

GOOD BEGINNINGS

www.goodbeginnings.org

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5 Ways to Advocate for Change

Recently, Good Beginnings Alliance kicked off the grassroots “Be My Voice” endorsement campaign urging citizens to speak up for our children’s best interests. By signing the endorsement (www.bemyvoicehawaii.org), the Hawai’i community is acknowledging the need to invest in our children, making their success a top priority in our state. The reaction to the campaign has been overwhelmingly positive, as the community rallies together to make children’s voices heard. This inspiring involvement from the community can be continued by identifying other ways that families, businesses and communities can advocate for children so our keiki have access to affordable, quality educational opportunities, family strengthening and health services. By launching and supporting a comprehensive children’s campaign we can make a difference in our keiki’s lives, and here we offer five strategies to make this initiative a reality.

1 Be steadfast. Real change takes time. In order to create a children’s campaign that will result in successful outcomes, it’s important to take the time and develop a comprehensive plan of action. This plan would address needs in order to support an effective initiative, including: surveying the community through polling and focus groups in order to determine strategies; engaging allies in the media and business communities; building transparency and accountability into programs; and identifying a unified message and raising sufficient funds to run a professional campaign.

2 Know the power of going viral. One of the key components of The Children’s Trust Campaign in Miami-Dade County, Florida, was grassroots mobilization. The leaders of that movement—which passed a parcel tax that brings in more than \$100 million a year to fund children’s services—

knew it would be critical to build public will in order to support the measure. “Pass it along” became a catch phrase for the campaign’s weekly get-the-vote-out emails, asking recipients to keep forwarding them on. Campaign Manager Susan Vodicka knew the message went viral when her own emails were being sent back to her.

3 Communication is key. When advocating for children, it’s important to engage all different kinds of communities through a respectful approach and eagerness to partner, not prescribe. It’s also necessary to address different ways of communication such as engaging the public through Community Cafés or printing materials in multiple languages. Communication also extends to media coverage, so it’s critical to catalog every article written on or including the initiative and subsequently create a comprehensive list of media contacts and allies.

4 Identify a unified message. In today’s world, we are bombarded with messages – on television, online, traveling down the highway, walking through the supermarket – so it’s critical to create clear and effective messages and develop vehicles through which these messages can be easily understood and inspire action. In short, we need to cut through the communications clutter in order to catalyze a movement that supports comprehensive services and quality education for all children. We accomplish this goal by understanding our different audiences and communicating the answers to three questions: Why is this initiative important to the community? How will it directly affect my family’s life? What can I do to get involved?

5 Respond to opposition, you may gain an ally instead. When Dave Lawrence of The Children’s Trust approached Governor Jeb Bush to support the initiative, the former governor raised questions surrounding outcomes and accountability, and as Lawrence recalls, wondering whether The Trust was “throwing away money with no controls.” To respond, Lawrence wrote Bush three lengthy letters over a three-week period outlining in detail how The Trust maintains rigorous standards, including yearly fiscal audits. Bush was convinced, eventually appearing in TV and print ads and contributing to the campaign.

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Message from the Executive Director



Dear Friends,

Advocacy is defined as “the act of pleading for, supporting, or recommending.” For Good Beginnings Alliance, advocacy means encouraging families, educators and the general public to view serving as champions for children as their kuleana. We

seek to empower all people – parents, providers, business leaders, philanthropists – to help shape the future of our keiki who need a big voice to make their future brighter and enable them to succeed in life.

Advocacy for our smallest citizens requires many of us working together. It will take a collective effort to effect positive change and make children’s issues a top priority in our communities, state, and nation. Whether it be signing an endorsement to say that children are a top priority, encouraging others to sign on, speaking up at a public hearing, emailing your legislator, or letting your local school or early learning program know that you will be there to lend your support – we all can make a difference, when we try.

In this newsletter, we feature four different articles on advocacy. First, we highlight five strategies to advocate for positive change; secondly, we tell a story of how speaking up for children can make a difference and influence policies for them; thirdly, an article reporting on how Harvard University Professor Dr. Jack Shonkoff’s visit to Hawai’i offered valuable advice regarding the science of early brain development and success later on in life; and lastly we share the experiences of Mr. Sergio Bendixen, the chief strategist for the successful Children’s Trust Campaign in Miami-Dade County, which now raises approximately \$100 million a year for children.

In Catherine Ryan Hyde’s novel *Pay It Forward* that was also made into a movie, it is described as an obligation to do three good deeds for people who cannot accomplish this on their own as a repayment of a good deed that one receives. Our keiki cannot advocate for themselves. It is up to all of us to carry the mantle of advocacy for Hawai’i’s young children to make our state a better place for everyone. And, in paying it forward we will ensure our keiki receive the opportunity for a successful future.



Elisabeth Chun
Executive Director
Good Beginnings Alliance

Expert Strategist Helps Hawai'i Put Keiki First

The leaders of GBA, along with members of One Voice Hawai'i, and early childhood education professionals, were given the opportunity to address our state's early education issues with Sergio Bendixen, the chief strategist for the successful Children's Trust Campaign in Miami-Dade County. With budgets dwindling, the state of our children's education has reached a critical stage, where Hawai'i's keiki need access to quality early learning programs and family services that ensure their safety and educational success.

Mr. Bendixen's expertise has been called on by Washington to win campaigns but arguably his impact is felt most deeply by the citizens of his home state of Florida. His strategy for The Children's Trust Campaign, which raises approximately \$100 million a year to help ensure thousands of children have access to quality education and healthcare, has changed the lives of thousands of children and families. Mr. Bendixen builds campaigns that engage and empower

communities. An innovative pollster, he relies on awareness, research, and a public assembly to unify people

around a common cause.

