

Early learning aid denied based on state's weak plan

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Federal reviewers ranked Hawaii's application for a competitive, \$49 million federal grant to improve the state's early-learning network last among 35 states vying for the money, calling elements of the plan "minimally implemented" and "low quality," documents show.

Hawaii's plan, described as a blueprint for bolstering early education programs statewide, received 135 out of a possible 280 points for meeting key benchmarks outlined in the Race to the Top — Early Learning Challenge.

Hawaii finished above only Puerto Rico, which got 104 points.

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Scoring details for the Race were released following the Obama administration's announcement Friday that nine states will share \$500 million in Early Learning funds. At the front of the winning pack was North Carolina, with 270 points. Massachusetts (267), Washington (264), Delaware (261.2) and Ohio (261) rounded out the top five.

Hawaii's ranking is a significant blow to the state's early learning community, which in recent years has worked to improve kindergarten readiness, step up data collection and expand preschool opportunities.

But officials said Hawaii's score in the challenge shouldn't be seen as a reflection of the state's plan, as much as evidence that the state has a lot of work to do to ensure all children have access to early learning programs.

"We're starting at a place of disadvantage," said Terry Lock, the state's Early Childhood coordinator. "We're not moving slowly but ... we have not invested in our early care and education system as other states have."

Hawaii is one of 10 states with no state-funded preschool program.

Lock also had just seven weeks to complete the application.

It was her first major assignment after being hired in June.

Lock emphasized that even though Hawaii wasn't selected as a winner, the state's plan for making reforms to early childhood education in the islands will go forward. Some elements of the plan are already being implemented.

Others, she said, will likely be put on hold until funding is secured.

Hawaii's early learning plan calls for the use of a new provider rating system based on early childhood education standards, the creation of a new Department of Early Childhood and efforts to measure children's outcomes.

Reviewers said the state's application didn't show a strong existing framework to build upon, and they questioned how some of the benchmarks would be met. One reviewer criticized "vague references," an incomplete data table and "ambiguity" as to how some key goals were achievable.

David Tom, director of public policy at the nonprofit Good Beginnings Alliance, said Hawaii's application was "a lot of effort in a short period of time" and resulted in many different entities finally working together.

"We didn't get the badly needed funds," he said. "But I think it was a good start, and I'm hopeful that great progress will be made in the future."

Robert Peters, chairman of the state's Early Learning Council, agreed, saying that "what we have is a plan." He added, "It may take us a bit longer because we didn't get the money. But we're not discouraged."

Correction: Hawaii's plan received 135 out of a possible 280 points. An earlier version of this story online and in the print edition said there were a possible 300 points.

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