



Early learning advocates push Hawaii lawmakers for funding

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HONOLULU (HawaiiNewsNow) - The new kindergarten cutoff age is forcing preschools and parents to make changes. Many families took their plea for early education funding directly to lawmakers on Tuesday.

Two-year-old Brady Harken loves to learn at Keiki O Ka Aina.

"We sing a lot of music. He loves dancing. It's very interactive. They've got all kinds of toys for him. He loves learning new words," said Brady's father, Bryce Harken.

The Harken family joined hundreds of other supporters of Family Child Interaction Learning (FCIL) programs where a parent or caregiver also attends. They urged lawmakers to pass SB 2975 SD 1, a Senate bill that would provide \$1 million in funding.

"It would be really important to be able to kind of make sure that there are state funding opportunities available should our federal funding going away, and also for expansion reasons," explained Kanoe Naone, CEO of INPEACE (Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture).

The money could fund 400 new spots. Since the programs are free, demand is expected to surge now that children must be five years old by July 31 instead of December 31 the year they start kindergarten.

"I think that there will be an influx just because families don't have the necessary resources in the communities we serve to be able to pay for an extra year of preschool."

"FCIL's really are a very, very good return on investment when you consider the fact that you're educating the caregiver as well as the child, and you're really able to strengthen communities," said Sen. Jill Tokuda, chair of the education committee.

Private providers have also noticed a couple of trends for families with late-born children.

"Most preschools are choosing to keep the students who are late-born enrolled, so that is impacting the children who are on the wait list to come in. We're finding that a number of families are choosing to keep their children home for another year," said Christina Cox, president of KCAA Preschools of Hawaii.

SB 2975 SD 1 is set to be heard by the House education committee on March 14.

Voters will decide in a constitutional amendment this November whether the state can use public money to fund private preschools.

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