

State offers free preschool at more elementary campuses

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Prekindergarten teacher Rachel Ishida prepared her classroom for students Wednesday at Kalihi Uka Elementary School in Kalihi. The newly furnished classroom features a neutral palette to which color will be added as students complete artwork and other projects that will be displayed during the year

With many youngsters priced out of preschool, the state is expanding free prekindergarten as the school year begins Monday, opening new classrooms for 4-year-olds at public elementary schools on four islands.

“I am so excited and so grateful,” said Rosalinda Nero, whose youngest daughter will get an early start on her education at Kalihi Uka Elementary that wasn’t available to her big brother and sister.

“I couldn’t afford a private preschool,” said Nero, who works in reservations for a Waikiki hotel. “It’s too expensive.”

Full-time preschool tuition in Hawaii averages \$9,500 per year, or nearly \$800 a month, according to the University of Hawaii Center on the Family. That’s close to the \$11,000 annual in-state tuition at the University of Hawaii at

Manoa. Less than half of Hawaii's 3- and 4-year-olds attend preschool or nursery school, according to the 2018 KIDS COUNT Databook. The new prekindergarten classes are opening at Kalihi Uka Elementary and Kailua Elementary on Oahu, Kilohana Elementary on Molokai, Kohala Elementary on Hawaii island and Kula Elementary on Maui. They bring the total to 24 campuses with preschool supported by the state Executive Office on Early Learning.

Families with lower incomes are given priority but others may attend, including students outside of the school's district. Enrollment is capped at 20 students per classroom, and there is space for 520 kids in 26 classrooms statewide this year.

"Hawaii is one of the last few states to really adopt a public prekindergarten program," said Lauren Moriguchi, director of the Executive Office on Early Learning, which was created in 2012 and launched public prekindergarten in 2014. This year is the first expansion.

"We are doing it slowly to make sure that we are doing it right," Moriguchi said. "We are focused on high quality early learning."

The state-funded program is aimed at the general population. It is separate from the long-standing, federally funded Head Start program for disadvantaged kids and public preschool for students with special needs. Some public charter schools also offer free prekindergarten through a federal grant.

Marilyn "Terri" Simms, principal at Kilohana Elementary in east Molokai, said parents have been asking for a prekindergarten class for years. Still, enrollment has fallen short of capacity so far.

She expects "the coconut wireless" to attract more students once people get a chance to see the class in action, led by a teacher certified in early childhood education.

"It's open to anybody on the island," Simms said. "Ohana is part of our school name. It's what the school is about."

At rural Waiahole Elementary in Windward Oahu, Principal Alexandra Obra has seen the results of the prekindergarten classroom at her campus over the last few years and is urging more families to sign up.

“I love the program just for the fact that it develops the whole child and definitely prepares them socially and emotionally, as well as academically for kindergarten,” Obra said. “And it’s free.”

Elementary schools with prekindergarten classrooms that still have several openings include Pahala, Naalehu and Hookena on Hawaii island and Kekaha on Kauai.

The Early Learning Office trains school staff so they understand what is developmentally appropriate for 4-year-olds, cognitively and socially, rather than offering simply a modified kindergarten.

“We’re really trying to get the kids to be excited about the world around them, to want to learn and discover,” said Kalihi Uka preschool teacher Rachel Ishida. “It’s a lot of learning through play, gaining skills, not just learning letters and sounds and numbers. We want them to work on social skills and friendships.”

Her classroom walls are starting off the year blank by design, so they can be decorated with art by her students, giving them ownership of the space, she said.

Kalihi Uka Principal Laura Ahn lauded the training and resources offered by the Early Learning Office and anticipates the preschool will make a big difference in her neighborhood. She already has a wait list.

“Because our community has a lot of immigrants, Filipino and Micronesian and Chuukese, it’s going to help bring them together and help the kids assimilate to Hawaii,” she said. “We have really hard-working parents, some of them work two or three jobs, so it will relieve the burden on the elderly relatives who have to babysit and the kids who are left home watching TV.”

To learn more, visit [Executive Office on Early Learning Public Pre-Kindergarten Program](#)