

Lessons Learned and Directions for the Future

–Elisabeth Chun

The school-readiness of Hawai'i's children and the readiness of Hawai'i's schools for entering kindergarteners has been a topic of considerable thought and action in recent years. Indeed, Hawai'i's citizens have long made young children and their education a high priority. The first steps were taken as early as 1894 when the Samuel N. and Mary Castle Foundation was created to promote high quality early education and care for children ages 0–5. In the same year, the Kindergarten and Children's Aid Association Preschools of Hawai'i was established to offer teacher training and free kindergarten to Hawai'i's children.

Much thought, research, and collaborative work across public and private agencies, early education and care programs, parents, K–12 education, and higher education systems have brought Hawai'i to this point. The Good Beginnings Alliance Master Plan, presented in 1996, and the School Readiness Task Force Report of 2003 have both spelled out incremental steps and moved Hawai'i closer to providing a coherent early childhood system for families and children.

With the help of United for Learning and the Hawai'i P–20 Initiative, the K–12 and the higher education systems have joined hands with the Good Beginnings Alliance to acknowledge the interdependence that the three systems of education (early childhood, K–12, and higher) have upon each other, and to acknowledge that their cooperation is essential to achieving good outcomes for children. The successful transition of children from one level to another through the educational pipeline requires each player to carefully plan and connect with their partners so that expectations for children's progress are understood and partners realize the interdependence of each part. For example, when kindergarten teachers report that four out of ten entering kindergarten children are not ready to succeed, they are sending a strong message that there is a lack of connection between early educational opportunities for children and the expectations of the kindergarten teacher. And when early childhood teachers report a paucity of community college courses available to them, they point to a lack of connection between their needs and higher education's ability to meet them.

Lessons Learned

It is useful to reflect on lessons learned from work to date

so that the next action steps will move Hawai'i forward and will result in better outcomes for our youngest *keiki*.

There needs to be a major state investment to increase the quality and availability of early childhood services.

The majority of the accomplishments to date have been funded through a patchwork of public and private investment. While this strategy is commendable it does not allow for statewide sustainability.

Resources must be invested to develop a cadre of well-educate early childhood professionals.

The early childhood system must expand and upgrade the credentials of its workforce. Currently there is no commitment to systematically train, compensate, and retain qualified early childhood teachers. Those interested in working with young children will require incentives to enter and remain in the field.

There must be a thoughtful prioritization of resources and strategies to ensure that all the components of the early childhood system are eventually funded.

For example, we cannot institute new expectations and standards without also investing in the development of programs and the professional capacity to meet those expectations. Incremental investment strategies will be required to enhance each of these components of the early childhood system.

In order to bring coherence, oversight and direction to programs and services for young children we need to designate an office or agency that has the primary responsibility for coordinating the parts of a comprehensive early childhood system.

This agency would set quality standards, provide programs to meet those standards and then hold programs accountable. This system must also have financial resources, statutory authority and transparency for its consumer/parents. Hawai'i has a strong history of convening partners to collaborate on early childhood projects such as the School Readiness Task Force; however these projects often remain separate, unconnected, or unsustainable without a designated infrastructure responsible.

What are the Next Steps?

Over the next year, with the guidance and support of the early childhood task force created by Act 51 of the 2005 legislature, Hawai'i has an opportunity to build on the successes and programs developed to date and to acknowledge a place for all of the pieces of our early childhood continuum—parent education, family child care; and high quality preschool and infant/toddler care. This effort will require members of the task force to fine-tune our road map. They will also need to anticipate the funding needed to increase resources for children and provide educational opportunities and reasonable compensation for early childhood professionals.

The timing appears right. A focus on school readiness makes business sense. The recently released report, *The Economic Impact of the Early Care and Education Industry in Hawai'i*, confirmed that the early care and education industry in Hawai'i is a viable industry. It provides nearly 9400 jobs and generates more than \$240 million in revenue annually. It enables working parents' earnings in Hawai'i to total more than \$5.1 billion a year.

