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Kihei Charter boosting academic days

'Creative scheduling,' community partners parts of the strategy

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KIHEI - While state officials debate how to restore classroom days to the public school calendar, Kihei Charter School has set a goal to implement 200 student academic days next fall.

The academic schedule and the school's education philosophy will be highlighted in coming information sessions for families interested in enrollment at the island's only charter school.

Kihei Charter offers programs for public school students across the island including a virtual academy for K-8; a middle school campus on Lipoa Street for 6th- to 8th-grade; and a high school off Ohukai Road for grades 9 to 12.

Kihei Charter Executive Director Mark Christiano said enrollment in K-12 climbed from 425 in the 2008-2009 school year to about 490 this school year. The middle school campus, which offers emphasis in science and mathematics plus the arts, has carved out a niche for its first year at the Lipoa Center in spots once used by Hapa's nightclub, a Mexican restaurant and the former Title Guaranty Escrow & Title Services offices on Lipoa Street.

Middle school students are also engaged this year in building a sustainable garden behind the Lipoa Center where vegetables and other plants are being grown and lessons in science, math, aquaculture and agriculture are being incorporated.

The high school campus maintains its computer and classroom spaces in the Kihei Commercial Center off Ohukai Road.

Christiano said the virtual academy can readily accept more than the 140 students it has on its rolls. The middle school campus is filled to capacity with 155 students and will have only 30 new openings for grade 6 (the 20 5th-graders in the virtual academy have dibs in registering for the middle school).

In the high school, Christiano hopes to add as many as 60 more students in grades 9-12.

All students on the middle and high school campus will be offered an educational program with as many as 200 academic days for school year 2010-2011.

Academic days for Kihei Charter are defined as those times in which teacher and student are engaged in learning but not necessarily in the traditional setting of a classroom. "There's more to learning than sitting in a classroom," Christiano said.

"Education and learning is not confined to these walls," added Gail Weaver, Kihei Charter's assistant director.

As members of the Hawaii State Teachers Association, teachers at Kihei Charter School work under the same contract as their colleagues at public schools throughout the state. Last fall, Hawaii's public school teachers approved a two-year contract that provided for 17 furlough days this school year and next. It amounted to about an 8 percent cut in salary per year.

As a result, public school students in Hawaii recorded the lowest number of classroom days in the nation per year with 163, down from 180. So far 10 of the 17 furlough days have been implemented on Fridays, with the next one coming up March 5.

Because of its independent governance system, Kihei Charter alternated Furlough Fridays with half of its teachers working one day and the other half taking the day off. Instead of 17 academic days lost, Kihei Charter's 6th- through 12th-grade program will have only 13 days lost between teacher and student at the end of this school year.

Christiano and Weaver have come up with a similar scheduling plan for next year's furlough days while adding more academic days to the school calendar. This is made possible in a number of ways.

These include the school's ability to develop a number of community partnerships such as a learning project with the Pacific Whale Foundation and several classroom-based grants such as Project Give, which encourages middle school-age students to provide community service in their neighborhoods.

"The kids will be officially engaged for 200 days next year," Christiano said. The additional academic days will be obtained through several means including "creative scheduling" for both teachers and students; field work (students are assigned to conduct projects outside of the classroom with teacher supervision); internships (students, particularly the high schoolers obtain jobs - paid or not - in fields they're interested in pursuing); enrollment in online classes outside of Kihei Charter's offerings including Advanced

Article Photos



The Maui News s/ AMANDA COWAN photo Dan Kuhar, lead facilitator for the Kihei Charter School's Technology Engineering Arts Mathematics Science (TEAMS) Academy, instructs students from Kamalii Elementary School on Friday morning at Kalama Park during Pacific Whale Foundation's Keiki Eco Day.

Fact Box

To Learn More

Who: Kihei Charter School

What: Information sessions for school year 2010-2011

When: 6:30 p.m. March 3, 9 and 11

Where: Grades K-8 at the middle school on Lipoa Street

Grades 9-12 at the high school off Ohukai Road

For more information, call 875-0700.

Placement courses for high school-age students; and participation in Running Start, a program offered at the University of Hawaii Maui College to give high schoolers a chance to earn college credit while still in high school.

Christiano said Kihei Charter has already been operating what could be called "on demand learning," which offers both Internet and interactive education with teachers in person and online.

Parents also participate in the learning process, with online access to all lessons provided by teachers and via the assigned homework. For students without computers at home, Kihei Charter helps ensure that a student gets one.

In addition, Kihei Charter plans to offer more time for online learning by opening its computer labs at night to students. The school does not plan on using its teaching staff for supervision but rather will solicit community volunteers through its supporting nonprofit organization, the South Maui Learning Ohana.

"This is really challenging for all of us. . . . But we believe we are preparing our students for their world, not our past," Christiano said.

Last year's wait list of 150 students who wanted to enroll in both the middle and high school has been dissolved, and a new crop of registrations will be accepted beginning in March.

For more information, call the school at 875-0700, or visit its Web site: www.kiheicharter.org.

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