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## HAWAII NEWS

# Federal funds to offset \$80 monthly hike in A+ program

By [Rosemarie Bernardo](#) • Today • Updated 12:50 am

A new \$80 monthly fee increase for the state Department of Education's After School-Plus, or A+, program to take effect Monday will not affect families thanks to federal monies that will be used to offset the increase.

A combination of COVID-19-related budget increases, rising operational costs and staffing challenges prompted the education department to increase the program's monthly fee to \$200 per child from \$120. The education department is utilizing federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund to cover the fee increase for the remainder of the school year.

The A+ program's \$200 monthly fee will take full effect in the 2022-2023 school year.

In a statement, interim superintendent Keith Hayashi said, "This change will help to increase and sustain staffing for our A+ programs, which will in turn help to ensure that after-school support and services can be provided to any student or family who needs it. The additional families can also be used to further after-school enrichment learning opportunities to support both academics and social-emotional learning."

Program providers are grateful for the monthly fee increase which will allow them to offer competitive wages to attract qualified staff. Currently, hundreds of children have been placed on A+ program's waiting list because of a lack of staffing.

Dana Vela, president and chief executive officer of Kamaaina Kids, said the organization has been asking for an increase because the \$120 monthly fee limited its ability to pay program employees a competitive wage. "The increase that the state just put through is really a dream come true. It's such a positive thing for children and families."

Kamaaina Kids and the YMCA, both of which are considered the program's largest providers, are each seeking approximately 60 to 70 people to fill part-time group leader and site coordinator positions to help reduce the program's current wait list of more than 2,500 children.

Shortly after the education department's recent announcement of the fee increase, Kamaaina Kids advertised on social media job openings with the new wages it is now offering. "Within the first 24 hours, (the woman posting the ad) had 30 responses," Vela said. "Usually, she's lucky to get three."

The organization is now offering a starting pay of \$17 an hour for site coordinators, an increase from the previous \$13 to \$14 hourly wage. The new hourly pay for group leaders is \$14 to \$16 compared to the previous \$11 to \$12 hourly wage.

"We're super excited," Vela said. "The people that work directly with the children are the most important positions in the company. And this really allows us to value them, not just emotionally, but also financially."

With the A+ program's monthly fee increase, Vela said Kamaaina Kids also can beef up its benefits package. Part-time employees can now participate in college tuition reimbursement or student loan repayment of \$1,000 per semester.

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Greg Waibel, chief executive officer of the YMCA, said the organization is appreciative of Hayashi for helping to shepherd through the transition of the program's new monthly fee. "We have been in a place where the current fee rate of \$120 was not enough to support the cost of the program."

The last fee increase for the program took place in the 2015-2016 school year when the education department implemented a fee increase over the course of three school years. The program's \$85 monthly fee at the time increased to \$100 the following school year, \$110 in the 2017-2018 school year and \$120 for the current school year.

The A+ program currently services about 15,600 public schools and is sustained through student fees and subsidies from the state Department of Human Services.

The education department works closely with private partners to run the program. Nearly 150 sites are operated by providers and 44 sites are run by the education department.

Prior to the monthly fee increase, the YMCA recently had implemented an hourly wage increase for employees for up to \$16 per hour, from up to \$11 an hour, in an effort to attract eligible workers. "We knew that we need to be competitive in this marketplace," Waibel said.

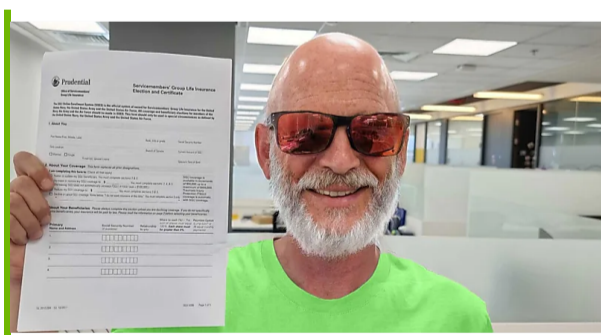
In addition to the wage increase, the nonprofit organization is offering a \$250 new hire bonus and a \$100 community referral to anyone who refers someone to apply.

Paula Adams, executive director of the Hawaii Afterschool Alliance, said, "We're very happy about this solution that the Department of Education found."

Hawaii's A+ program's long waiting list parallels wait lists at after-school care programs nationwide, leaving parents scrambling to find child care. "It's happening everywhere in the country. We need to find creative solutions to support programs the best way we can so they can provide more services to the families," Adams said.

"The parents are put in this horrible situation of quitting their jobs or leaving their kids alone and I think that's something no parent should go through," she added. "The parents should have peace of mind that their kids are being taken care of while they're at work."

Once the federal subsidy for the A+ program's monthly fee increase ends at the end of the current school year, eligible families who plan to enroll their children in the program for the 2022-2023 school year and are seeking assistance may apply for subsidies via the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program or Child Care Connections Hawaii.



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