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About 3 in 5 Hawaii voters support a proposed constitutional amendment to let the state use public money for private preschool programs, according to new Hawaii Poll results.

Support was highest among voters under age 35 and among neighbor islanders.

Overall, 62 percent of voters would support the amendment, while 33 percent oppose it and 4 percent are undecided.

The poll was conducted Feb. 1-11 by Ward Research for the Hono-lulu Star-Advertiser and Hawaii News Now among 642 likely voters statewide. The margin of error is 3.9 percentage points.

The amendment on November's ballot is critical to Gov. Neil Abercrombie's push for universal preschool. He has said that a combination of public preschools, private preschools and state-funded slots in private schools is likely needed to serve all of the state's 17,200 4-year-olds.

The state Constitution prohibits public funds from being spent to support or benefit private educational institutions. The amendment, if passed, would allow the state to contract with private providers to build capacity.

Hawaii is one of 11 states without state-funded preschool. About 40 percent of keiki attend preschool, at an average \$803 a month.

Support in the poll was pretty even across income levels: 65 percent of households earning less than \$50,000 a year said they support the amendment; 63 percent of voters in households earning \$50,000 to \$99,000 are behind the proposal; and 59 percent of those making more than \$100,000 said they favor the change.

Napualani Spock, 46, of Maka-wao, Maui, said she believes the change would help middle-class families.

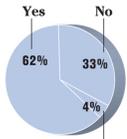
"If you're extremely impoverished you can get financial help to attend, and if you're wealthy you can afford the tuition," said Spock, who works in public health. "But if you're in the working class, you make too much for subsidies but not enough to afford preschool."

Pearl City carpenter Bobby Nicholson, 45, said he doesn't want to see public funds go to private schools.

"It would be like taking money out of a public bucket for private institutions, and then when you need that money, we spent it," he said.

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There will be a constitutional amendment to vote on in November. It will ask if public funds can be directed to private organizations to pay for early childhood education. If the vote were held today, how would you vote?



Don't know/refused

Poll was conducted among 642 registered voters statewide by telephone (landlines and cellphones) Feb. 1-11 by Ward Research. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points. Numbers do not total 100 percentage because of rounding.

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