In addition, business leaders are aware of the urgency for reform and know that the growth of our island economy is dependent upon our ability to develop a well-educated and well-trained workforce. Such a workforce must be built upon a strong foundation. Just as a builder would never consider constructing a house on a base that is weak and unable to support the upper stories of the structure; so children, too, upon entering school need a firm foundation, and sometimes additional support, to provide help in their educational journey.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point*, refers to the moment when an idea takes hold and becomes a movement, an accepted idea. Has Hawai'i reached its tipping point in early childhood education? Does the large number of early childhood measures presented this 2005 legislative session bode well for young children? Are the people of Hawai'i ready to expand their commitment to young children?

It is time to once again step back and affirm Hawai'i's vision for its early childhood system. It is time to take concrete measures to move forward and remedy the lack of connections among various systems and agencies to ensure that children, families, and professionals are not "lost" in this complex educational continuum.

What, then, might our vision include? The following

list summarizes some of the most frequently noted attributes of an ideal early childhood system:

- ❖ **Parents** are able to access information and support to increase their knowledge of child development and good parenting practices. Parents must also be able to choose from and afford a range of high quality early education and care options.
- ❖ **Information and referral services** are readily available to families so they can easily locate the services they require.
- ❖ Children receive **early and periodic screening** so that any learning difficulties can be identified and needed services can be delivered while the child is young and prior to entering kindergarten.
- ❖ **Early intervention services** are available for all children and families identified as at risk and needing follow-up services.
- ❖ A **coordinated continuum of services** is available to families and young children with **state and county infrastructure** that sets quality standards, provides programs to meet those standards, and holds programs accountable. In addition, there is a **commitment to a seamless education system** focused on meeting the learning needs of children across the education continuum and supporting the transition from early education into the elementary school.
- ❖ **Quality enhancements**, such as training and education opportunities that are affordable and accessible for early childhood providers and programs statewide, are available.
- ❖ **Practitioners are trained and valued.** They deliver high quality services in collaboration with other community partners. Teachers work with doctors, doctors work with social workers, social workers work with parents and teachers. Practitioners include home visitors, family childcare providers, teachers in child care centers, pediatricians, and public health workers. All compensation should be commensurate with their training and the important contribution they are making to society.
- ❖ **Communities come together** around needs of youngest children. Parents and representatives from business, faith, social services, education, and health communities are included as partners.
- ❖ Practices and services are delivered in **culturally effective** ways.

- ❖ An **accountability system** is in place to focus on goals and results for children, including appropriate measures to track progress and to assess the accomplishments of these goals.

We already have many pieces in place—preschool content standards, transition materials, accountability assessment, a registry to document the training of preschool teachers, scholarship programs for early childhood providers, scholarship programs for children to attend preschool, accreditation support for early childhood programs, partnership between higher education and K–12, and private school and foundation support. Yet, our early education system is not complete. More pieces must be added. Parts of the system are unconnected. Enhancements to the quality and availability of current programs are needed. Do we share the commitment to persevere and succeed? If we do, our tipping point may be close.

Hawai'i is a special place that values children (*keiki*) and family (*ohana*). The people of our state understand that children thrive best when supported by a nurturing families

and supportive communities. This very belief strengthens Hawai'i's potential to create quality environments in which young children can learn (as described by Anna Sumida in this issue of *Educational Perspectives*), and to create the connections between the family, schools, and communities (as stated in our school readiness definition). A strong foundation has been built that can support the state of Hawai'i in becoming be a national leader in building a culturally appropriate and developmentally appropriate high quality early childhood system. We will do these things if we make them a priority.

Focusing our attention on the early years will require hard choices. We have the opportunity to create the road map and make specific recommendations that will increase access to quality early childhood education and care. We have the opportunity to impact the lives of Hawai'i's families and *keiki*. If we are diligent in addressing our task and committed to making the most of this opportunity, this may be the time when the scales do tip. If not now, when? Our children are waiting.

