

Entering Kindergartners and Schools They Enter: Making a Difference

By Mary E. Brandt, Ph.D.

Will investments in preschools and other early learning experiences in Hawaii make a difference when our keiki enter kindergarten?

Early childhood educators and advocates throughout the country say, “Yes, they will!”

Energized by this belief, a number of organizations in Hawaii have been making advances in early childhood education over the last few years. For example, Hawaii Association for the Education of Young Children (HAEYC) has overseen rigorous center-based national accreditation of preschool programs to ensure that quality interactions and enriched learning environments are part of every preschooler’s experience. As a result, HAEYC has doubled the number of accredited preschools since beginning this effort, and has over 50 more centers actively working toward accreditation.

Additionally, SPARK, a joint venture of the Good Beginnings Alliance and INPEACE¹ funded by W.K. Kellogg Foundation, has provided parent participation preschools (Keiki Steps) and offered summer pre-K experiences to children who have not attended



preschool. The learning and growth that take place in both programs help to ease the transition to kindergarten by developing foundational skills for kindergarten success.

Moreover, P3, another initiative funded by W.K. Kellogg Foundation, is under way in Hawaii.² Its strategy is to coordinate and support public-private efforts from provisions for early learning

through grade 3 so that all third graders will be reading at the third grade level. In this way, such efforts can have maximum impact to truly make a difference in the current lives and future success of our young children.

Research findings conducted in other states support investing in preschools, early learning experiences, and transition programs prior to kindergarten entrance, particularly for low-income keiki. In fact, high-quality early learning experiences are the foundation for improved high school graduation rates, college attendance, and employment and earnings. Further, it lessens future crime and delinquency and unhealthy behaviors like smoking and drug use. In Hawaii, would strengthening and expanding these investments make a difference?

¹ INPEACE, the Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture, was founded in 1994 in Hawaii.

² Contact Good Beginnings Alliance website for more information on SPARK and P3 initiatives: www.goodbeginnings.org.

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Hawaii State School Readiness Assessment (HSSRA)³

Analyses of data from HSSRA conducted in the fall of each school year help answer this question. Throughout this issue brief, commentaries on the findings are noted in the Implication sections.

What does HSSRA assess?

Fall 2006 was the first year in which almost all public school principals and kindergarten (K) teachers participated in the HSSRA.⁴ These educators also provided background information on their K students and school.

Kindergarten teachers assessed their classrooms of entering students on 24 skills and characteristics foundational to successful early learning. These are grouped into 6 dimensions: Social-Emotional, Approaches to Learning, Physical Well Being, School Behaviors, Literacy Skills, and Math Skills.

The teachers also reported on whether the entering K students had preschool experiences and whether a plan for transitioning children from home/preschool to kindergarten at their elementary school was in place. A transitional plan is extremely important to successful early learning in kindergarten.⁵

³ For detailed information on HSSRA, please see *Guide for Principals and K Teachers* on arch.k12.hi.us.

⁴ Charter schools, Niihau schools, and schools for orthopedically and severely cognitively impaired students are not included in HSSRA State figures.

⁵ See *Learning Early Childhood Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do* (2005) published by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA; and R. Pianta & M. Cox (1999). *The Transition to Kindergarten*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks.

Overall, 628 K teachers in 177 public schools assessed their classrooms.

The 164 principals who participated in the HSSRA assessed 18 school policies and practices that support young children's learning. These are grouped into five dimensions: Transition, Family Communication, Parent Involvement, School Improvement of Early Education, and Kindergarten Classroom Practices.⁶

Entering Kindergartners--Who are they?

The fall 2006 HSSRA data on entering kindergarten classes totaled 12, 379 students consisting of approximately 6.3% certified special education (SPED) students, 13% English as a Second Language Learners (ESLL), and 39% whose family incomes' qualified for the federal free and reduced lunch cost program (FRL), an indicator of poverty.⁷

Typically there is overlap among SPED, ESLL, and FRL. For example, children who are learning English as their second language often come from new immigrant families whose low incomes qualify them for FRL. With these overlapping characteristics in mind,⁸ we have

⁶ Descriptions of HSSRA dimensions are available on <http://arch.k12.hi.us>. Click on SCHOOL and then HSSRA link and download HSSRA Guide.

