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Saint Mark and Kamehameha Schools fill need for pre-K education



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Saint Mark Head of School David Gaudi Jr. and Kamehameha School CEO, Jack Wong partnered to make pre-K education more accessible on the Windward side.

COURTESY SAINT MARK LUTHERAN SCHOOL



By [Megan Fernandes](#) – Reporter, Pacific Business News

Saint Mark Lutheran School completed its \$4.6 million early education building in July, which has been in the pipeline since 2012. The new building will be able to seat between 60 and 70 pre-K students.

The community and donors raised enough to build the 11,000-square-foot early learning resource center, adding a pre-K program to Saint Mark Schools' previous K-8 structure.

“There was a great need for it in the Windward community,” said [David Gaudi Jr.](#), head of Saint Mark School. “That is why the community raised millions for this.”

The new space includes classrooms, collaboration space, a playground and administrative offices.

The cost of private school has caused some like Saint Francis School to close. The school, which was founded in 1924 and served 442 students, shut down after this past school year due to its financial woes.

“We built a building and a program in challenging times but we wanted the community to know that not every school is having a hard time,” Gaudi said.

A needs assessment on the Windward side showed that there are two children for every one seat available.

“One of the biggest challenges we face are enrollment predictions due to the cost of tuition and the high cost of living,” Gaudi said.

Partnership to close the education gap

According to Gaudi, more than 17% of school-age children in Hawaii attend private schools, which is double the national rate.

A 2017 early-learning needs assessment showed an overall shortage of early childhood seats across the state. It showed a demand that exceeds capacity, and barriers that prevent private schools from meeting that demand — such as lack of facilities and high expansions costs.

Kamehameha Schools partnered with Saint Mark School to help ensure accessibility to an early learning center for Native Hawaiian families in need by promising \$320,000 in scholarship money to hand out on a needs-basis.

“It’s a huge opportunity for a three-year-old whose family may not be able to afford private school education,” Gaudi said. “Getting them off on the right start at a young age sets them up to do well in school, graduate from college and sets the stage for success after school.”

This is the first partnership of its kind that Kamehameha has done specifically for a pre-school program.

Kamehameha Schools has been partnering with Saint Mark School since 2008, by giving incoming kindergarteners of Hawaiian families scholarships to go to other private schools like Saint Mark School.

“It’s been a very successful partnership,” Gaudi said. “About 28% of our student body is a part of that program.”

[Jamee Miller](#), Kamehameha Schools’ regional director for Koolau and Waialua, said the partnership began as mostly transactional, but the most recent collaboration efforts for the pre-K program have strengthened that relationship between the two private education entities.

“We are told by families that Saint Mark School is a school of choice for Native Hawaiian families in the area,” Miller said. “It services the Windward region and is far-reaching. We found synergy that aligned with each other’s goals.”

Support for early learning education is a new model for Kamehameha Schools. It includes “wrap around support” for Hawaiian families — meaning families of pre-K students are educated on resources for education opportunities, application assistance, financial aid, medical needs and other topics.

According to Miller, the partnerships between Kamehameha Schools and other private schools have become an “intimate investment to create customized solutions to better serve the community.”

Because enrollment, especially for early learning education, is higher in the private school sector than the number of seats these institutions can provide, Miller said that the only solution was adding more seats — something that was not feasible for Kamehameha Schools. So when word got out of Saint Mark School’s early learning center and program, it seemed like a natural alliance to Kamehameha Schools.

“Part of what attracted us to support the early learning center was that Saint Mark School did a great job of raising their own scholarship funds to offset enrollment of their K-8 programs,” Miller said. “We could leverage their funding with ours.”

Miller said that initiative to “speak to the overall well-being of the child” is a driver of their 2020 strategic plan.

“Data shows that the earlier a student can be in a formal learning setting, the more successful they will be,” she said.

There are several challenges still facing the private education sector. According to Gaudi, the increase of growth in charter schools has been a growing challenge for private institutions, especially ones within close proximity.

Miller said that systematic challenges such as housing, cost of living, homelessness and other factors that can affect the child’s ability to perform, are also a priority for Kamehameha Schools to address.

“We cannot solve this ourselves but we are partnering with solution-focused partners,” Miller said.

Kamehameha Schools’ preschools served 1,632 students in 2018-2019. Its Pauahi Keiki Scholarship program awarded 3,467 scholarships to students in need, and there were 4,800 children in community early learning collaborations in public preschools, family child interaction learning programs, infant toddler programs and other early childhood programming.