

Kids, parents rally for funds for early childhood programs - Hawaii

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Supporters of family-child interaction learning programs brought a makeshift classroom to the Capitol on Tuesday to rally for expanded early-education options.

Young children and their parents sang and danced in the Capitol courtyard and sat at knee-high tables scattered with worksheets, crayons, rubber bands, chopsticks and other sensory items while movement leaders spoke of the need to finance diverse community and nonprofit learning programs with state funds.

"When we're talking about things like the budget and we're talking about things like early childhood and investing in it, we need to see the lives that we'll touch," state Sen. Jill Tokuda, chairwoman of the chamber's Education Committee, told the crowd.

School readiness advocates hosted the rally to drum up support for a \$1 million appropriation in the House budget for early childhood education and a Senate bill, introduced by Tokuda, that would help fund family-child interaction learning programs through the Executive Office on Early Learning.

"If you haven't actually experienced it or you haven't seen the people who it affects, (you) don't get it," said event coordinator Kanoe Naone, CEO of the Native Hawaiian nonprofit INPEACE, noting that the point of the rally was to help people better understand the benefits of early-childhood programs.

Brad Baang of Wai-anae said he brought his 2-year-old grandson Mattias to the rally because he believes funding early-learning programs such as Keiki Steps, which the duo has been participating in since August, can break the cycle of poverty and provide the state with a sizeable return on its investment.

"Not only do you get an immediate return from the keikis when they grow older, but they tend to get jobs, they tend to pay taxes, you know, they tend to pay for a lot of the social needs that we have," he said.

Lea Cachin Delos Reyes and her 2-year-old son, Jaden, who also attend Keiki Steps in Wai-anae, came out for the rally. Cachin Delos Reyes said on a typical day caregivers and children might make lei and bracelets together, play with Play-Doh or search for bugs and butterflies while exploring outdoors.

"They love it," she said.

Expanding access to programs such as Keiki Steps, which INPEACE facilitates, could benefit some of the thousands of children who will be affected later this year by the dissolution of junior kindergarten, Naone said.

"This is a free option, just like elementary is a free option," she said. "This is the only free option for them."

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