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Early learning critical for successful future

By Liz Chun

This commentary is part of a series of articles prepared by Voices of Educators, a non-profit coalition designed to foster debate and public policy change within Hawai'i's public education system, in partnership with The Advertiser. It appears in Focus on the first Sunday of the month.

"Schools of the Future" is the theme for the Voices of Educators beginning this month and continuing through October. If you are a parent, an educator, a business leader or a policymaker, we hope our next three articles will catalyze dialogue and action.

Focusing first on early education, then moving to elementary and secondary schools in September, and higher education in October, we will strive to make a case that our education system must adapt to a new world.

What will students need to know and be able to do in this new world, and what will schools need to offer students to prepare them for success in college, careers and citizenship?

The challenges we face for early education are already evident. We are painfully aware that developing nations such as China, as well as more familiar western countries such as France and Sweden, are mobilized for successful schooling by recognizing that the early years are a crucial time for children.

Even before research and brain scans instructed us that 90 percent of brain development happens by the time a child is 5 years old, these and other countries had already dedicated significant resources to building a foundation for learning for young children.

Knowing that positive attitudes for learning are shaped in the early years, that good teaching can enhance curiosity, that stimulating learning environments advance language development leading to higher levels of literacy — we can easily see what building blocks need to be in place very early if we reasonably wish for later success in math and science.

Despite steadfast efforts by many over the past few decades, we know such early learning environments are not available to many children in Hawai'i. And we know that without a good early education, the journey through elementary school will be compromised, the prospects for high school dim, and the likelihood of matriculating in college improbable.

We have a moral imperative in Hawai'i to take swift action to create a new early education system with high probability for success. Act 14, recently approved by our State Legislature, creates a new set of conditions capable of sustaining a long-term, future-oriented effort to remedy our past failures.

Most important, we now have a vision for early education that will build capacity and empower our community to create dramatically new kinds of early learning programs for toddlers and preschoolers born over the next few decades. The prospects for a good life for these children will be enhanced if we do our work well.

What will that take? The new vision for successful early learning must be adopted by everyone in our

community. It will require new definitions of quality, the dedication of more resources to what we educators call P-3 (provisions for early learning through grade three), along with an enduring belief that more and more children will complete the P-20 continuum (provisions for early learning through graduate school) and emerge as leaders for the future.

The commitment requires agreement that resources must be invested to provide well-qualified and highly trained teachers for all young children, create new standards and curricula aligned with new world expectations, and provide smaller classes with enriched learning environments that nurture and stimulate young minds.

Young minds are naturally curious, inquisitive and eager to learn, and are a resource we must not squander. Knowing that schooling has the potential to either enhance or diminish these natural tendencies over time, the quest for better quality becomes essential to schools for the future. We must work together to create better quality, beginning today.

We are imagining newly designed early learning programs in which cognitive, social, emotional and physical development are the norm, sustained by positive interactions with peers and the expectation that young children are natural problem-solvers with intrinsic needs to know and learn.

We are imagining newly designed programs in which learning in the early years is action-oriented, in classrooms that are colorful, exciting places bursting with energy and creativity. Picture early learning programs with environments that are an extension of the home, that are places that children yearn to return to each day, and in which lives will be shaped by powerful and positive forces for good.

We are imagining transitions from home to preschool to kindergarten to the primary grades that are smooth and seamless, during which momentum and confidence builds, during which curiosity leads to a desire for reading, during which problem-solving leads to skill with numbers. Picture early learning programs abounding with art, music, dance, exploration, creative play with peers, children imitating strong adult role models, and in which a feeling of being safe and loved leads to lifelong self-confidence.

Please join us in creating early learning programs and schools for the future for young children in Hawai'i. The Keiki First Steps program enabled by the enactment of Act 14 just one month ago will require all of our best efforts and we must not lose the momentum created by this historic legislation.

A next step is the upcoming P-3 Summit to be convened on Aug. 27 at Hilton Hawaiian Village. There, educators, business leaders and policy makers will work together to imagine and create the continuum that can lead to schools for the future.

Voices of Educators is composed of some of Hawai'i's top education experts, including: Liz Chun, executive director of Good Beginnings Alliance; Patricia Hamamoto, superintendent of the Department of Education; Christine Sorensen, dean of the University of Hawai'i's College of Education; Donald B. Young, Hawai'i Educational Policy Center; Roger Takabayashi from the Hawai'i State Teachers Association; Sharon Mahoe of the Hawai'i Teacher Standards Board; Alvin Nagasako of the Hawai'i Government Employees Association; and Robert Witt of the Hawai'i Association of Independent Schools. Visit their Web site at www.hawaii.edu/voice
