

## 420 keiki to land spots in preschool - Hawaii News - Honolulu

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By Nanea Kalani

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The reduced funding lawmakers set aside this session for Gov. Neil

Abercrombie's universal preschool plan will serve 220 fewer 4-year-olds than planned, establishing prekindergarten classes at 18 instead of 30 public schools next school year.

Most of the sites, announced Thursday, are on neighbor islands and in rural communities, where access to preschool programs is limited.

Lawmakers agreed to provide \$3 million for the initiative, about two-thirds less than the Abercrombie administration had wanted. The funding will establish 21 classes to offer free instruction (public schools can't charge tuition) for about 420 students who meet geographic and income qualifications. The initial plan called for 32 classes to serve 640 students.

The income guidelines to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch will be used, meaning a family of four cannot earn more than \$50,117 a year.

Priority also will be given to late-born 4-year-olds — born between Aug. 1 and Dec. 31, 2009 — who would have been eligible for junior kindergarten, which is being eliminated next school year. An estimated 5,000 4-year-olds will be affected by the change.

Availability will be on a first-come, first-served basis. Application packets are available at school offices, and officials will be accepting the first round of applications until May 30. (Additional application rounds may be necessary if there's a shortage of qualified applicants.)

The multimillion-dollar investment represents the first time the state has designated public funds for prekindergarten education, joining 41 other states that offer state-funded preschool.

The average cost to attend an accredited preschool in Hawaii is \$803 a month. About 40 percent of 4-year-olds here attend preschool.

"We are on our way to creating access to early learning for our children statewide," Abercrombie said in a statement.

He has said a combination of public preschools, private preschools and state-funded slots in private schools is likely needed to eventually serve all of the state's 17,200 4-year-olds.

"This partnership between my Executive Office on Early Learning and the (Department of Education) is an important part of our vision to prepare as many 4-year-olds as possible for kindergarten," Abercrombie added. "It is a key component of the mixed-delivery system of public and private providers that has worked for many states, and that I believe is best for the future of Hawaii's keiki."

The partnership means classrooms will be staffed by DOE teachers and educational assistants, while the Executive Office on Early Learning will provide expertise and training on early childhood education and development.

"This is definite progress," Executive Office on Early Learning Director GG Weisenfeld said. "It is a systematic approach to ensuring high-quality early childhood education with dedicated funding and professional development support."

School sites were chosen based on community needs, available facilities, Title I status (where 35 percent or more of students qualify for free or reduced lunch — a key indicator of poverty) and support from principals and administrators.

State Sen. Jill Tokuda (D, Kai-lua-Kane-ohe), chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, said in a statement, "While we would have liked to have gotten more resources to increase the number of children served statewide, these 21 classrooms will greatly enhance our school readiness efforts in our most rural and underserved communities."

The prekindergarten classes, while limited, will be critical next school year, when junior kindergarten is eliminated at public schools and the state moves to a higher age requirement for kindergarten. Students will need to be 5 years old by July 31 to enroll in kindergarten in the fall.

To help more families, the state has pumped an extra \$6 million into the existing Preschool Open Doors program, which provides tuition assistance for low-income families to send their children to private preschool. The subsidies will help cover the cost of preschool next year for about 900 needy children.

Another key piece of Abercrombie's early-education push is a proposed constitutional amendment that would let the state use public money for private preschool programs.

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.

## **SCHOOL CHOICES ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS THAT WILL OFFER PRE-KINDERGARTEN CLASSES FOR THE 2014-15 SCHOOL YEAR:**

>> **Oahu:** Likelike, Linapuni, Nanakuli, Waiahole and Waialua

>> **Hawaii island:** Honokaa, Hookena, Keonepoko, Konawaena, Mountain View, Naalehu, Pahoia, and

Kau High and Pahala Elementary

>> **Kauai:** Eleele and Kekaha

>> **Maui:** Hana High and Elementary

>> **Molokai:** Kaunakakai

>> **Lanai:** Lanai High and Elementary

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