All Aboard: Hopping Back Into a Boarding School Model

BY KIM NGUYEN, DEAN OF RESIDENTIAL PROGRAMS, ‘IOLANI SCHOOL (HI)

Founded in 1863, ‘Iolani School has a rich and diverse history. Deep within that history is the fact that ‘Iolani started as a boarding school and offered boarding through 1959. In the decades since, our Honolulu-based school continue to grow in both reputation and size to become a well-respected K–12 day school with more than 2,100 students. Then, in 2018, ‘Iolani implemented a new element of our strategic plan that brought back a piece of school history we welcomed our first group of boarding students in nearly 60 years.

In some ways, the task was monumental. In others, it was an easy transition. With all the unpredictability and challenges of the pandemic, we’ve had a chance to learn and adjust. It has definitely been an adventure. Based on our experiences, my top advice for schools looking to add boarding is:

Focus on the why.
This helps with marketing and building a strong pipeline of applicants. Hawaii is not the typical area you think of for boarding school. For us, boarding extends the opportunity for an ‘Iolani education to students beyond Hawaii. From the beginning, our focus has been to keep the number of boarding students intentionally small to allow us to really get to know and support each student.

Be mindful of the culture shift required.
Boarding requires shifts in culture and mindset—and a commitment to integration between day school and boarding students. Most importantly, keep in mind that you won’t have everything figured out in year one. I’ve been delightfully surprised to find an amazing network of other schools and people willing to share insights and advice. Looking ahead, I’m excited to be a resource for schools and admission directors as they build out their boarding strategies.

Educate the community.
This creates trust and loyalty. During our first year, we had no dorms, so students lived in faculty and staff housing while dorms were built. When the pandemic moved us into virtual learning, our boarding students returned home or moved to homestays due to travel restrictions. Even when our school reopened in September 2020, many of our boarding students continued virtual learning until they were able to return to Hawaii.

Through all the ups and downs, our number of boarding students has increased—from our first group of 34 high school students in 2018 to 90 boarding students starting the 2022–2023 school year. We’ve also been able to tap into our strong international alumni network and proximity to Southeast Asia, which, combined with the school’s unique culture and reputation, has helped us attract a diverse group of students.

Kim Nguyen has led efforts to develop and grow the recently reinstated boarding program for grades 9–12. Prior to joining ‘Iolani, Kim served as Director of International Recruitment and Support at her alma mater, Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA. Under her leadership, Kim established an international student program and grew the international student population from 6 to 78 students from 15 countries in 3 years. Before her career in admissions began, Kim taught ESL in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, for three years, which is where she credits the origin of her love for international education.