

Breaking Barriers, Building Futures

The Exceptional Ohana of Excellence Academy at Waipahu High School

"Ohana means family, and family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten"

While it is the only academy at Waipahu High School (WHS) that serves self-contained, non-diploma track students on Individualized Education Programs, the Ohana of Excellence Academy (OEA) has put in place unique systems and initiatives that prioritize their students' safety and facilitate their inclusion within the larger Waipahu family. OEA supports students in grades 9-12 and provides extended support for an additional four years, allowing them to remain enrolled as needed until the day before their 22nd birthday. Experiential learning activities are a part of all students' curriculum, fostering independence and community involvement.

The teaching team's description of themselves as a family is more than just a worn-out saying. Their concern for students begins even before the students arrive at Waipahu. The transition from middle school to high school represents one of the most significant educational shifts in a young person's life. For students with special needs, this transition can present unique challenges that require careful planning, dedicated support, and effective strategies. Leading up to the incoming 9th grade registration, the OEA team and Waipahu Intermediate School (WIS) team work together to discuss rising freshmen and to plan for the incoming class. Accompanied by the familiar faces of their WIS teachers, the 8th graders visit each academy class to experience the lessons and activities firsthand. The eighth graders' introduction to the OEA culminates in an on-campus tour of the academy and the greater Waipahu campus. Student Ambassadors from OEA take part by sharing stories of their Pathway. Finally, the 8th graders, along with their parents and teachers, complete a registration card to show which OEA pathway they are most interested in joining. This interaction facilitates the transition, thereby mitigating the challenges of the shift from middle to high school.

NCAC Reviewers noted, '...It is evident that both students and educators feel a strong sense of belonging and pride in their affiliation with the academy. The genuine desire to see students thrive is reflected in the academy's culture, operations, and daily interactions.'

The OEA has two Pathways: Program and Competitive. Students in the Program Pathway have severe to moderate disabilities ranging from 12-months to 2nd grade. The Ohana of Excellence Academy's Program pathway empowers students to achieve independence and reach their full potential by immersing students in authentic Project Based Learning (PBL) experiences. By aligning projects with individual education plans, personal, and vocational goals, students develop essential life skills. Through hands-on collaboration and community engagement, they build confidence, independence, and a strong foundation for future success.

Students entering the Competitive pathway select a "Training Center" during registration. These students have greater independence, academic abilities ranging from kindergarten to 5th grade, and

work toward competitive employment when they leave Waipahu. The Ohana of Excellence Academy's Training Centers empower students by providing hands-on opportunities to gain real-world experiences. The Centers offer comprehensive vocational training in various fields, including the Café (Barista, Cashier, Food Station, Server, etc.), Services (includes building maintenance and landscaping), Bookstore and Printing (Sales Associate, Printshop, etc.). Through personalized instruction and real-life simulations, the academy prepares students for successful integration into the workforce, fostering independence and confidence in their abilities.

NCAC Reviewers noted, The academy, in collaboration with the Advisory Board, has successfully developed and implemented micro-credential certifications, demonstrating a strong commitment to equipping students with industry-relevant skills...The academy is also to be commended for providing access to an appropriate early college course, as well as opportunities for all students to complete a portfolio and capstone project."

As with all successful academies, the active involvement of advisory board members, including business, community, post-secondary partners, and parents, is key to the OEA's success. Advisory board members play a pivotal role in shaping the educational experiences and opportunities available to students. Through guest speakers, field trips, industry mentoring, skills training, and mock interviews, advisory boards offer a variety of experiences that enrich the students' learning journey. Businesses also provide externships for teachers, enabling them to deepen their knowledge and skills in a particular field. This professional development for teachers ensures they are well-equipped to create engaging and relevant learning experiences for their students.