⁷ Our State's FRL percentage is slightly higher than the most currently available national percentage of 37%. See *Overview of Public Elementary and Secondary Students, Staff, Schools, School Districts, Revenues, and Expenditures* (November 2006). National Center for Educational Statistics, USDOE, p. 2.

⁸ HSSRA data cannot sort out the overlap. For the State overall, approximately 51% of the students have one or

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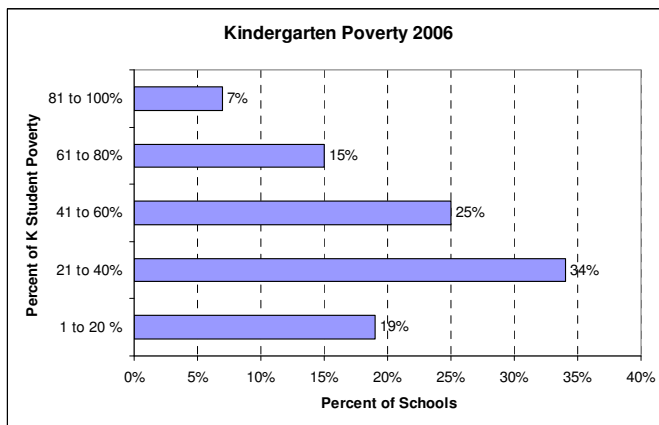
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examined the approximately 5,000 K students from low-income families that comprise the FRL group.

Are there pockets of school poverty for kindergartens across the state?

Yes, kindergarten poverty is distributed very unevenly among our public schools across the state.

Looking at the bar chart below, about 7% of our schools have between 81% and 100% of their kindergartners receiving FRL. These percentages translate into 16 to 20 out of 20 children in a K classroom living in poverty. These can be considered extremely low-income schools.



In contrast, about 19% of our schools could be considered middle class. These schools have between 1% and 20% of kindergartners living in poverty. This means that just 2 to 4 out of 20 K children are from low-income families.

Most notable is that over a third of our schools have from 50% to 100% of their entering K

more of these special needs. This percentage (51%) most likely applies to the kindergarten cohort as well.

children coming from families living in poverty.

By and large, these low-income families are in survival mode and under daily stress. They are hard-pressed to provide the kinds of early educational experiences at home nor able to afford formal preschools that support successful early learning in school.

Implications. Such high percentages of poverty present tremendous challenges for our K teachers and for the schools where they teach.

K teachers with almost all their K students receiving FRL face a truly daunting task of meeting all the kindergarten benchmarks and curriculum standards. Unfortunately, the common response is to lower academic expectations for these children by moving slowly and methodically through the same curriculum.⁹ This strategy does not work as it almost guarantees that these K children will not meet the end-of-year K standards. And the cycle of “low academic expectations leading to low academic performance” is repeated over and over again throughout these students’ school years.

Research stands in direct contrast to this ingrained, common sense notion of what to do. These low-income children need an accelerated

⁹ See D. Grace & B. DeBaryche (November 2006) *Junior Kindergarten Pilot Program Evaluation 2005-2006* on-line at Hawaii Educational Policy Center, University of Hawaii at www.hawaii.edu/hepc/

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curriculum, not a “watered down” one; an enriched and engaging curriculum, not a simplified and non-involving one.¹⁰

In-service training specifically for our K teachers and administrators on developmentally-appropriate enrichment strategies for

High-poverty kindergarten classrooms seem needed. Moreover, K teachers have expressed the need for targeted professional training focused on the developmental nature of the kindergarten learner entering school.¹¹

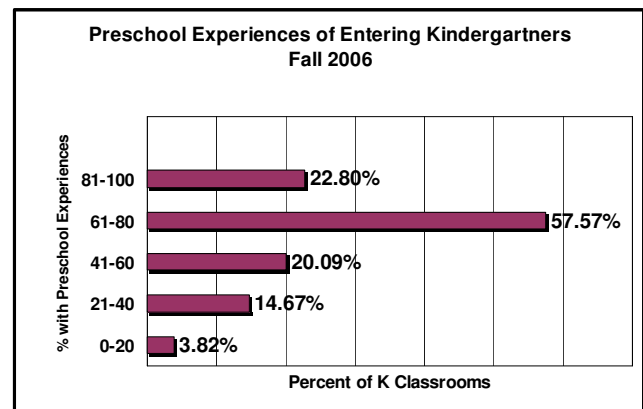
How many have preschool experiences?

