

## Early education can improve test scores

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Two trends in Hawaii education are worth noting, both of them encouraging.

One is that fourth- and eighth-graders again have shown gains in reading and math scores in the National Assessment of Educational Progress results. The downside in the results released this week is that the students were still performing below those in most other states, except for the bright spot of fourth-grade math scores, which are on par nationally. But the upward trend shows that the increased rigor being implemented in public schools seems to be having the desired effect, and that is certainly worth lauding.

Second, there is a growing recognition in Hawaii public policy of the importance of early education in long-term academic achievement. As part of the federally funded Race to the Top initiative, about 800 more Hawaii students will be subsidized to attend preschool. This is part of the initiative's focus on improving opportunities in low-income areas dubbed "zones of school innovation," including the Nanakuli-Waianae communities and the Kau, Keeau and Pahoehoe areas of Hawaii island.

Beyond that, the state Department of Education has submitted a proposal for a \$50 million grant to improve the early-education system. The plan's components include instituting a system for rating the quality of child-care providers who, for many working families, are among the key players in a child's early education. That is due to be piloted this spring. The other elements are more complex: a system for tracking educational outcomes for children — a work already in progress — and the creation of a state Department of Early Childhood in 2015.

In the next few years the Abercrombie administration will have to demonstrate that the entirely valid goal of boosting early education merits the creation of a separate government bureaucracy, with all the costs that will bring. On the one hand, early-childhood concerns overlap bailiwicks of education, social services and health. But the counterargument is that early learning provides the foundation for academic success later in life, and that it's better seated within the DOE. The right decision will depend on how the administration frames its vision for the new agency.

However it's delivered, a sharper focus on early education is defensible. A 2008 study commissioned by the Good Beginnings Alliance, a Hawaii nonprofit, projected that money spent on early education pays off more than four-fold in averted costs for lost productivity and crime.

There's one more crucial role to be filled in the campaign for a more robust educational system: that of Hawaii's parents, who should embrace their responsibilities as their child's first teachers.

Some worthy efforts are being made to cultivate that awareness, including programs of Kamehameha Schools' Ka Pua Initiative that involve parents in nurturing and teaching children, starting at prenatal stages and continuing through preparation for kindergarten.

The focus has been on parents living on the economically distressed Waianae coast, home to many of the Native Hawaiian residents that Kamehameha serves. The message here is empowering: Regardless of income or social status, every parent can have the resources to give their child a good start in school.

It's only by concurrently working these two reform tracks — raising the bar for students now in the public schools system while improving the classroom readiness of the generation to follow — that Hawaii can truly transform its educational outcomes.

Scores are getting better incrementally, and that's good, but there's much more work to be done to power improvements by leaps and bounds.

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