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HAWAII'S **Complete** SOURCE

OPINION

Posted on: Sunday, October 11, 2009

Early education should be top priority

Corporations can contribute toward preparing keiki

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By Liz Chun

This commentary is part of a series of articles prepared by Voices of Educators, a nonprofit coalition designed to foster debate and public policy change within Hawaii's public education system, in partnership with The Advertiser.



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Investing in early childhood education and care is sound economics.

Simply put, for Hawaii to compete successfully in a global marketplace, community leaders and policy makers must have the vision and the courage to create a viable, sustainable early education system.

This week, a number of our state's business, government and community leaders are gathering to explore the powerful impact and dividends derived from investing vigorously in early childhood education.

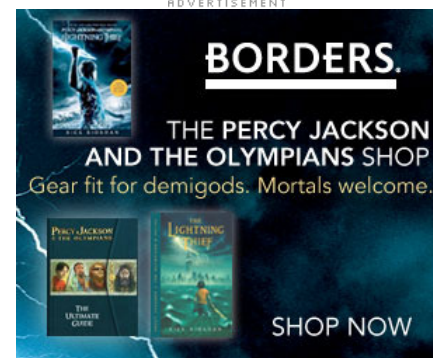
The 2009 Hawaii Economic Summit on Early Childhood Investment is a chance for this hui of policymakers to lead a discussion with the community and the private sector on what this investment means to Hawaii's future sustainability.

Recent economic challenges have confirmed to business leaders and economists worldwide that future economic prosperity will depend largely on how well we do today at developing the future workforce.

Hawaii's human capital, the ability to combine technical and behavioral skills to create economic value, will determine our ability to compete globally.

To these ends, investments to strengthen our state's future human capital, starting with early

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childhood education, must be our top priority.

Understandably, today's organizations are primarily focused on their short-term financial sustainability. However, today is an opportune time for companies to reassess how they invest their money.

Planning for the long term, companies must become mindful of the compelling scientific data from longitudinal studies that support strong socioeconomic evidence concerning the benefits of investing in early childhood.

Many 21st-century corporations are beginning to understand that contributing private dollars, supporting early childhood programs and partnering with other like-minded corporations and the public sector to sustain these programs makes the best sense in the long run.

Investing in our children gives them an advantageous start in life, as well as contributing to the well-being of families and society in general.

Early childhood investments can strengthen and sustain local economies, create jobs, and build a talented and competitive future workforce.

Hawaii recognizes the benefits of early childhood investment and has joined other states in establishing cohesive systems of early learning and support for its youngest children.

In July 2008, state lawmakers passed into law the Keiki First Steps bill, creating the Early Learning Council, which is responsible for developing and administering the early learning system to benefit all children throughout the state from birth until the time they enter kindergarten. The system is sure to strengthen and build upon the wonderful existing programs and services for young keiki currently offered in Hawaii.

Investing in the early years is first and foremost about addressing our children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual well-being. The earliest years for keiki — prenatal through age 8 — is the most crucial developmental period. Before age 5, about 90 percent of brain growth occurs and the foundations of thinking, aptitude and language are built.

In Hawaii, our young keiki need help.

According to the 2008 Hawaii State School Readiness Assessment, only 21.2 percent of public school kindergarten teachers reported that most of their incoming students consistently displayed key literacy skills (e.g., recognizes four letters, opens book from front cover to back cover).

The School Year 2007-2008 Hawaii State Assessment found that 61.7 percent of third-grade students were reading at grade level.

This means that nearly four out of 10 third-graders were not reading at grade level. Since children learn to read from pre-kindergarten to third grade, and read to learn from fourth grade on up, we must invest in early childhood programs for the sake of our children, our future workforce, and our economic sustainability.

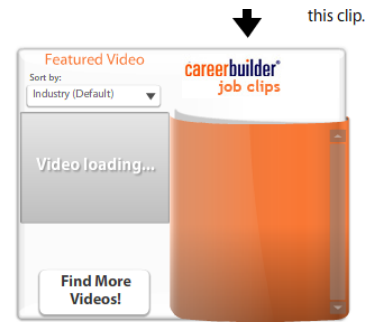
Additionally, a 2005 Economic Impact Study of the Early Care and Education Industry in Hawai'i noted that early childhood education and care programs helped allow parents to be part of the workforce, generating \$5.1 billion to the state's economy.

Armed with increased scientific and social science evidence, it is now up to the corporate executives to head back to the boardroom table and start a dialogue about the positive impact early childhood investment can have at the state, regional and national levels.

Growing tomorrow's educated and competitive workforce for Hawaii to compete successfully in a global economy depends entirely on the steadfast commitments our community leaders and policy makers make at this week's summit.

Voices of Educators comprises some of Hawaii's 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 Hawaii's College of Education; Donald B. Young of the Hawaii Educational Policy Center; Wil Okabe from the Hawaii State Teachers Association; Sharon Mahoe of the Hawaii Teacher Standards Board; Francine Honda of the Hawaii Government Employees Association; and Robert Witt of the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools. Visit their Web site at www.hawaii.edu/voice.

Liz Chun is executive director of Good Beginnings Alliance, a policy and advocacy organization dedicated to maximizing resources for young children in Hawai'i. She is coordinating the 2009 Economic Summit on Early Childhood Investment. Denise Eby Konan is professor and chair of the Department of Economics at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa. She will be a featured speaker at the



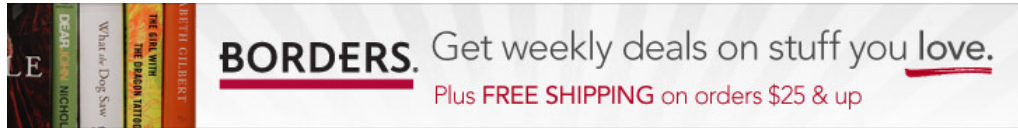
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Economic Summit on Early Childhood Investment on Wednesday.

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