In terms of regular, planned early learning experiences (referred to throughout this issue brief as “preschool”), approximately 61% of entering kindergartners had preschool experience.¹²

However, preschool classroom diversity is huge--four K classrooms had no children with previous preschool experience, while 23 K classrooms had 100% of the entering children previously attending preschool.

The bar chart below, *Preschool Experiences*, shows the overall extent of such diversity in preschool experiences for all K classrooms in

the State. In almost 60% of our K classrooms, 12 to 16 of the 20 entering students had preschool experience. That’s the good news. In contrast, about 19% of K classrooms had 12 to 20 of the 20 students without regular early learning experiences to get them off to a good start.



Implications. This diversity in preschool experiences within K classrooms and across K classrooms in the state presents very different instructional challenges to our teachers. For example, one K teacher with just a few keiki without preschool may ponder how to meet those children’s needs while attending to the majority of the class. In another K classroom with almost 100% without preschool, a teacher may wonder where to begin instruction.

Since few of our K teachers (about 22%) meet the early childhood education endorsement requirements,¹³ in-service professional

¹⁰ See M. Goldberg (April 2001). “A Concern for Disadvantaged Students: An Interview with Hank Levin” in *Phi Delta Kappan*, v.82 (no. 8), 632-34. For independent research studies on Accelerated Schools, go to www.acceleratedschools.net, and click on research link.

¹¹ See Grace & DeBaryche (November 2006).

¹² Parents report preschool experiences which include both center-based and other regular early learning experiences at kindergarten registration.

¹³ See HSSRA State Summary 2006-07 on arch.k12.hi.us or goodbeginnings.org websites. The endorsement requires early education course work and practicum beyond the Elementary Education Degree.

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development specifically in early education will help our teachers meet such challenges.

Is there a relationship between preschool and poverty for Hawaii kindergartners?

The answer is “Yes.” There is a statistically significant correlation between the level of preschool experiences and kindergartners’ poverty rates.¹⁴ That is, the higher the poverty rate, the less likely the children come to school with preschool experiences.

Implications. Preschool experiences targeted to geographic areas where families are struggling with poverty make sense. However, the number of four-year-old, subsidized slots in preschool centers is limited. Thus, expanding the number of preschool subsidies for low-income families, like the “Open Doors Program,” would definitely help.

Preschool Experience: Will it make a difference?

If more children attend preschools or have regular planned early learning experiences, will they enter kindergarten more prepared to succeed? “Yes” is the consistent research finding across many states.¹⁵ Is this true for

Hawaii keiki? Let’s look at what HSSRA data tells us.

Does preschool experience make a difference in Hawaii’s kindergarten classrooms?

Do K classrooms with more entering children with preschool experiences perform better on HSSRA? Using the HSSRA fall 2006 data, here’s what we found:

- ◆ A statistically significant relationship between percent of entering kindergartners with preschool experience and the percent who consistently display 23 of the 24 skills and concepts assessed by HSSRA.¹⁶
- ◆ When the 24 skills or characteristics are grouped into the 6 dimensions, the dimensions for Literacy Skills and Math Skills had the strongest relationship with preschool experiences.

In other words, K classrooms with more entering children with preschool experiences also had a greater number of their students with literacy and math skills solidly in place.

Implications. Strengthening the state’s efforts to provide high-quality preschool experiences prior to school entry will help improve the skills needed for successful learning in kindergarten.

What else impacts entering kindergarten literacy and math skills?

¹⁴ Two-tailed Pearson correlations were significant at 0.01 level for school FRL rate and kindergarten FRL rate.

¹⁵ See *The Effects of State Prekindergarten Programs on Young Children’s School Readiness in Five States* by W.S. Barnett, C. Lamy, & K. Jung (December 2005). The National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University, Rutgers, NJ.

¹⁶ Two-tailed Pearson correlations were significant at 0.01 level. One item about “Practices Personal Hygiene” had no relationship with preschool attendance.

