

HAWAII NEWS

A+ program staffing shortage leaves hundreds of Hawaii kids waiting and their parents scrambling

By [Rosemarie Bernardo](#) • Today • Updated 6:45 am

Every week since the school year began, Jessi Cook's 9-year-old daughter asks her mother why she isn't enrolled in the After-School Plus, or A+, program at Ewa Beach Elementary School where she previously had been enrolled.

A significant staffing shortage resulted in an extensive waiting list of hundreds of children in the after-school program that includes Cook's daughter and 5-year-old son.

"I've had to explain to her, 'I'm trying to get you into A+.' My daughter is like, 'Why am I not in A+?'" said Cook, noting her daughter often tells her how much she misses hanging out with her friends there as well as the teachers who help her with homework.

Cook's children are among the hundreds of elementary school-age children on the waitlist for the A+ program. The state Department of Education relies heavily on private providers to maintain the program, which has been available to families since 1989.

At least 2,600 elementary school-age children — nearly 1,600 at the A+ program held at public schools on Oahu, served by YMCA of Honolulu, and 1,000 at schools on four islands, served by Kamaaina Kids — are on the waitlist in the current school year. The two organizations are considered the program's major providers.

Other providers that the Education Department works closely with include Dream Co., Moiliili Community Center on Oahu and Maui YMCA.

The A+ program was created to reduce the high incidence of latchkey children and provide affordable child care in a safe environment, according to the Education Department website. The monthly enrollment cost is \$120 per child; they receive help with their homework and participate in enrichment and physical activities.

Both the YMCA and Kamaaina Kids are seeking approximately 60 to 70 people to fill part-time group leader positions to shorten their waitlists.

For every group leader hired, that's 20 kids off the waitlist, said Cassidy Inamasu, executive director of the YMCA Atherton branch. The nonprofit organization is offering a \$250 hiring bonus to attract people.

The current waitlist for the A+ program is the longest Inamasu has seen in the 18 years he's been employed with the YMCA, the main provider on the island. He said Leeward Oahu and Windward Oahu are priority areas for filling vacancies.

Inamasu said now that parents are going back to work, the lack of child care is incredibly difficult. Families are scrambling for child care, relying on extended family members while dealing with the challenges of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

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Like many parents, Cook, a mother of five who resides in Ewa Beach and works as a project manager at the Department of Defense at Schofield Barracks in Wahiawa, turned to the A+ program for after-school child care for her two elementary school-age children. Her two youngest children, who are 3 and 18 months old, are in day care, and her 14-year-old son is in middle school. Her husband is active-duty in the Air Force.

Because of the waitlist, Cook switched from a full-time position to part time, a position she had to fight for so she can care for her children who are on the A+ program waiting list.

The part-time agreement with her employer, however, is only until the end of the year.

"They only agreed to go through December, so I don't even know what will happen after Christmas if we don't have A-plus yet," she said. "For my family A-plus is affordable. It's held in a convenient location, and more importantly, my kids love it."

Dana Vela, president and chief executive officer of Kamaaina Kids, said the organization is doing everything it can do to reduce the waitlist: hire a recruiter and contact colleges and organizations that include the Hawaii Employees' Retirement System and the American Association of Retired Persons-Hawaii.

Part of the challenge to fill vacancies, Vela said, is that the vacant positions needed to shorten the waitlist are part time. The nonprofit organization is also competing with the restaurant and hotel industries to hire people.

"We can train people if we have people to hire. We have the infrastructure to make sure there is intensive training," she added. "We want people who love children."

Kamaaina Kids is also offering a \$75 new-hire bonus, education reimbursement benefits and a child care discount of up to 75%. It is also working on a plan to offer student loan repayment benefits.

Experts think the demand for after-school child care for K-6 students is much higher than apparent, as there are families who opt to not put their child's name on a waiting list once they hear of the hundreds of students who are already on the list.

Paula Adams, executive director of Hawaii Afterschool Alliance, said, "They say, 'Why bother putting my kids on the waiting list when I know my kids are never going to get in?'"

Adams believes there are approximately 4,000 to 5,000 elementary school-age children in need of child care. Other organizations that operate their own after-school programs, such as the Boys & Girls Club, also have a waiting list, she said.

"The families are being put in this horrible situation where they have to choose between quitting their jobs or leaving their kids by themselves," Adams said.

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>> To apply for an A+ group leader position at public schools served by Kamaaina Kids, visit bit.ly/3iDQ5zs.



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