

Preschool subsidies to fall short

Most parents of kids who are too young for kindergarten will not receive state help

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The state will be able to help pay for an extra year of preschool for only a quarter of the estimated 5,000 4-year-olds who will be affected next year when junior kindergarten is eliminated at public schools and the state's higher age requirement for kindergarten takes effect.

The state Department of Human Services, in charge of the state's new school readiness program, plans to ask

lawmakers for an extra \$2.5 million so it can help more needy families afford another year of preschool next year, said Pankaj Bhanot, director of the Benefit, Employment & Support Services Division.

Students will need to be 5 by July 31 to enroll in kindergarten for the 2014-15 school year. The state's intent was to phase out junior kindergarten — launched in 2006 for late-born 4-year-olds — while introducing publicly funded universal preschool. Hawaii is one of 11 states without state-funded preschool.

About 40 percent of Hawaii 4-year-olds attend preschool.

Gov. Neil Abercrombie

last year established the Executive Office on Early Learning to lead the effort in hopes of having a program in place for the 2014-15 school year.

GG Weisenfeld, director of that office, said her staff has been working with the state Human Services and Education departments to educate families and preschool providers about the upcoming changes.

The office has set up a website (earlylearning.hawaii.gov) and phone line (586-0796) to help families find subsidies and assist preschool providers with resources and materials.

"We're concerned that for some of the preschool providers, they haven't

thought about having children for an additional year of preschool," Weisenfeld said. "They're not going to do the same curriculum. The children still need to be challenged so that they are ready for kindergarten."

The Abercrombie administration said its school readiness legislation would have been the catalyst for a more rigorous early education program for all of the state's 18,000 4-year-olds. Voters will be asked to approve a constitutional amendment next year allowing public money to be spent on private early education programs.

Lawmakers earlier this year scaled down the governor's early education initia-

tives and converted a \$25 million school readiness proposal, which was supposed to be the first step of his early learning initiative, into a \$6 million expansion of Preschool Open Doors, an existing child care program under the Human Services Department.

The money will subsidize the cost of preschool for 900 low-income 4-year-olds next year. With its addition to an existing \$1.5 million appropriation, about 1,200 needy children will be helped, Bhanot said.

Eligibility is based on a family's monthly gross income, which cannot exceed 85 percent of the state's median income. The subsidy amount is based on a sliding

fee scale using a family's monthly gross income and the tuition rate of the selected preschool (they can choose from about 650 providers licensed by the Human Services Department).

The legislation to expand the subsidies also calls for learning assessments of participating children and new reporting by preschools and the Department of Human Services — requirements that Bhanot said his department is working on.

Weisenfeld said her office is also exploring the possibility of working with the DOE to set up preschool programs on public school campuses in places where preschool services are not available, such as rural areas.