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'Aha Pūnana Leo

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

International Recognition for Hawaiian Language Preschools

Hilo, HI - May 20, 2014 - The 'Aha Pūnana Leo's Hawaiian language nests preschools have just been awarded the world's first accreditation of an early education program conducted through an endangered and indigenous language by the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC). A distinguished review team of experts that included international educators from countries with records of high academic achievement in multiple languages, such as Scandinavia and New Zealand, conducted the newly established process of accreditation for preschool through high school. The accreditation serves as the base from which WINHEC seeks to develop distinctive support for indigenous early education. As the first in the world with this international accreditation, Hawai'i's Pūnana Leo preschools are setting the bar for early childhood education in indigenous languages around the globe.

The 'Aha Pūnana Leo's system of eleven Pūnana Leo preschools, one infant-toddler program and a statewide administrative office was evaluated in January based on indigenous education guidelines under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In an initial report to the 'Aha Pūnana Leo, the review team commended the 'Aha Pūnana Leo for the quality of its program and urged it to increase its attention to its role as an international leader and to continue to provide Hawaiian language education to its staff.

The self-study from the 'Aha Pūnana Leo highlighted the academic advantages of early education through Hawaiian, including early mastery of reading and the cognitive benefits of high bilingualism. The review team was especially interested in how the Pūnana Leo uses unique features of Hawaiian spelling that provides for a two-year advantage in early literacy development of its preschoolers over English language preschoolers.

The 'Aha Pūnana Leo's Executive Director, Ms. 'Ekekelā Aiona, is delighted with the announcement. "It is gratifying to receive this accreditation that recognizes the quality and value of Hawaiian language medium education. This is one step in the long process of revitalizing the Hawaiian language and reestablishing high quality distinctive Hawaiian language medium education." The next step is to seek WINHEC accreditation recognition by the State of Hawai'i. The goal is to expand and to include international WINHEC accreditation recognition that is currently limited to regional mainstream English language medium accreditation, resulting in support to Hawaiian language medium preschools equal to that given to English medium preschools.

For 90 years the use of Hawaiian was illegal in schools. The 'Aha Pūnana Leo led the movement to remove that ban and has been the primary private entity supporting the development of education through Hawaiian from preschool on to the doctorate level. Language revitalization programs worldwide widely recognize the 'Aha Pūnana Leo as the model for education in an endangered and indigenous language revitalization movement.

The 'Aha Pūnana Leo's unique family-based education program serves as the foundation from which children enter Hawaiian immersion schools, where students pursue a college preparatory curriculum and often learn a third language in addition to English and Hawaiian. Pūnana Leo is not only praised for the level of success their students accomplish academically, but also for instilling intrinsic Hawaiian values in their students that resonate within the family and out to the wider community. The 'Aha Pūnana Leo is a member of a consortium of internationally recognized schools, organizations and university programs in Hawai'i dedicated to reestablishing Hawaiian as the first and main language of the home.

To learn more about 'Aha Pūnana Leo, visit www.ahapunanaleo.org.