



# Star Advertiser

## *A Free Lunch is No Cause to Celebrate.*

There is a disturbing trend—Hawai‘i’s keiki are increasingly at risk. The October 10, 2011 story, “More isle children receive free lunch,” states the number of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch has risen to 53 percent, the highest in two decades. “Free lunch” isn’t something to cheer about; instead, it is an indicator of poverty that deeply affects our children and their school achievement.

In the October 3, 2011 article “Is ‘No Child Left Behind’ Necessary?” former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch cites family income as the leading predictor of successful standardized education test scores. Children from lower incomes are not less capable of success but they do lack the same early learning opportunities as their wealthier counterparts. These opportunities are critical as 90 percent of a child’s brain is developed by age five. Tie this fact to the August 17, 2011 story, “Poverty Drags Kids Down,” that Hawai‘i’s keiki are growing up in families struggling below the poverty line—we see the increased risk of our children dropping out of school and earning lower wages as adults—perpetuating a cycle of limited opportunity.

The lagging economy has also resulted in a significant reduction of vital early childhood programs (e.g., Healthy Start, preschool subsidies) for children and families who need them the most, despite the outcry from early childhood advocates and families. However, these are real children and families who are suffering.

Compounding these cuts is a state law passed in 2010 that will delay school entry for approximately 5,500 late born (August–December) children starting in school year 2013-2014. With the pending termination, families will have to pay for another year of early learning for their children, a potentially unaffordable cost, or provide care in a setting that does not provide a quality early learning component. The end result will be an increased number of young children starting school not ready to succeed.

In 2010, only a little more than two out of five kindergarten students in low income school areas had previously attended preschool. Going forward, we note that less than one out of two third grade students in these same schools were reading at grade level--potentially falling further behind as reading becomes their primary vehicle to learning in the fourth grade and beyond. These figures validate Ravitch’s belief that family income predicts student achievement unless strategies are targeted to increase access for low income families.

We cannot put our children’s future at risk and watch another generation struggle with the achievement gap. In 1943, Hawai‘i had the moral courage (in the midst of World War II and a

tight economy) to offer full-day kindergarten to all children who turned 5 years of age in a calendar year. We can't stop now and let these late-born 5,500 children "go by the wayside" in 2013.

Facing a continued economic challenge, the Legislature has tough decisions to make. However, cuts to these kinds of educational programs will cost Hawai'i a lot more in the future. In fact, many well-respected economists and scientists throughout the country have concluded that investing in high quality, early childhood programs will result in astounding economic and social benefits for our children, families, states, and nation.

Hawai'i must step forward and be the voice for our keiki who cannot speak for themselves. Thus, we have launched the public-will building campaign, *Be My Voice! Hawai'i*, to elevate issues such as delayed school entry to our families and communities. They can then directly communicate their priorities to elected leaders. Unless we do something now, our children will continue to pay the price.

**Submitted by Elisabeth Chun - Executive Director, Good Beginnings Alliance**

Elisabeth "Liz" Chun is the Executive Director of the Good Beginnings Alliance, Hawai'i's statewide 501(c) (3) intermediary organization that spearheads efforts to create a coordinated early childhood education and care system. Ms. Chun received a B.A. in history from Carleton College and a M.Ed. in educational psychology with a special education focus from the University of Hawai'i. Her experiences range from preschool special education teacher and director, to a Head Start trainer, to developing a nation-wide business focused on providing early childhood materials and training to families and educational consultants. Prior to joining Good Beginnings in 1997, Liz was in the Governor's Office of Children and Youth as the program manager for Hawai'i's federal Child Care and Development Block Grant. In July 1996, she transferred to the Department of Human Service, the new lead agency for the Child Care and Development Block Grant/Child Care Development Fund. Liz was recently honored as recipient of the Junior League of Honolulu's 2011 Laura N. Dowsett Award and is the organization's past president. As a volunteer, Liz' continues her commitment to issues involving Hawai'i's children. She currently serves on the Samuel N. and Mary Castle Advisory Board, and the Ho'okako'o Corporation supporting conversion charter schools and early education in Hawai'i.

