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Even in tough times our keiki should be a priority.

By Elisabeth Chun

Bravo to Gov. Neil Abercrombie for his recent selection of Terry Lock as the state's early childhood coordinator and the reallocation of funds to support Healthy Start, a nationally recognized child prevention program.

Kudos also to the state Board of Education for making the wise decision to not eliminate kindergarten for our 5-year-olds and to the state Department of Education for determining that kindergarten is a critical core program.

These decisions clearly indicate that our young children are a top priority for these leaders.

Hawaii was a visionary pioneer at prioritizing our young children with the establishment of kindergartens in the 1890s, and full-day kindergartens in 1943 — in the midst of World War II and a tight economy.

However, we are still one of 12 "wilderness states" that do not have some type of state-funded early learning program.

We must resume the bold leadership of our storied past for the sake of our keiki.

World-renowned scientists and economists such as Jack Shonkoff from Harvard University and Nobel Prize winner James Heckman from the University of Chicago have proven that investing in the youngest years reaps the greatest benefits to society.

Additionally, a number of respected longitudinal studies have shown investing in quality early education programs results in much lower expenditures later on.

Here in Hawaii, we spend almost \$40,000 a year per each prisoner and only \$11,060 a year per each elementary student.

In comparison, parents spend just over \$7,000 for a child to attend preschool.

Moreover, in several elementary schools in low socioeconomic communities, only 44 percent of the kindergarteners had attended preschool, and 49 percent of the third-grade students were reading at grade level. That's less than one out of every two students.

These two numbers are related as children learn to read from birth to age 8, and read to learn from age 9 on up. Do the math.

The federal government also recognizes the need to support a comprehensive early childhood system in order to compete in a global economy.

To this end, it has announced two new grants: Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant (\$500 million) and Invest in Innovation (i3) Grant (\$150 million).

Every day we hear about our national deficit and the importance of balancing the budget, yet Congress and the federal government are convinced that investing in our youngest children is a national priority.

These grants seek to transform a patchwork of disconnected programs of varying qualities and uneven access into a coordinated system that prepares children for success in school and in life.

Even in these challenging budget times, we need our Legislature and policymakers to make our keiki a top funding priority for the benefit of the children, their families and our entire state.

To accomplish this, the "Be My Voice Hawaii" campaign is being launched to give Hawaii's children a loud and united voice; stay tuned for more information on this.

Will you be our children's voice, too?