

Public schools face restructuring; charter school leader promises this to be best year

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Dan Kuhar, STEM lead facilitator for Kihei Charter School, sorts through library books Thursday morning while preparing for students.

The Maui News / AMANDA COWAN photo

As more Maui public schools than ever brace for federally mandated restructuring, Kihei Public Charter School opens the 2008-09 year hoping to break new ground with a record number of students.

The only charter school on the island will boast an enrollment of 430 students in grades K through 12, registered in five separate academies that serve a range of students, from those learning at home to youngsters seeking an educational emphasis in art, science and math.

"It's going to be the best year for the charter school yet," promised Gail Weaver, Kihei Charter's assistant director.

"There are a lot of positive things happening. We have great kids and great families, and we're just excited to get the new year going," she said.

Public school teachers' first official day for the new year comes this Thursday, with the schools welcoming students the week of July 28. The first day of classes varies from campus to campus, depending on which schools opt to use professional development days or waiver days so that faculty can meet prior to returning to the classroom.

Kihei Charter has chosen to open July 28.

Maui District Superintendent Bruce Anderson was in New Orleans last week with about a half-dozen principals expecting their schools to be placed into restructuring status under the federal No Child Left Behind Act because they failed to meet mandated levels in student proficiency tests multiple years in a row.

Contacted by cellular phone, Anderson said his focus this year is to assist his complex in adjusting to a private consultant required to work with schools designated for restructuring, to assist with increasing student achievement and raising test scores. The No Child Left Behind Act requires all public schools to meet adequate yearly progress based on Hawaii and national test scores with the goal of having every student proficient in math and English by the year 2014.

"The schools have made improvements, but overall they haven't hit the mark," Anderson said.

He said he wants to assure all the schools that having a new educational consultant on campus does not mean the staff has no say about its campus or its operations. "The providers, they don't come in and tell us to restructure everything," Anderson said. "The control of the school remains with the school and not the provider."

Schools expecting to have the Edison Alliance as a consultant on everything from curriculum to teaching strategies for the first time include Baldwin High School, King Kekaulike High School, Maui High School, Iao Intermediate School, Maui Waena Intermediate, Lokelani Intermediate School and Wailuku Elementary School.

Anderson has also hired two new principals in his school area - Mary Auvil at Kamalii Elementary School in Kihei, where first-ever Principal Sandra Shawhan has retired; and Leila Hayashida at Waihee Elementary School, where Faith Tokeshi also retired.

Hayashida has been on campus for a few weeks now, although her first official day at work wasn't until last week. "I'm most excited about having a really hardworking staff that has passion for their profession and for the kids," she said.

At Lahainaluna High School, where students tested last year achieved proficiency levels for the first time since No Child Left Behind was implemented, Principal Mike Nakano had been cautiously optimistic that the same results would prevail. But Lahainaluna didn't quite make it this year, having met the required benchmarks for reading, but not for math.

Lahainaluna is undergoing a few capital improvement projects this school year - the most disruptive one involving the shutdown of 23 cesspools on the campus and a hookup with the county sewer system. "It's a huge, huge job," Nakano said, adding it will take an estimated nine months to complete.

Orientation for boarders and new freshmen will take place this week, with first day of classes set for July 31.

As of Tuesday, Nakano was still looking for four teachers including one to cover special education and another as a counselor in Lahainaluna's Alternative Learning Center. "The hard part is they're not wanting to move here to Lahaina," Nakano said.

He said many of the certified teaching candidates expressed concern about the high cost of living in Hawaii and having to transfer from the Mainland to Maui.

At Haiku Elementary, Principal Bernice Takahata said she only had a "couple more" teachers to hire out of a sizable pool of applicants. "I should be set," she said.

She said she expects to meet her school's projected enrollment of 444 students, including 80 kindergartners and approximately 60 new students. First day of classes is set for July 30 at Haiku Elementary.

Takahata said dedicated teachers were already setting up their rooms this past week, and families were starting to visit the campus. "We have a lot of parent support here and we're looking forward to it again this year," she said.

Back at Kihei Charter, its newest academy is a public intermediate school that will initially accept just 6th- and 7th-graders in space leased from the Maui Academy of Performing Arts on Market Street in Wailuku. The school's 52 slots have all been filled, as well as the positions for four teachers.

Kihei Charter's Science Technology Engineering and Math Academy, situated in the Research & Technology Park in Kihei, is also full at 72 students, with a waiting list of those who hope for a place if someone else drops out. Weaver said she and her staff were overwhelmed during last spring's informational sessions that were packed with standing-room-only crowds who wanted to hear more about what the charter school had to offer.

Anderson said he would like to reiterate to parents of kindergartners that they need to register their children as soon as possible. "For some reason, every year they lag behind," he said.

No figures were available on how many students would be enrolled in the public schools this year, but Anderson said he expected it to remain flat around 20,000 or so total.

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