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Ruth Ann Babas teaches her third-grade music class at Island Pacific Academy in Kapolei. Said Keri Magaoay of Makakilo, who now has four children enrolled at the school, "The curriculum is challenging and it's fun. They have full art classes, music, foreign language, PE."

The private school pull

New institutions are opening and older ones are expanding to meet the growing demands of families

STORY SUMMARY »

Hawaii has one of the highest rates of private school enrollment in the country, and that figure has been growing as new campuses open.

Today, 18 percent of students in the state attend private schools, up from 16 percent a decade ago.

Jacqui Pirl, author of "The Parent's Guide to Private Schools in Hawaii," says publicity about low test scores could be contributing to a "brain drain" from public campuses. "I think that feeds on itself," she said.

But she and other observers note that public schools serve students of all backgrounds, languages and abilities, so their scores should not be compared to selective schools'.

"The public schools have to work with what they have, and they still do great things," said Roslyn Chun, an architect whose children attend Niu Valley Middle School and Aina Haina Elementary.

[FULL STORY »](#)



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Students Catherine Mount, left, Aiyana Adams, Aidan Johnson and Wesley Harrison create a paper deer head using cutouts of tracings of their hands and feet in an elementary science class at Island Pacific Academy.

By Susan Essoyan
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When Island Pacific Academy opened in Kapolei in 2004, Keri and Barry Magaoay were so impressed that they switched their children from public school, joining a growing trend of families choosing private schools in Hawaii.

"We were so thrilled at what we saw at IPA, and it's gotten better and better every year," said Keri Magaoay of Makakilo, who now has four children at the independent school. "The curriculum is challenging and it's fun. They have full art classes, music, foreign language, PE."

The rate of students enrolled in private schools compared with total enrollment has gradually risen to 18 percent during the last decade in Hawaii, up from 16 percent in 1997. That is one of the highest rates in the country, according to a Star-Bulletin analysis of 2006 data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Only Delaware and Washington, D.C., topped it, with 19 percent. The national average is 11 percent.

Private schools have historically played a big role in Hawaii education, anchored by Punahou, Iolani and Kamehameha schools, all founded in the 1800s. The recent upswing in private enrollment is reflected in the opening of Kamehameha campuses on Maui and the Big Island, with 2,100 students, along with Island Pacific Academy on Oahu, all meeting pent-up demand beyond urban Honolulu.

Island Pacific, which draws largely from fast-growing Kapolei and Ewa, has jumped to 630 students this year from 191 students in 2004. It expects another 100 next year when it adds its first 11th-grade class.

"In the spring of 2005, we changed our original business plan for the elementary school from two sections of 20 kids per grade to three sections," said Headmaster Daniel White. "That was in response to the market."

Jacqui Pirl, author of "The Parent's Guide to Private Schools in Hawaii," said that publicity about low test scores in Hawaii's public schools could be contributing to a "brain drain" of bright scholars and promising athletes to private schools. High real-estate values might also make more people feel they can afford tuition payments.

"When the test scores come out, it makes headlines, it's an attention grabber, it raises the orange flag on public schools in Hawaii, and I think that feeds on itself," said Pirl, whose children attend both public and private schools. "There is a huge snowball effect."

Statewide, roughly 39,500 students were enrolled in private school in the last school year, up from 36,600 in 1997-98, according to the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools. Meanwhile, public school enrollment slipped over the same period to 179,200 from a peak of 189,300, generally tracking the trend in births statewide, with a five-year lag.

But the growth in private school enrollment might be tapering off. It has remained at 18 percent of total enrollment for three years, but the private school population fell in 2005-06 along with public school enrollment. And the number of children leaving public schools for private schools has held steady over the last three years, said Tom Saka, information specialist at the Hawaii Department of Education.

Many parents pull their kids out of public school as they approach middle and high school. Mark Cusmano, a single parent, moved his daughter from Maemae Elementary, a public school in Nuuanu, to St. Andrew's Priory. His son will leave Maemae for Mid-Pacific Institute next year when he enters fourth grade.

"They're of an age when they're reaching middle school, where it is much more important that the whole environment is college-oriented," Cusmano said. He teaches at Hawaii Pacific University, works extra jobs to cover costs like tuition but still finds time to volunteer at Maemae to tutor kids who are having trouble.

"I see the teachers are overburdened," said Cusmano as his children practiced soccer at Makiki District Park on a recent afternoon. "You have a whole range of students in the classroom. It's very difficult for even the best and most accomplished teacher to help each of those students on an individual basis."

The outflow of bright students to private schools as they move up beyond elementary school tends to depress public school test scores in the higher grades, educators say. Those lower scores can scare off other parents, feeding the cycle.

"Our public schools provide the fundamentals to many, many kids who jump into the private school system at middle or high school," said John Hammond, vice principal at McKinley High School. "That hurts our test scores in the upper grades. It's hard to build a winning team when you're losing some of your better players."

Ironically, Hammond believes that McKinley and other schools across the state are offering students a stronger education than ever, with clearer standards and better teaching techniques. Campbell High School in Ewa Beach just received approval to offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, a rigorous curriculum used at Mid-Pacific Institute and on tap for Island Pacific Academy. Another public school, Niu Valley Middle, is piloting the International Baccalaureate Middle Years program this year.

"I've been at this for 37 years," said McKinley's Hammond, a veteran educator. "Overall, academically, in terms of what goes on in the classroom between the child and teacher, we've never done better."

His school has one of the highest enrollments of English Language Learners in the state, and significant numbers of students with special needs and living in poverty. "When you crank out the scores, that's not something people would see," he said.

"We try our best to be all things to all people," he said. "We've got an excellent gifted/talented-type program. Our students can even take courses here for college credit. We probably offer 15 to 18 different sports. We've got a good band and a good music department. We've got a finance academy for kids interested in that."

Roslyn Chun, an architect, and her husband, Daven, a physician, both graduated from public schools in Hawaii and are sticking with that tradition. Their children are at Aina Haina Elementary

and Niu Valley Middle schools.

"So many of our friends send their children to private schools," said Chun, a McKinley graduate. "We want to believe in the public school system. It's really what the child makes of it."

"There's a lot of really bright, hard-working kids that come out of the public school system," she said. "The private schools hand-pick who they want. The public schools have to work with what they have, and they still do great things."

Hawaii school enrollment

The rate of students choosing private elementary and secondary schools in Hawaii has gradually risen to 18 percent.

School Year	Private	Public	Private enrollment as a percentage of total enrollment
2006-07	39,555	179,234	18%
2005-06	39,018	181,355	18%
2004-05	40,448	181,897	18%
2003-04	38,075	182,434	17%
2002-03	38,283	182,798	17%
2001-02	37,821	183,629	17%
2000-01	36,616	183,520	17%
1999-00	36,311	185,036	16%
1998-99	36,702	187,395	16%
1997-98	36,723	189,281	16%

Note: Private school enrollment figures include some preschool classes. Public enrollment starts at kindergarten.

Sources: *Hawaii Association of Independent Schools; Hawaii Department of Education.*

Public vs. Private in Hawaii schools

Hawaii has one of the highest rates of private school enrollment in the country.

Highest private enrollment

19%	19%	18%
Delaware	Washington, D.C.	Hawaii

Lowest private enrollment

4%	4%	5%
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Utah Montana Nevada

Figures represent the ratio of private school enrollment to total school enrollment in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Source: Star-Bulletin analysis of Census Bureau data from the 2006 American Community Survey.

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