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Early learning touted in study

Education advocates hope findings will lead to investments

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For every dollar that the state invests in early childhood education, \$4.20 can be saved in the form of reduced spending on remedial education, crime, health and welfare, according to a new study released today by the Good Beginnings Alliance.

The findings, included in the report "The Economic Benefits of Investment in Early Education for Hawaii," come as the state's newly formed Early Learning Council struggles to garner state funding to establish a statewide early learning system.

Education advocates are hoping that the study will compel elected officials and business leaders to consider investments in early childhood education.

"We understand what is happening with the economy. We feel it's important to keep this on the top burner so when funds become available we can invest in the early years," said Liz Chun, executive director of the Good Beginnings Alliance, a Hawai'i advocacy organization for early childhood education.

"This is a time to not disregard early learning, but to actually look more clearly at why it's a good investment for the long term," Chun said.

Not only does quality early learning help children develop cognitive skills, but it can also have various social benefits, including lower crime rates and increased tax revenues, the study says.

The analysis was based on recommendations last year by the Early Learning Educational Task Force, which proposed a 10-year plan to develop a preschool system in Hawai'i at a cost of \$145 million annually, or \$11,605 per child.

The total projected social benefits for Hawai'i — including lower crime rates, less need for remedial education — would be \$48,410. That's roughly 4.2 times the cost of the program, according to the findings.

State Rep. Lyla Berg, D-18th (Kahala, 'Aina Haina, Kuli'ou'ou), vice chairwoman of the House Committee on Education, said the state's Early Learning Council is working on a strictly volunteer basis with no money. The council is tasked with creating an early learning system that would be a private-public partnership, with services offered by existing and new childcare or preschool facilities.

Berg said the council's budget was eliminated in the governor's budget request to the Legislature and that lawmakers are now working to get the council at least \$250,000 to hire an executive director, staff members and set up an office.

"The concern I have is, if we're looking at building the science and technology industries ... and different components of our economy, the people to be involved in those components are being born now. We can't afford to wait," Berg said.

Chun said the state is likely to receive at least \$8 million for early childhood from federal stimulus money. It's still not clear where it may go, she said.

"What's important to note is there is expected to be some new funds, but that's taken in the spectrum of we know things have been cut," Chun said.
