

Preschool decline must be reversed

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The economic downturn that has ravaged state and federal budgets certainly has taken its toll over the past few years. One of the most regrettable victims has been the academic future of many of Hawaii's young students — and now the state must find ways to reverse a downward trend.

The cause: a worrisome decline in enrollment at isle preschools, according to data from the state Department of Education. The overall drop of about 3 percentage points since 2008 may not sound so devastating: The numbers for the current school year show that 58 percent of Hawaii kindergarteners attended preschool the year before, compared with 61 percent three years earlier.

However, digging a little deeper into the tally uncovers the cause for the real concern. Schools in lower-income areas are showing a far more drastic drop in the proportion of kindergarteners who have that crucial year of preschool preparation. In some places, the decline was sudden; in others it's been a trend extending over a few years:

- » Kalihi Kai Elementary — Only about 30 percent of the current kindergarteners attended preschool, a drop of 26 percentage points compared with last year.
- » Puuhale Elementary had only 27 percent of its incoming kindergarteners with preschool experience, compared with 45 percent in 2010-2011.
- » Of Aiea Elementary's kindergarten class, only 28 percent attended preschool, down from 52 percent in 2008.

This is of particular concern to organizations such as the Good Beginnings Alliance. The group, along with many other educational advocates, make the persuasive case that early-learning experience prepares children for success in the years before they enter kindergarten. Socioeconomic challenges already complicate academic pursuits for many children, and now many more of Hawaii's poorer keiki are going to start out behind, said Liz Chun, the alliance's executive director.

"No child wants to be in the one-third of the classroom that can't do what the other children can do," Chun said.

One countermeasure deserving of support that she proposes is to readjust the federal subsidies that states receive to underwrite early-education opportunities. Subsidies have been issued on a sliding scale according to family income, but when funding cuts hit in 2010, the Department of Human Services under the Lingle administration reduced the subsidy across the board, Chun said. She rightly argues that it would be better to concentrate available funds where it is most needed: by the poorest children, whose families had little hope of finding any additional money for even a slightly higher co-pay.

The unintended consequence of discouraging many poorer families is that preschools often then lost some funding for other federal programs because low-income enrollment had fallen. The Abercrombie administration ought to revise rules to help the families that need it most.

Further, the state and the nonprofit sector should find ways of bolstering another form of early education by supporting a range of programs empowering family caregivers to be their children's first teachers.

In 2008, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 2878, establishing the Keiki First Steps early-learning system, a way to coordinate and oversee existing programs for children from birth to kindergarten. It was never funded — and budgetary shortages are sure to persist this session — but lawmakers should at least consider providing some resources to help the fledgling early-learning council get started.

Children only get one chance to make a good beginning at education. The starting-line faltering that Hawaii has witnessed during these fiscally difficult times simply can't be accepted as the new normal. The commitment to early education must get back on track.

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