

# WHAT IS SCHOOL LIKE?

Students and families who come from the Freely Associated States (FAS) of the Pacific—the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of Palau—have diverse schooling experiences that influence how they interact, adapt, and contribute to education environments outside of the FAS.

## ISLAND GEOGRAPHY SHAPES STUDENTS' SCHOOL EXPERIENCES



### ISLANDS AND ATOLLS

Residents of the FAS live on islands and atolls. The largest islands, with a land area of 129 square miles, are Pohnpei (in FSM) with 30 schools and Babeldaob (in Palau) with 15 schools. The smallest atoll is Namdik (in the Marshall Islands) with a land area of one square mile and one school.



### WEATHER

Lower-lying islands and atolls of the FAS are sensitive to great fluctuations in rainfall, temperature, and coastal sea levels. Extreme natural events, such as droughts, flooding, typhoons, tsunamis, and king tides, often disrupt the academic calendar.



### SCHOOL ACCESS

Families often need to send students from outer or neighboring islands to another island or another state or country for middle or high school because on-island schools may only support elementary students. Transportation to another island might include passenger-cargo ships, small propeller planes, motorboats within a lagoon, or a commercial flight.



### LESSONS

The physical features of islands and atolls factor heavily into everyday life in the FAS and can serve as elements in teaching that contextualize and support student learning. Island geography and weather also provide opportunities for developing heightened skills that connect students and educators to their local ecosystems.

## DIFFERING EDUCATION SYSTEMS SHAPE STUDENTS' SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

### SCHOOL PATHWAYS

Both public and private education are available across the FAS. Public schools serve K-12 and are managed by each country's national department or ministry of education. Families may choose to send students to private schools based on religious background, perceptions of private education, or family connections. Each country has at least one community college that serves students from across the region and is reviewed by a U.S. accrediting agency.



### EDUCATION MODELS

Education systems have existed for millennia in the Pacific, with knowledge being passed through oral traditions and mentorship models. However, formal school systems in the FAS today generally follow U.S. education K-12 structures and models—including standardized curriculum, assessments, and accountability systems for students and educators—because of the United States' trusteeship of the region following World War II, education funding through the Compacts of Free Association, and religious organizations' education initiatives. (Taira, 2020)



### MOBILITY

Students' experiences from K-12 to postsecondary education often include moving between different islands, states, and countries. Community obligations or family needs may prompt students to transfer schools mid-year or miss part of the school year. Students may face challenges adapting to their new school's curriculum, language of instruction, and course sequencing.



# A DAY AT SCHOOL IN THE FAS



## CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Physical classroom environments vary depending on which islands/atolls they live and which schools they attend. A multi-story school building might be the largest structure on an island, and in other places, a school may consist of one room. Student desks or tables may be arranged in rows or in groups, but some classrooms may not have much furniture, so students may sit on the floor. Classroom decorations are often content-related but may be limited based on school resources.



## COMMUTE

The FAS are situated across many thousands of islands and atolls, so students and teachers often must travel to and from their home islands for school. Students' daily commute could include a school bus ride from one side of the island to the other or a boat ride across the lagoon. A flight on an island-hopping plane or a one-day to two-week-long voyage on a cargo ship might be the only means of transportation for students who move to attend school on another island. These students may live with extended family, with host families, or in school dormitories and may not return home for weeks, months, or years.



## EXTRACURRICULARS

Extracurricular activities are popular among students and faculty, and whole-school activities are essential community events. Local and cross-region annual competitions, such as speech and debate, are held in high esteem. Large cultural events and exhibitions in which schools organize performances or competitions for the community are often highlights of the school year. Sports are often played for fun outside of school, like baseball, volleyball, and basketball, although inter-school team competition is not common.



## LANGUAGE

Students' language and multilingual environments influence how they have experienced school in their home islands or other FAS locations where they attend school. Language of instruction policies and practices (in local, state, national languages, which may include English) vary across the islands, schools, and grade levels. Local and foreign teachers also have a wide variety of language backgrounds (for example, the teacher may only speak English or the local language of the island or may speak multiple languages with varying proficiency), which can affect how multilingual students learn and understand academic content.

Reflecting on the geography and education systems of the FAS with school leaders and community members can build educators' contextual knowledge so that they can better support students in transitioning to new school systems.

