

COMMENTARY

Putting our keiki first pays big dividends

By Liz Chun

Since declaring this imperative in its Oct. 7, 2007, article (The Honolulu Advertiser), The Voices of Educators note the passion with which our community is now engaged in dialogue about the urgency for adopting a vision and a plan for a long-term investment in our keiki, and the well-being of all who live in Hawai'i.

Having shared its vision with the Legislature on Jan. 3, "Keiki First: A Statewide Early Learning System for Hawaii," the Early Learning Task Force is working closely with policymakers in the House of Representatives and the Senate to develop a sustainable plan to support this vision.

To encourage a wide discussion of the issues, we pose this question: How will the proposed investment in early education shape our communities and our future?

For your consideration, we believe that quality early education:

1. PROMOTES HEALTHY BRAIN DEVELOPMENT.

Brain research now tells us that children begin their learning even before they are born and that nearly 85 percent of a child's intellect, personality and social skills are developed by the time a child is 5 years of age. Moreover, by age 6 there are large and preventable gaps between the development and academic abilities of high and low-income children.

2. DECREASES THE "LEARNING GAP" BETWEEN LOW-INCOME/ EDUCATION FAMILIES' CHILDREN AND CHILDREN FROM MIDDLE-TO-HIGH-INCOME/EDUCATION FAMILIES.

Almost 40 percent of our young children live in families who cannot afford to send their children to early education programs. Additionally, the early childhood programs that receive federal and state subsidies — such as Head Start — are filled to capacity and have waiting lists. Thus, quality early education is a must-do to help our young children bridge this "learning gap" and just as importantly, provide them the tool to "break the cycle of poverty" for themselves and their children when they become adults.

3. PREPARES YOUNG CHILDREN TO SUCCEED IN SCHOOL.

Many of our young children are entering kindergarten unprepared to start school. According to the 2007 Hawai'i State School Readiness Assessment, our public school kindergarten teachers reported that less than 18 percent of the classes had most of their children possessing adequate early literacy skills. Why is this so important? Learning to read is a building-block process. Children in pre-kindergarten to grade 3

learn to read, whereas children in grade 4 and on read to learn. Preparing our children to succeed in school early in life will have significant and far-reaching outcomes for years to come.

4. SUPPORTS THE PARENT AND THE PARENTS' CHOICE AS TO THE BEST PROGRAM FOR THEIR CHILD; PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY.

There are an increasing number of "gap group" families who because of their financial situation, their choices of early education opportunities for their children are limited, often unstable, and of unknown quality. The proposed program for 4-year-olds is offered in three different settings: center-based preschool; family child care; and family child interaction learning programs to allow parents to decide which program best meets their family needs.

Highly successful quality education, including early childhood, is built on a three-legged stool: parents, child and educational programs. When one leg of this stool (e.g., parental involvement) is lacking, it is very difficult for a child to succeed in school and life. Thus, this proposed program will provide the much-needed support for parents to encourage good habits of parental involvement with parents of young children.

5. PROVIDES SAFE, NURTURING PLACES FOR CHILDREN WHILE PARENTS ARE WORKING AND REDUCES JOB ABSENTEEISM.

In 2005, Hawai'i conducted a study on the economic impact of the early education and care industry on our state's economy and found that this industry employs more than 9,400 people and more than \$240 million earned income annually. Moreover, this industry directly impacts families of children who earn more than \$5.1 billion in Hawai'i's overall economy. The early care and education industry facilitates the success of other industries in our state.

6. PRODUCES LONG-TERM EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS.

For the child, a quality early education program teaches social skills such as problem solving, team building and interpersonal communications that will benefit our young children for a lifetime — especially when they enter the workforce as adults. Just as importantly, these skills will help our young children later become contributing citizens to our communities, state, nation and the world.

For the state, long-term studies of high-quality early childhood programs such as Michigan High Scope and Illinois' Chicago Parent Child Centers showed a significant decrease in special education placement, grade retention, school dropouts and crime. The bottom line is these quality early learning programs resulted in considerable educational and societal dollar savings.

7. INVESTS IN HAWAII'S FUTURE — OUR KEIKI.

At the start of every year, financial experts advise people to examine their investment portfolios so that they will be financially prepared for the future. We must have a similar attitude for investing in quality early education for our children, who are our future.

There is no better investment than the quality early education for our children. Let's put our Keiki First!