting list for enrollment—blind lotteries are held before the start of each school year.



“We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist, using technologies that haven’t been invented, in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet.”

—Educator Karl Fisch



Over the course of her seven years teaching science and math in more traditional school settings, SEEQS founder Buffy Cushman-Patz toyed with the idea of creating a unified approach to education in which educators from different disciplines collaborate on curriculum. Her ideas for overhauling traditional curriculum persisted as she left teaching in 2010 to accept an Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellowship, a yearlong position in Washington D.C. with the National Science Foundation. Afterwards, she earned a master’s degree in education at Harvard where she refined her vision and acquired the leadership tools to bring her vision to life.

Over the course of her year at Harvard, she wrote the charter for SEEQS and assembled its founding governing board. In August of 2013, SEEQS opened its doors to a class of 60 students in sixth and seventh grades. In its second year, the

school doubled the number of students and faculty and added an eighth grade class. This past May, the first graduating eighth grade class presented formal portfolios to showcase their understanding of the five core SEEQS sustainability skills: collaborating productively, managing effectively, reasoning analytically, communicating powerfully and thinking systematically.

During the challenging process of bringing SEEQS to life, Cushman-Patz recognized that a sense of community was integral to the school’s success. The practice of sustainability, she reasons, involves keen consideration of how your actions affect others. Her overarching goal is to teach students how sustainability and community work together on a small scale so they can apply this principle to the world around them. “We are not trying to bombard students with a long list of sustainability must-dos,” she clarifies. “We are a school first. Our aim is to provide the ways and means for students to come to conclusions on their own about the contributions they want to make.”

As school leader, Cushman-Patz (known as “Ms. BCP” to her students) wears a few different hats. In her executive director role, she raises funds, manages the facility, fosters community connections and works toward judicious expansion. As principal, she provides teachers with instructional leadership, handles student disciplinary issues, consults with parents and works with the Department of Education to support children with special needs. She also recruits seasoned educators with a strong presence in the community. The faculty of 22 collectively holds 17 master’s degrees collectively (three from Harvard), plus one Ph.D and two in progress.



Now in its third year, SEEQS is not immune to the financial hurdles confronting other public charter schools. Unlike regular public schools, SEEQS has to pay its own rent. It costs \$10,000 per student to run the school, leaving a \$3,500-per-student deficit after state funding. Constant fundraising is necessary for survival. SEEQS is now looking to add a high school in the near future and fingers are crossed that the state or a benefactor will step up to provide a proper facility.

The monkeypod tree is where students and teachers migrate to when they have downtime. Their shared experience is at the heart of what makes SEEQS so extraordinary. The school's community-based lessons emphasize inquiry, philosophy and reflection to foster an "intellectually safe" space where students build empathy and interact democratically. SEEQers (the commonly used term for the students) are expected to fill their toolboxes with skills from each discipline and use that knowledge to solve real-world problems.

The school's weekly schedule reflects what the founders value most in a learning environment. School days are divided into curriculum blocks dedicated to community involvement and authentic work, as opposed to busywork. The semester-long Essential Question of Sustainability (EQS) blocks are at the heart of the reimagined student experience. At the start of each term, SEEQers participate in a weeklong EQS camp, an intensive primer that involves field trips, expert interviews and brainstorming. Students enroll in one of the EQS courses chosen by the faculty and embark on a semester-long project.

In Spring 2015 the EQS themes were "How does water sustain us?" and "How does transferring knowledge worldwide help Mālama Honua?" Educators from different classes guide the students as they evaluate and interpret the questions through the lenses of science, math, English, history and the arts, adding their own twist on the topics. Throughout



the semester, students visit community partners and seek direction to refine their focus. Past trips have included an invasive algae cleanup with Mālama Maunaloa and tours of the Healthy Watershed Demonstration site at Koko Head District Park.

At the semester's end, students present their EQS projects to the school community and the public. This past spring, two students created Kokua Boards Foundation, a nonprofit that connects young, aspiring wave riders with professional surfers. One student made her own toys from recycled materials and sold them at a Hawai'i Public Charter Schools Network fundraiser. Another wrote and published a book, *The Mystery Aboard the Hokule'a*.

History teacher and EQS co-teacher Nathan Malinoski feels the school's nontraditional culture fosters empowerment. "The teaching style at SEEQS lets the kids take control in a way that builds skills of inquiry and the power of connection," he says. "These students know how to engage, how to build relationships. They look you in the eye and genuinely listen and respond."

SEEQS celebrates individuality, says Cushman-Patz, and many parents appreciate the school's efforts to create a climate of diversity and inclusiveness. Kanani Fuimaono, whose daughter, Hunter, is now a seventh grader at SEEQS, believes the emphasis on personal identity has helped her child feel accepted

and more open to learning. "This school is like a snapshot of the island, from your surfers to your anime kids, but here everybody belongs and the school really supports and respects different styles of learning," Fuimaono says. "This is a tough time for kids, so having a safe, comfortable and supportive environment is extremely important."

Cushman-Patz aims to fine-tune the SEEQS model and open additional locations on other parts of O'ahu and the neighbor islands. She envisions immersion internships for 11th and 12th graders that translate their deep understanding of sustainability issues into service with local organizations. As Cushman-Patz works towards expansion, the success of the SEEQS formula will continue to be measured by the transformations that occur in its students.

Former SEEQer Chloe Fagan, a member of the 2014 graduating eighth grade class, is a shining example of the effects of this dynamic learning environment. "Before SEEQS I was scared to talk to people and express my opinions," Fagan says. "I began to step out of my comfort zone because of the fine arts classes. I started raising my hand more and asking questions. I learned that talking to people was one of my strong suits and it came naturally. Without this school, I would still be that scared girl in the back of the class, worried that I would get teased if I raised my hand. SEEQS has prepared me to be a leader." ☺