Replicating the success of The Children's Trust in Hawai'i would change the face of early childhood education. Today, less than 10 percent of Hawai'i's public school kindergarten classes can report that 75 percent of the keiki meet school standards. This statistic underscores a critical need to ensure that children are prepared for the first day of class.

As part of a two-day intensive workshop, Mr. Bendixen shared his experiences in building The Children's Trust Campaign, urging members of the Early Learning Council to build support around the idea of bringing a similar campaign to Hawai'i. Additional private meetings were held with early childhood advocates and leaders to gain valuable feedback from Mr. Bendixen, and

solidify a partnership that will allow Hawai'i to develop programs that put our keiki first.

In order to support and propel this campaign, the early learning advocates and Mr. Bendixen established several cornerstones of the movement, including

focusing on economic benefits and mitigating social factors that affect learning opportunities for children. Statistics show that every \$1.00 invested in quality early childhood education will yield a return of \$4.20 in savings of future interventions and programs. Similarly, reducing neglect, exploitation, violence and risky behaviors that create

barriers to emotional health and school readiness will serve our children while saving the state money in the long term. Establishing risk assessment and intensive home visiting for the highest risk families of newborns in all communities and incorporating effective evidence-based program improvements will provide a foundation for change in the lives of keiki who may not otherwise have the opportunity of quality early learning.



Sergio Bendixen

Photo courtesy of Makana Studios



Dr. Jack Shonkoff

Science Validates Early Childhood Investments

A growing number of economists and business leaders throughout the country are seeing proof that investing in quality early childhood

programs, from birth through age five, will help secure our country's economic future. Scientific research has been a key indicator to underscore the links between early brain development and success later on in life. Last summer, Good Beginnings Alliance (GBA) and Hawai'i's Early Learning Council hosted Dr. Jack Shonkoff, Professor of Child Health and Development and founding director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, to present this critical relationship to an audience of political candidates, philanthropic foundations, and early childhood advocates.

Children's brains are built over time,

starting before birth and continuing into adulthood. In the first few years of life, the child's early experiences affect the quality of the brain architecture by building a sturdy or fragile foundation for all learning, health, and behavior that will follow. The quantity and quality of these earliest experiences make a difference. For example, Dr. Shonkoff has explored how poverty, violence and neglect can impact the brain development of children. In one of his studies, this "toxic stress" was measured and shown to produce elevated levels of cortisol. At sustained high levels, cortisol has been associated with learning impairments and difficulties in anxiety management.

Dr. Shonkoff explained that children's brains and skills are shaped by the "serve and return" interaction between children and their parents and other caregivers in the community. If these "interactions" are absent, unreliable, or inappropriate, they can lead to later learning and behavior problems. In fact, he suggested that barriers to

educational achievement start emerging as early as 18 months. On the flip side, positive reinforcement and engaged interaction help create a solid emotional foundation that prepares the child for future learning.

According to Dr. Shonkoff, communities can focus on several outcomes to ensure their keiki will develop emotionally and intellectually, and succeed in school and beyond. Reducing "toxic stress" in childhood through preventative programs will lead to a healthier and more productive society. These interventions will also reduce lifelong burdens to the medical sector. Lastly, a science-based approach to child maltreatment could reduce later mental illness and violent crime by promoting healing relationships.

Of course, preventative programs will require funding in the near term but save the state money in the long run. So the question is no longer, "How can we afford to invest in early childhood services?" We must ask ourselves, "How can we afford not to?"

Strong Advocacy Influences Policy for Children

When government makes the right decisions, the resulting policies deliver wins for children and their families throughout Hawai'i and all over America. These successes are measured not one child at a time, but tens, hundreds, and thousands of children who benefit by positive policy changes. However, small and big wins alike don't happen by accident. It takes mobilization, effort and community support to deliver changes in government policy. Good Beginnings Alliance's (GBA) strong nonpartisan advocacy combined with the voices of other early childhood champions, parents, and countless others helps support policy successes.

GBA partnered with other leading children's advocates to educate government officials and the general public on issues that affect America's children, especially marginalized keiki who deserve access to quality learning opportunities and services that promote whole child wellness. In November 2009, the Department of Human Services (DHS) announced a plan to reduce child care subsidies for needy children and families due to their budget challenges. GBA, along with their partners, alerted communities of the potential negative impact on children and families, mobilized philanthropic foundations to show a united front, and organized a media campaign that made the front pages of the local newspapers and the "six o'clock news" on television.

The public testimonies at the DHS public hearing were overwhelming, and government officials quickly sought to find an interim solution. Thus, DHS delayed this program change implementation by one month and transferred over \$7 million in TANF funds to implement a temporary subsidy program. Thanks to DHS' quick action, a number of affected families were able to keep their children in licensed childcare or preschools until the end of the school and fiscal year on June 30, 2010.

Of course, this solution was only temporary, as we must keep in mind the support all families need in order to send their children to quality early education programs. Government tries its best to do right by the people, but they need help in understanding the magnitude of a problem and potential

solutions at hand. Moreover, government listens when many people speak up. The voices of the families and communities often need help in getting organized, focused and heard. GBA is helping to provide this leadership and focus for effective public advocacy for families and communities—and especially for our young children who don't have an opportunity to speak for themselves.



Be My Voice

Please sign the "Be My Voice Hawai'i" endorsement now and help make the success of our keiki a top priority in Hawai'i! Do you believe that our keiki deserve the opportunity to succeed in school and in life? Do you believe our children deserve access to affordable and accessible quality educational opportunities, health and family strengthening services? If so, show your support and sign the endorsement at www.bemyvoicehawaii.org now! We urge you to speak up for our children and be their voice!



Transforming the Lives of Hawai'i's Young Children