NCAC Reviewers notes, "The academy is to be commended for its deep understanding of the intent behind the academy model and the National Standards of Practice (NSOPs), as demonstrated by its thoughtful adaptation to meet the unique needs of its student population. Both volunteers and staff report feeling well-prepared for their roles. Interviews and evidence reveal a strong, enthusiastic, and deeply committed Board supporting the academy."

Were the story of Ohana of Excellence to end here, it would still be an exceptional one. But there is more. The team could have been satisfied with their program. Yet, they were confident that they could achieve a higher standard. The team didn't want the OEA students to be set apart from the rest of Waipahu. That's when this remarkable academy became exceptional. Academy Principal Brandi Yagi reflected, "To truly prepare our students for a life after high school, we cannot operate separately from the rest of the school. OEA is blessed because we are part of a larger school community that sees us as a part of the Waipahu family, not separate. There are obvious connections between what our students are working on and how it connects to what other academies are doing. All we have to do is ask. The other academies always embrace and welcome partnerships with us."

The Academy of Industrial and Engineering Technology and OEA collaborate on multiple projects, including "Suds for Success," a work-based learning experience where from OEA provide car washing services, while AIET students inspect tire pressure and fluid levels. The two academies are also working together on renovations, which include constructing and installing cabinets for the Cane Café. OEA's Bookstore and Printing Program works with the Academy of Arts and Communications (AAC) faculty to develop designs. A future project will have OEA students teaching AAC students how to screen shirts.

Many academies invite OEA students to take part in their college and career fairs. Through this collaboration among academies, a genuine sense of inclusion is cultivated, where special needs students are valuable members of the school community, rather than just being physically present. Waipahu has transitioned from mere compliance to a comprehensive school-wide strategy that fosters authentic connections with students and families, fostering a feeling of inclusivity for all.

In May 2025, OEA made history when they were the first fully self-contained SPED class to take an Early College class and receive college credit. Despite the challenges, the students completed the “Professional Employment Preparation” course at Hawaii's Windward Community College, aimed at enhancing real-world employment skills and confidence in the workplace. Eunice Fukunaga, director of Waipahu's Early College Director, talked about the significance of the college-level course, “The goal for our students is to obtain full-time employment. That's why we thought it would be perfect because it's professional employment preparation. They take the knowledge and the skills that they learn, like resume building, interview skills, and use those skills to go out and seek employment.” Principal Zachary Sheets added, “It's very important that we offer this to our OEA students so that they have the same opportunity as everyone else. And now we're proud to say that every single academy on our campus has early college opportunities for their students.” Seeing proud parents and beaming students, Sheets continued, “When you saw the students' parents tearing up because their students are going to have this opportunity. I think you know how special it is,” said Sheets. Breaking stereotypes and barriers is just the next step to “show them it *is* possible.”

In 2024, after completing the rigorous National Standards of Practice (NSOP) Review Process, the National Career Academy Coalition (NCAC) granted the Ohana of Excellence Academy the National Career Academy Model with Distinction status, the highest designation the NCAC offers. At the 2025 national conference, NCAC presented the inaugural North Star Award to the Ohana of Excellence Academy. The award recognizes an academy or school that is a guiding force that serves as a source of direction, clarity, and inspiration for others seeking the way.

The Ohana of Excellence Academy often uses the “Ohana means family” quote from “Lilo and Stitch” as a foundational philosophy. This quote encapsulates the essence of the Academy's approach to education, emphasizing the importance of family-like bonds within the school community. The movie portrays Stitch's long journey, a path that ultimately leads to his acceptance and integration into a family. This mirrors the Academy's mission to create an inclusive environment where every student feels accepted and valued. For as long as there were academies, researchers asked students to describe how it differs from other programs. The recurring word was, “family.” This sentiment is not just a superficial tagline but a deeply ingrained part of the Academy's culture. The structure creates a close-knit educational community that nurtures its members, fostering growth, acceptance, and development. This nurturing environment is designed to support students academically, socially, and emotionally, ensuring that they have the resources and support they need to succeed. Among the best, the Ohana of Excellence Academy stands out.