- How does the student population of your school, district, or state compare to the student's home island or country? Does the student-teacher ratio differ? What challenges might a new student face given these differences?
- Does the student come from a more populated island/atoll (for example, the capital city or a large town) or from a more remote island/atoll? What island-to-island school transitions might the student have faced in the FAS before arriving to their new location?
- Did the student attend public and/or private schools, and how does public and private education differ in their home island (for example, language, curriculum, student-teacher ratio)? How might this experience affect their transition to your classroom?

**3,000+** students and **230+** teachers in Palau public schools across 10 islands (2020/21)

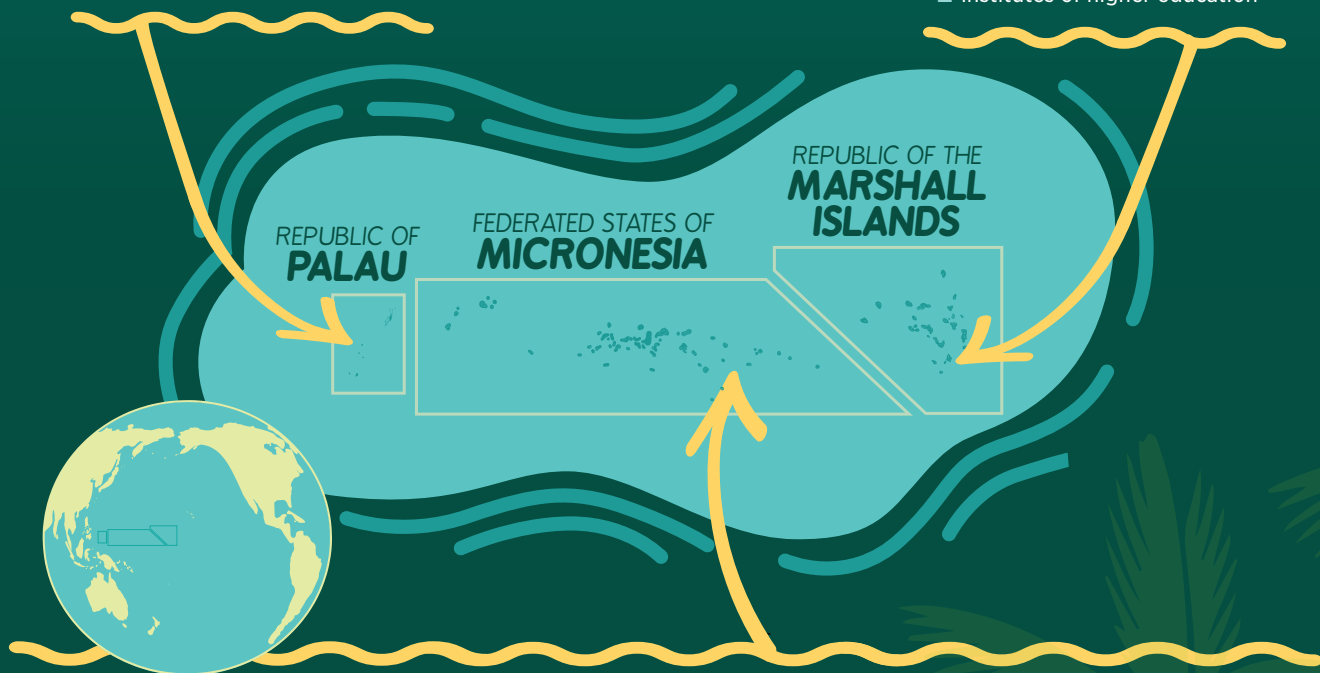
**17** public elementary and middle schools and **1** public secondary school

**1** institute of higher education

**10,700+** students and **700+** teachers in RMI public schools across 25 islands and atoll groups (2019/20)

**79** public elementary and middle schools and **7** public secondary schools

**2** institutes of higher education



#### KOSRAE STATE

**1,700+** students and **160+** teachers in Kosrae public schools on 1 island (2020/21)

**6** public elementary and **1** public secondary school

**1** institute of higher education

#### POHNPEI STATE

**10,000+** students and **500+** teachers in Pohnpei public schools across 6 islands and atoll regions (2020/21)

**31** public elementary and **3** public secondary schools

**1** institute of higher education

#### CHUUK STATE

**10,000+** students and **500+** teachers in Chuuk public schools across 40 islands in 5 island/atoll regions (2020/21)

**54** public elementary and **13** public secondary schools (including 10 combined elementary and secondary schools)

**2** institutes of higher education

#### YAP STATE

**2,200+** students and **280+** teachers in Yap public schools across 4 island and atoll regions (2020/21)

**27** public elementary and middle schools and **3** public secondary schools

**1** institute of higher education

■ The number of islands and atoll groups presented are based on the geographic clustering of island and atolls, which may also be organized into comparable school zones or regions managed by the department/ministry of education.

