

Education

Hawaii Preschools See Declines In Enrollment And Available Seats

Private pre-kindergarten programs have lost \$7 million in tuition as fewer families send children to school, according to the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools.



By Suevon Lee    / March 1, 2021

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Buried amid the national conversation around safely reopening K-12 classrooms during the pandemic are the impacts of loss of in-person instruction for the littlest learners: 3- and 4-year-olds attending preschool programs, experts say.

Increased restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of the coronavirus and parental fears have led to diminished capacity for both public and private preschool programs in Hawaii. In some cases, small private child care providers have had to close because they could no longer afford to meet their bottom line, according to new data.

The net effect of fewer available seats for pre-kindergarteners [in a state](#)

where the cost of child care is already exceedingly high may be developmental delays as children miss out on key preparation for later success in school and in life.

“Teachers will find they have two unusually large problems next year: many more children who aren’t where they expect them to be in terms of pre-academic skills and a very high level of social, emotional problems,” said W. Steven Barnett, senior co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research. “That’s going to complicate everything.”

Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Initial pre-K spacing rules issued by the Hawaii Department of Human Services set specific student to staff ratios no greater than 10 to 1. Later guidance removed those specifications but

requires kids to be kept in separate groups with dedicated staff.

In November, a survey conducted by Early Childhood Action Strategy, a coalition that advocates for Hawaii's children, and PATCH, a Hawaii child care resources agency, found that [25% of 824 licensed child care providers in the state had been forced to close](#).

“Providers now are operating at reduced capacity, and more families are reluctant to place their children in care,” either due to lost wages, health and safety concerns or because they're working from home, according to an [analysis of that data](#) by Early Childhood Action Strategy.

Private child care providers are licensed by the state Department of Human Services, which has [COVID-19 guidelines](#) requiring that kids be kept in separate groups all day with dedicated staff. Although these measures are less restrictive than [initial guidance](#) mandating a student to teacher ratio of no more than 10 to 1, they don't allow much room for enrollment expansion.

According to the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools, pre-K enrollment across 39 of 55 member schools that offer pre-K was down nearly a third this year — from 2,714 students to 1,940 students — due to the restrictions placed on classroom size from COVID-19.

“It became too expensive to staff up for expanded groups of students,” HAIS Executive Director Phil Bossert said via email.

The total amount in lost tuition revenue due to the lower pre-K enrollment is \$7 million, according to HAIS.

Hawaii experienced a 6% total decrease in maximum student capacity across all of its licensed child care facilities and homes — from 33,519 seats down to 31,720 seats — from last year, according to the Department

of Human Services.

The department could not say how many fewer children enrolled in such programs this year, because it does not track that figure, spokeswoman Amanda Stevens said.

Child care providers were considered essential businesses in the beginning months of the pandemic and [thus many stayed open](#).

While public schools largely stayed in distance learning mode in the fall, public pre-K classrooms overseen by the Executive Office of Early Learning were able to open in August, the start of the new school year.

That's because the youngest learners were considered to be in the same high-needs category as non-native English speakers or special education students whose needs were harder to fulfill remotely.

Hawaii advocacy group Early Childhood Action Strategy estimates that 25% of all licensed child care providers in the state were forced to close due to the pandemic.

That decision, made in tandem with school principals, was consistent with broader efforts to provide pre-K learning for low-income youth, English learners, homeless families and kids with special needs, said Keopu Reelitz, a spokeswoman for the Executive Office on Early Learning, which oversees public preschools.

But the state's 44 public pre-K classrooms also have had to scale down attendance and reconfigure classrooms due to COVID-19 guidelines.

They are operating at about 55% pre-pandemic level capacity, with room for 374 students in public preschool classrooms, down from 680.

Normally, EOEL classrooms can hold up to 20 students. Every classroom is now either at 10 students per classroom, or two groups of 10 on alternating days, according to Reelitz.

“We worked with each of the schools to determine their capacity, and what their spacing was,” she said.

Hawaii’s trend is not unique: a [new national survey](#) by National Institute for Early Education Research indicates that 3- and 4-year-old participation in both public and private preschools since the pandemic has significantly dropped.

“It’s low-income kids in particular who are being left out of in-person learning,” said NIEER’s Barnett, co-author of the new study. “Children in poverty are almost entirely dependent on publicly funded programs — and (many of) those did not reopen where private programs did.”

Last year, [a big push in the Legislature to expand early education](#) for Hawaii’s underserved kids resulted in [Act 46](#), which, among other things, mandated a kindergarten assessment to gauge a child’s exposure to early learning by July 2022 and established a special fund to expand Preschool Open Doors, which provides child care subsidies to families. But that program is on thin ice this year, facing a \$6.9 million cut to its budget next year, according to Deb Zysman, executive director of Hawaii Children’s Action Network.

This session, a main piece of early education legislation is [House Bill 1360](#), which would establish stipends to help offset tuition in early education training. Amid the state’s overall teacher shortage, qualified early educators are in particularly short supply and [among the lowest paid](#).

“The main challenge (around expanding early education) is lack of funding,” said Zysman. “It’s been a struggle everywhere. Child care has been so sorely underfunded and this year, we’ve seen those cracks.”

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