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Performance at the high school has gone up under Wade Araki

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After years of falling enrollment, low test scores and an unfavorable reputation, a turnaround may be underway at Kaimuki High School.

Kaimuki has one of the state's highest rates of students granted geographic exemptions to attend schools outside of their district, in recent years losing 100 incoming students annually, mostly to neighboring public or private schools.

Administrators and parents say the school — with a large immigrant population and nearly two-thirds of students from low-income families — suffers from a reputation that deters some families from enrolling.

Almost 80 percent of the students are English-language learners and 65 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a key indicator of poverty. The student body includes mostly Native Hawaiian, Micronesian, Japanese, Filipino and Chinese students.

The school's test scores are bleak: Just 23 percent of students tested proficient in math last school year and 51 percent were proficient in reading.

Tensions can run high, giving the school a tough image. On a recent afternoon, a girl shouted about wanting to "scrap" with another student for fun. Kaimuki recorded 180 suspensions the year before last, the most recent data available. (That's about 50 more than the combined suspensions at the district's two other high schools, McKinley and Roosevelt, that year.)

The exodus of students has meant Kaimuki's historically higher enrollment of 1,200 to 1,500 students has dropped over time to 820 students this year. And that's resulted in fewer per-pupil dollars for the school.

"It causes a downward spiral," said Vice Principal Gary Harada. "When you have less kids, you get less resources. You can't offer things like art. We had to cut art last year."

But Kaimuki High is starting to see improvements under Principal Wade Araki, who joined the school in 2011 after helping turn around a Windward Oahu elementary school.

His track record at Benjamin Parker Elementary is impressive: The school went from having 11 percent of students proficient in math to 84 percent, and from 27 percent testing proficient in reading to 88 percent in the nine years Araki was there.

For the first time in five years, Kaimuki hasn't seen its enrollment dip.

In the classroom, the principal is leading an effort to reconfigure the high school into so-called smaller learning communities — a concept where large schools are organized into smaller units to personalize learning and improve academic achievement.

Beginning this year, the school's 170 ninth-graders make up a freshman academy — essentially a school within a school with an assistant principal, counselor and teachers assigned to the freshman class.

"If I stayed with the traditional high school model, these kids would suffer," Araki said. "We've made it so that the kids are known to the teachers. When the kids know somebody cares about them, it makes a big difference."

The effort seems to be working: The number of freshmen having to repeat ninth grade is on the decline.

Kaimuki's freshman failure rate was around 34 percent the year before Araki got to Kaimuki. It dropped to 17 percent in 2011-12, and to 11 percent last year.

"So far this year, no freshman is in jeopardy of failing," he said.

Kaimuki will expand the concept each year by adding academies for each grade level. By 2016-17, the school hopes to establish academies at all grade levels.

For the upper grades, academies will be geared toward vocational training to help guide coursework. For example, Araki said next year Kaimuki plans to add an academy focused on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) disciplines to explore careers in such areas as energy, medicine and sustainable food sources. Another academy will focus on the hospitality industry, centering on career opportunities in hotels, culinary arts and entertainment.

Araki recently visited mainland schools that have mastered the concept, including the Academies of Nashville, smaller learning communities in 13 of the city's public high schools that expose its 15,000 students to a host of career and college opportunities. The Tennessee initiative has seen improved graduation and attendance rates and a decline in expelled students.

At Kaimuki, the school also now performs monthly benchmark assessments for all freshmen and sophomores, allowing teachers to tailor lessons and supports as needed. Students also are offered more tutoring services during school breaks and credit-recovery courses after school.

As a result, the school is seeing other improvements:

» Kaimuki's cumulative grade-point average has improved to 2.07 as of the end of last school year. It was at 1.27 when Araki got there.

» The number of students having to repeat a grade has gone from more than 360 students two years ago to fewer than 75 students now.

» The school's average daily attendance has improved to 93 percent from 88 percent two years ago.

Kaimuki also started offering a college course this year through a partnership with Kapiolani Community College. The "Kaimuki to College" initiative allows students to take college-level courses — for free — on

campus after school and earn credit toward a college degree while fulfilling high school graduation requirements.

The high school is paying KCC per credit for an instructor and purchases the required textbooks.

Nineteen Kaimuki students are taking the initial course, Pacific Islanders in Hawaii, which counts as a social studies credit. A college-level religion course the school plans to add next year already has 24 students signed up.

"It helps me learn how to be a college student," said Kaimuki senior Wenmin He, who moved from China to Hawaii with his family in 2009 when he was in eighth grade and couldn't speak English. "College is not high school. It's a lot of work and you have to manage your time. Also, there is a lot of homework."

He is taking 10 college credits, attending two additional classes on the KCC campus after school, while maintaining A's in his high school classes. That sometimes means he doesn't go to bed until 3 a.m.

"To me, sleep is not that important," he said. "I believe as long as I work hard, I have a big chance to be successful because America is a country of opportunity. I want to bring my parents out of the immigrant life and don't want them to keep struggling."

He said he hopes to major in engineering and has his sights on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Harada, the vice principal, said the school hopes the community takes note of the changes being made.

"With the academies we're building and with these college courses we're offering, we're hoping to bring these kids back," Harada said.

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