

## Investing in keiki is for all our futures

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By Dee Jay Mailer

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President Barack Obama's clear voice in support of our youngest keiki is music to many ears here in Hawaii.

In the next few months, we will all have an opportunity to exercise our voices as well, following our island values of taking care of our children first.

Our voices should ring throughout the corridors where laws are made, helping lawmakers in Honolulu and Washington, D.C., act for our children.

In Hawaii, legislators must vote on whether to support Gov. Neil Abercrombie's early learning plan, beginning with voting for legislation introduced by our strong education legislative leaders, Sen. Jill Tokuda and Rep. Roy Takumi.

In Washington, Obama has called out to make early education a congressional priority.

The focus on early education is not new. In the 1970s, Congress passed a bill for quality preschool that was vetoed by President Richard Nixon. He left early learning to the states and 39 stepped up; Hawaii was not one of them.

Four decades later, we thankfully hear the call again from our top leaders: our president, who wants high-quality preschool accessible to every child in America, and our governor, who championed this agenda even before his election.

Both leaders' reasoning is simple: Investing in our youngest is an investment in all our futures. In Hawaii, it's even simpler: our children are our dearest treasures. They are our legacy. Their welfare comes first.

Funding an early learning program during economically hard times is an understandable concern. But here's why spending money on early education now is wise: Good Beginnings Alliance published a report by an expert local economist that showed favorable returns on investment in quality early learning programs in Hawaii. For every \$1 spent, the state would see a \$4.20 return in social and fiscal benefits like lower crime, increased tax revenue, less dependency on social services and a more productive workforce and economy.

Obama said that for every dollar invested, society will "save more than \$7 later — by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime."

Early learning breeds stronger human potential. Nobel Prize winner James Heckman found that investing in a child's early education and sustaining that through adulthood creates a more capable, productive workforce.

Twenty years from now, we want our children to have the knowledge, values, creativity and persistence to lead the world in humane and responsible ways. This all begins before kindergarten and, by third grade, is part of our lifelong DNA. When early years are left up to chance, the chances of failure exponentially grow.



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Gov. Abercrombie has made high-quality early childhood development and education a priority because he is serious about increasing prosperity here at home. Obama echoed these sentiments in his State of the Union speech.

The first step in making this vision a reality is to call on our state lawmakers to support the early education bills: House Bill 862 and Senate Bill 1093, relating to school readiness; HB 864 and SB 1095, relating to the early childhood education program; and HB 853 and SB 1084,

relating to a constitutional amendment that would allow public funds to be appropriated to private early education providers, the primary means for children to get early learning currently in our state.

The fate of our society rests in the hands of the next generation; and the fate of the next generation rests in our hands. Let's equip our young ones with the tools they need — quality education and social experiences, care and loving support — so they and society reach their fullest potential.

Me ke aloha no n pua makamae o Hawaii nei — With love and devotion for the children of Hawaii.

[Even in tough times, our keiki should be a priority](#)

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