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EDITORIAL | OUR VIEW

Editorial: Reach out to hire afterschool help

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School kids, who can't seem to catch a break after a year of COVID-19 upheaval, are on the losing end again, with a persistent shortage of workers to make an important program possible again.

After-School Plus, better known by the abbreviation, A+, has been a mainstay of the state's school enrichment services for the past three decades. For elementary school-age children, it's provided recreation, socialization and academic support after classes let out each day, reducing the number of "latchkey kids" at loose ends until their parents get home from work.

Now, because of pandemic-fueled labor shortages, as many as 2,600 of them statewide are missing out again, languishing on waitlists. The disruption affects the daily routines of families across communities, so addressing the need will take a community effort.

Put another way: It's time for institutions, organizations and community groups to get the word out on open positions. And it would help if officials ensure that resources are brought to bear in improving pay rates and, thus, the number of quality applicants.

To start with, the links to the job information: The contractors are YMCA of Honolulu (www.ymcahonolulu.org/careers/job-opportunities) and Kama'aina Kids (kamaainakids.applicantstack.com/x/openings).

Each of these nonprofits are looking to fill 60-70 group leader positions, part-time jobs. Just as illustration of the urgency, the Y has posted a limited-time offer for hiring bonuses.

They've hit on one route to a solution: Improve the pay to make the jobs more competitive. State Rep. Amy Perruso's history as a teacher drew her interest to this issue, and she is advocating for public school officials to tap into federal dollars that can help to subsidize higher pay for the group leaders.

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One source would be the \$80 million set aside for child care in the federal American Rescue Plan Act. One category to benefit from these ARPA funds would be stabilization grants that would go to cover personnel costs for A-Plus programs. The application process for the funds is not yet open, Perruso said, but they certainly provide an option.

She also underscored that other after-school programs statewide — such as the Boys & Girls Clubs and After School All Stars Hawaii, which partner on school programs — are facing similar problems and could qualify for aid.

For the near term, though, the problem may not be as much the pay as the lack of awareness of the job opportunities. This is

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Additionally, service clubs at high schools have members who could be recruited for the work, especially those near A+ centers.

And to build capacity for the longer term, these programs could serve as teaching internships for those pursuing education and early-education credentials at colleges and universities.

It would require more time than the current crisis would allow, but the state Department of Education could work to coordinate or expand on any connections in this area. Children hoping to enroll in future academic years would benefit.

Taking the larger view, consider the impact on the parents or guardians of the children who have been waitlisted. Some of them could resume full-time work only after school reopened, and they were counting on afterschool support being in place as well.

Hawaii's economy will be limping along until all such gaps in services are patched. That makes this labor shortage everyone's problem, and there's really no time to lose in getting it fixed.



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