

Isle preschool enrollment shrinks

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The number of incoming public school kindergartners statewide who had attended preschool dropped to 58 percent this year, the lowest level since all schools began reporting that statistic in 2008, as several communities continued to see sizable declines in preschool attendance rates.

Many educators believe preschool can give youngsters skills that can be the foundation for academic success.

"Students who haven't attended preschool basically come in 18 to 24 months behind," said Ted Fisher, principal of Kaala Elementary School in Wahiawa, where about 27 percent of this year's incoming kindergartners had attended preschool. "There's no question in most educators' minds that a good beginning is something that's necessary."

But over the past four years, the percentage of kindergartners with preschool experience dropped in nine of the state's 15 school complexes, new state figures show.

Six public school complexes saw preschool attendance decrease from last year.

Among the schools with the sharpest declines:

- » At Kalihi Kai Elementary, preschool attendance decreased 26 percentage points this year compared with the 2010-11 school year, when about 56 percent of students attended preschool.
- » At nearby Puuhale Elementary, 27 percent of this year's incoming kindergartners attended preschool, compared with 45 percent last school year.
- » At Aiea Elementary, 28 percent of kindergartners this year attended preschool, down from 52 percent in 2008.
- » On Hawaii island, about one-fifth of kindergartners at Mountain View Elementary went to preschool, from 48 percent four years ago.

Statewide, the preschool attendance rate for public school kindergartners has dropped by 3 percentage points since 2008, when 61 percent of kindergartners attended preschool.

The new figures come as the state looks to bolster Hawaii's early education system in hopes of improving student achievement.

Principals and child advocates say kindergartners without preschool experience are more likely to enter school far behind their peers.

"If we're really worried about improving the quality of our workforce ... we need to get them when they're young, give them a leg up," said Christina Cox, president of KCAA Preschools of Hawaii and liaison for the Childcare Business Coalition.

This year, 37 percent of kindergarten teachers reported that at least three-fourths of their incoming students had the "attitudes and habits that facilitate learning," by showing an eagerness to observe and ask questions, try hard and appear interested in the world around them.

That's down from 43 percent in 2009, according to the Department of Education's annual kindergarten assessment, which compiles statistics on readiness indicators, preschool attendance and other characteristics of incoming kindergartners.

ON THE NET

For a look at preschool attendance rates for kindergartners by school, go to arch.k12.hi.us and click on "Hawaii State School Readiness Assessment."

Meanwhile, just 25 percent of teachers said at least three-fourths of their kindergartners started the school year knowing math concepts (such as counting) needed for kindergarten, from 31 percent in 2009; 24 percent had key literacy skills, the same as in 2009.

Education advocates blame the significant drops in preschool attendance rates on a sputtering economy, which has spurred low- and moderate-income families to put young children with relatives or unlicensed practitioners during the day rather than in more expensive licensed preschool centers.

"With the economy how it is, I think it's really difficult for many parents," said Diane Young, Department of Education early childhood/kindergarten educational specialist. "There's a bigger movement toward letting relatives watch (children)."

Declines in preschool attendance have also been attributed to fewer families receiving subsidies to cover preschool tuition costs.

Since January 2010, when the state decreased the amount of help families can get for child care costs, the number of families getting subsidies has dropped by about 28 percent -- from 7,728 to 5,592 families two months ago, the state Department of Human Services said last week.

Advocates point out while the rates of preschool attendance have declined, the percentage of kindergartners who qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch, a key indicator of poverty, has risen. This year, 52 percent of Hawaii's 16,038 incoming kindergartners qualified for lunch subsidies, up from 45 percent in 2008, according to the DOE readiness assessment.

Coupled with the increase in poverty, the drop in preschool attendance is particularly worrisome, say advocates and educators. Research has shown that low-income children, those who do not attend preschool and kids who fall behind in kindergarten are more likely to struggle in school -- and later in life.

"When I see the percentage of children who are starting off behind the power curve, that's an area of concern," said Dave Tom, director of public policy at Good Beginnings Alliance. "If you don't get them early, then it's a challenge."

Terry Lock, the state's early childhood coordinator, also called the new statistics a concern and said the state is working to expand access to "high-quality" preschool programs.

Hawaii is one of 10 states with no state-funded preschool program. The Abercrombie administration has pledged to develop a system over the next few years that would provide all young children access to quality child care services.

As part of that effort, the state has applied for a \$50 million federal grant under the Race to the Top Early Learning competition. Hawaii, which is vying for the funds along with dozens of other states, will learn if it is a winner next month.

Officials are working to expand preschool access as they also face a looming deadline: Junior kindergarten, meant for children born too late in the year to qualify for regular kindergarten, is set to end in 2013.

The program debuted in 2006, but because of spotty success, lawmakers opted to phase the program out with the 2012 class of about 6,000 late-born children.

That means children born from Aug. 2 to Dec. 31, 2008, who would have been eligible for junior kindergarten in 2013, will have to wait an additional year before entering school.

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