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The simple answer is poverty. Since poverty and preschool experiences are related, and preschool experiences and entering literacy and math skills are related, it is not surprising to find a statistically-significant relationship between poverty and entering levels of HSSRA literacy skills and math skills.¹⁷

Bottom line: as poverty rates increase, fewer children start out with these literacy and math skills in place when entering kindergarten.

Implications. Increasing the opportunities for children living in poverty to experience enriched early learning programs prior to K would improve their entering foundational skills. With these implications in mind, do our public schools’ early education policies and practices support such early learning experiences prior to kindergarten?

School Policies and Practices: Transition

School policies and practices that deal with transition to kindergarten can provide positive experiences for children prior to entry into the “big school.” Transition programs help children become familiar with the school campus and typical school-like routines, and just as importantly, become comfortable with trustworthy adults outside their extended family. Moreover, in extended transition programs, particularly important for those without preschool, learning some early literacy skills (e.g., letter-sound correspondence) and

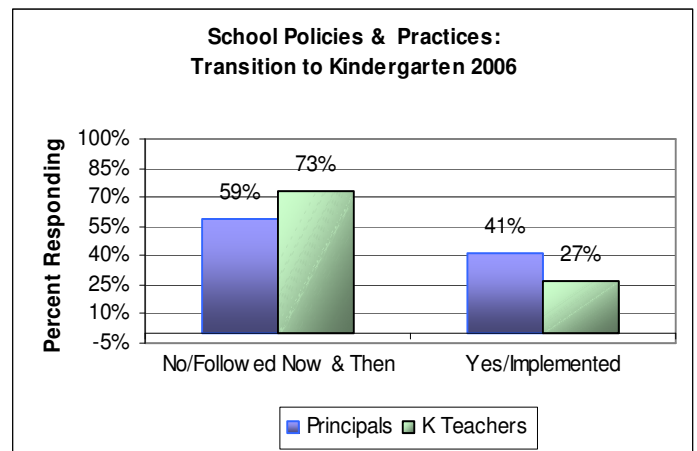
early math skills (e.g., counting and classifying objects) would be an added benefit.

Do our public schools have in place a written transition plan? And is it well implemented?

HSSRA asked these questions of K teachers and the school principal. Here’s what we found:

◆ Overall, 59% of the principals reported that either they did not have a written transition plan or that it was, by and large, not being carried out.

About 73% of our K teachers told us that their school had no transition plan, or gave contradictory responses at the same school. For example, some said “Yes, our school has a transition plan,” while others said “No, our school does not have a transition plan.”



These contradictory responses suggest that if there is a transition plan, it’s not being systematically implemented at the school.

Together, these findings indicate that a large proportion of our public schools are not involved in supporting our keiki’s transition

¹⁷ Pearson correlation coefficient was significant at 0.01 level.

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from home/preschool to the more formal, “big” elementary school.

Implications. Better communication at the school among K teachers and between them and the principal about the school’s transition policies and practices would be an important first step. Certainly, knowing what the school’s transition plan entails would more likely result in its implementation.

Another step for the State DOE deals with principal pre-service and in-service training. DOE pre-service, cohort training for principals could be designed to include school policies and practices that provide the environment and support for successful early learning.

Particular focus could be on transition policies and practices and their importance, since these are required by NCLB for certain Title I schools.

Our DOE in-service training for elementary school principals and teachers could focus on how to best implement school policies and practices in early education and how to evaluate them with an eye toward improvement.

Concluding Thoughts

HSSRA provides valuable, actionable data for Hawaii policy makers, funders, and public school officials. Preschool/early learning experiences and living in poverty do make a difference in the skills that entering kindergarten children bring to school.

HSSRA findings are completely consistent with research carried out in other states. Hawaii is not alone.

The HSSRA findings and their implications support the following conclusion for action by both the public and private sectors:

- ◆ Increase quality preschool and early learning experiences that are geographically-targeted toward low-income families;
- ◆ Implement effective transition programs in our public elementary schools to support entering kindergarten children and their families; and
- ◆ Redesign professional training programs for administrators and kindergarten teachers that incorporate early childhood practices and strategies

These actions will make a difference when our keiki enter kindergarten, particularly for those children living in poverty.

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