Hilo Hawaiian-immersion preschool set to open in 2028

By Grace Inez Adams
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A new immersion preschool in Hilo, next to the ʻImiloa Astronomy Center, is scheduled to open in 2028 to help meet growing demand for Hawaiian-language education.

Through a partnership between the University of Hawaii at Hilo, the Hawaii State Charter School Commission and Aha Punana Leo, the school will provide early childhood education in Hawaiian for up to 80 prekindergarten students.

It also will provide professional development opportunities for students in UH Hilo's Kahuawaiola Hawaiian and Indigenous Teacher Education Program, as well as other students on campus, said Ka Haka ʻUla o Keʻelikolani College of Hawaiian Language Executive Director Kaʻiu Kimura.

"Our college here at UH Hilo, one of our purposes, or our responsibilities, is to develop educators, teachers, administrators, curriculum developers fluent in the Hawaiian language that can support Hawaiian medium education, not just here in East Hawaii, but throughout the state," she said. "And so the idea of building out a preschool program that would directly be on campus and in close proximity to the college would provide, in essence, a laboratory space where we could train educators through the school."

She said that according to data from the U.S. Census, Hawaiian is the fastest growing non-English language spoken in homes across the state, increasing from 18,400 speakers in 2016 to 27,338 in 2024. In Hawaii County specifically, the spike has been even more significant, more than doubling from about 5,000 to 11,279 speakers.

Kimura said she believes the increase is the result of efforts that began in the 1980s to revitalize and preserve the Hawaiian language after years of suppression following the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom.

"Forty years after major efforts were initiated focused in on returning and renormalizing our Hawaiian language as a living language here in Hawaii, we're seeing the fruits of that labor in terms of the growing populations within our communities that are raising their children and managing their homes through the Hawaiian language," she said.

Education, she added, has played a large role in making that resurgence possible and, as the number of speakers grows, so too does the demand for Hawaiian language school programs, especially for young learners. With the county's few existing immersion preschools at full capacity, she said there is a need for additional programs.

"We have to keep up with that demand. We have to keep developing the capacity for teachers, administrators and speakers who can flourish in any domain in any workforce that they choose to seek out in adulthood," Kimura said. "Starting when children are very young in their formative ages, preschool level, and even younger, building community, building schools, building places where people gather and conduct everything through Hawaiian language, so that these children are now growing up with Hawaiian language as their first, or major language, that's helping to raise them."

The new ʻImiloa preschool campus will feature four classrooms equipped to support 20 students each as well as outdoor play spaces, according to Douglas Cullison, a program manager for the Hawaii School Facilities Authority, which has been in charge of overseeing the design and build out of the campus.

A contract for the construction was recently awarded to Nan Inc., and Cullison said work is scheduled to start in March.

Kimura said the plans for the campus were designed with the existing landscape and natural features in mind.

"ʻImiloa's landscape is so dedicated to our Native Hawaiian ethnobotany, and so we want to continue that in this space of the pre-K," she said. "So we are dedicating the play zones and the outdoor spaces modeled around that concept of ʻImiloa's landscape."

Construction is expected to take slightly over a year, putting the school on track to open in fall of 2028, in time for the 2028-29 school year. Kimura said details about the enrollment process and tuition are still being worked out.

Funding for the construction of the school comes from the Ready Keiki initiative, a statewide effort to expand access to early learning programs. The funding for the operation of the school, she said, will stem from a combination of sources including the university, the Charter School Commission and other public and private partners.

Kimura said she hopes the school will provide quality educational opportunities and contribute to sustaining and perpetuating the Hawaiian language.

"There's so much codified in any language, not just the literal meanings expressed through words, but just every language has its own way of communicating, its own way of articulating, how we engage with each other, how we see the world, and it's so important to maintain that and not lose that, because really the diversity of perspective is important," she said.

"I think in Hawaii, being this small, isolated landmass in the middle of the Pacific, this is the only place where Hawaiian language is native to and belongs, and so losing that language would definitely lose invaluable perspectives that help shape and inform how we communicate and interact and understand the world around us."