

The logo for the Honolulu Star-Advertiser. It features a sunburst graphic at the top with the word "HONOLULU" in a curved banner. Below that, the words "Star" and "Advertiser" are written in a stylized, gothic-style font, separated by a blue five-pointed star.

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Hawaii News

Free pop-up preschools serve isle keiki

By [Nanea Kalani](#)

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Eva Likor helps her daughter, Kandyce, paint at Come ... with Me!, an early learning program at The Towers at Kuhio Park in Kalihi. The free program, which is held at three locations on Oahu, targets low-income families that might not otherwise send their children to preschool. Parents or caregivers are required to attend so the learning can continue at home.

For a few hours twice a week, spaces inside a Kalihi public housing complex, a church in Palama and the Nuuanu YMCA are transformed into temporary preschool

classrooms, providing free early childhood education programs for young children in low-income families.

The effort stems from a national pilot the YMCA launched five years ago to conduct early learning programs on-site in impoverished communities, where children typically aren't attending preschool due to either economic or cultural reasons, or both.

Nearly half of Hawaii keiki ages 3 to 4 years old — some 18,000 children — are not enrolled in early education programs, according to the Kids Count Data Center, which collects statistics on child and family well-being in the U.S. Although Hawaii two years ago joined the majority of states providing publicly funded prekindergarten, the program accommodates fewer than 400 students at 18 public schools statewide due to funding and space limitations.

The YMCA's 40-week program targets children between 3 and 5 years old, but unlike traditional preschools or nursery schools, parents or caregivers are required to attend with their children to help ensure that the learning continues at home.

"This is not your typical preschool where you just drop your kid and go," said Lisa Ontai, vice president of marketing and mission advancement for the YMCA of Honolulu. "You have to have that buy-in, because we only have them for two days out of the week."

The program is designed to support parents and caregivers in their role as their child's first teacher.

"Really the goal is for the caregivers to know that everyday activities can be turned into early learning experiences," said Diane Tabangay, executive director of children's programs for the YMCA of Honolulu.

The YMCA of Honolulu was selected in 2012 as one of several sites nationwide to test the model. This marks the first year the program has been established as a core program.

Data from the national pilot program show that participating children who were assessed on school readiness showed big improvements in five developmental areas.

Referring to children who don't attend early learning programs, Ontai said, "These children end up starting kindergarten way behind their classmates and research shows many never catch up." By bringing high-quality programs into needy communities and making it free, organizers hope the program will help close the achievement gap.

Honolulu's early learning program is called Come ... with Me! Tabangay said the ellipses is meant as a fill-in-the-blank for activities such as "read," "sing" and "explore."

On a recent Friday morning, the sounds of children singing and laughing emanated from a ground floor multipurpose room at The Towers at Kuhio Park in Kalihi. To start

the morning, 10 toddlers and their caregivers — mostly young moms — sat cross-legged, forming a circle, and sang songs including “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” and “If You’re Happy and You Know It.” After circle time, the families headed to 13 activity centers each set up on small tables, including puzzles, crafts, science, reading, Play-Doh and math.

Eva Likor, a stay-at-home mom of three, said she started bringing one of her sons to the program in 2014 after seeing a flier at her children’s elementary school. Her son is now enrolled in a Head Start preschool program and she brings her 2-year-old daughter, Kandyce, to Come ... with Me!

“My kids really enjoy it and they get to know the other kids,” said Likor, 27. “And we also get to know the other parents, too. It’s fun being with other people, you know, not like staying in the house.”

Likor, who moved to Hawaii from Pohnpei in 2005, said she’s enjoyed watching her children learn to be more social and independent. On days when she’s felt too tired to attend the program, her children have insisted on going.

“But my kids are like, ‘Mommy, can we go to school?’” she said. “They say, ‘Mommy, it’s so fun.’ They like to do the activities and they remember everyone’s names here.”

Savannah Jordan, also a stay-at-home mom, credits the program for helping her 20-month-old daughter, Gracey, develop social skills. She said organizers allowed her to start bringing Gracey when she was just 6 months old.

“It has helped her to be sociable, because she’s an only child. Her social skills became really good after, maybe, two classes,” said Jordan, 32. “And even with the books — they read a lot here — and that’s how she learned most of her words.”

Jordan, who grew up in Kalihi, said her experience interacting with the other families got her interested in working with children. She said she’ll be starting a job next month reading to children as part of another YMCA program in partnership with Kookia Kalihi Valley.

“If it wasn’t for this program, we probably would be just staying home,” she said.

The Kuhio Park location has 15 families enrolled this year while the Nuuanu YMCA site and another at St. Elizabeth’s Episcopal Church in Palama each have 18 families enrolled.

Tabangay said the programs have to follow certain criteria — what she calls fidelity markers — but are tailored to be culturally relevant. For example, the 13 activity centers are standard in all of the early learning programs, snacks have to meet certain guidelines, lessons have to be aligned with the state’s early learning standards, and there has to be a physical activity component.

Although the program is free, it initially took encouragement from friends or family members to get participants to enroll, said Crisilyn Fonoti, coordinator for the Come ... with Me! site at Kuhio Park.

"I come from the housing as well, and this program really helps because a lot of them just stay at home ... so I always try to encourage them to come out and tell them that we have different things the kids can do, we have puzzles, writing, art, outdoor activities," Fonoti said. "This program also helps with parenting skills and it's free – and that's what I tell families; you don't pay anything."

Transitioning the program to a core offering meant finding sustainable funding. Ontai said funding now comes from donors, including corporate donors like Hawaiian Electric Co., which recently donated \$10,000 for the program, and support through the Aloha United Way.