■ Depending on the district, elementary schools may serve grades K–8 or be split into elementary and middle school. Secondary schools serve grades 9–12, which may be split into junior high and high schools.

■ The organizational and management structures of the public schools, private schools, and higher education systems vary by country.

# PRACTICING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION

## WITH PACIFIC ISLAND STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

*Culturally responsive practices are “behavioral and policy actions that acknowledge stakeholders’ cultures and utilize that knowledge to create an optimal learning environment where personal beliefs and assumptions are regularly examined, cultural identities are nurtured, institutional policies and procedures are interrogated for bias, [and] cultural competency is developed.”*

*(Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015)*

### IN THE CLASSROOM

**Promote culturally engaging activities by offering opportunities to learn more about Pacific peoples’ diverse experiences.** Introducing all students to the histories and geographic features of the Pacific region and to traditional and modern cultural practices can help combat stereotyping of Pacific Islander communities. For example, provide opportunities for students to learn from community members through hands-on workshops (for example, weaving, handicraft making, gardening, cooking) or through guest speakers and roundtables that feature Pacific Islander community leaders, career professionals, and college students.

**Create a physical space that highlights the Pacific region and celebrates Pacific Islander contributions.** For example, display maps of the islands in the classrooms, photos of Pacific people and cultural activities, and in-language cultural proverbs or messages of encouragement. Consider the diversity of all the students in your classroom and highlight different cultures accordingly.

**Develop processes for welcoming new students into the classroom who have just arrived from the FAS.** Students entering classrooms outside of the FAS for the first time may be overwhelmed by the faster pace of spoken English, unfamiliar classroom sizes and settings, and overall adjustment to new lifestyles. A newly arrived student may have an older cousin, relative, or someone from the same island who already attends your school, so consider pairing the new student with another student who can support them in learning about the school from a student’s perspective.

**Promote family and community engagement at the classroom level.** Parents and caregivers want their children to succeed in school, but their engagement may be hindered by a lack of understanding of school procedures that differ from the FAS or by limited availability to participate. Inviting community members to be involved during the school day during weekly reading time or another consistent classroom activity can provide opportunities for both formal and informal communication with families to support them in engaging in their child’s learning.



### SCHOOL AND DISTRICT-WIDE

**Promote extracurricular activities to engage students outside of academic classroom settings.** Pacific students may enjoy participating in intramural or competitive sports, art activities, and music or choir groups. Provide clear information in multiple formats for students and families about how to participate in these activities because organized sports and interschool competitions will have different expectations and be on a larger scale than what students may have experienced in the FAS.

**Consider using various platforms and translating outreach materials to commonly spoken languages of Pacific Islander families in your district.** FAS students and family members will have varying levels of familiarity with navigating different school systems, so they may rely on more settled community members to help understand new processes. Translating important forms, announcements, and how-to information can support this transition to a new school system. Facebook, in particular, is a common platform for communication in FAS communities, so consider creating videos and other forms of visual and audio communication rather than written documents that might not gain as much traction.

**Offer opportunities for family members to connect with and learn about their students’ school experiences, including student showcases, and parent/caregiver roundtables.** Offer creative timing, ways, and venues for working parents and caregivers to participate in these efforts (for example, holding weeknight or weekend sessions, celebrating student achievements, providing food and childcare at school events). Some school districts with large numbers of newcomer students from the FAS have created community liaison positions at the school or district level to provide ongoing support in communication between schools and families.

**Include information on students’ school experiences in students’ islands of origin, their past schools attended, and grade levels completed in the student database.** This can be valuable information for teachers, staff, and community liaisons when working with families and making sure students receive the support needed. At a district level, knowing how many students come from specific islands or recognizing patterns of migration or student mobility may open opportunities for deeper connection between schools and communities.

Information on FAS students’ school experiences for this infographic was compiled through consultation with educators, community leaders, and cultural advisors.



Complete references, acknowledgements, and additional resources for this infographic series are available on the REL Pacific website.