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Early Education: There Should Be No Question

By Tom Apple | 04/25/2013

I have trouble understanding the debate, even why there is a debate, over early learning in Hawai'i. To those of us who see how a child's future is so clearly determined by his or her early years, the case for early learning programs is solid.

Perhaps it is time for some harsh facts.

Who is more likely to end up needing the social service system—the child who had strong early learning opportunities, or the one that didn't? Who is more likely to go to prison? To collect welfare benefits?

The answer of course, is the child who did not have a chance at quality pre-school learning.

As Chancellor of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, I see students journey to Hawai'i from around the world to learn and pursue their passions. The caliber of students is high; Hawai'i's keiki need every edge to prepare them for their future collegiate learning and work within the global marketplace—a quality, early childhood education is one advantage.

Why now?

Besides equalizing the playing field for all children, I offer up three reasons.

The first is practical. Right now, we are faced with a kindergarten cliff. Beginning in the 2014 school year, children must be five years old to enter kindergarten—this leaves 5,100 children, the "gap group," without somewhere to learn. They need a place to go.

Second, it benefits every child if all children are ready to learn on day one of kindergarten; it strengthens the K-12 pipeline of students. A kindergarten teacher is derailed when children need to be taught basics, such as how to focus and play well with others.

Third, there's a federal carrot. The White House is proposing federal/state partnerships to fund early learning programs for low and moderate-income children. However, states must have a program in place in order to be eligible for funds. Hawai'i should appreciate the timeliness of President Obama and Governor Abercrombie both making early childhood education a priority of their administrations. Our state needs to be ready to join that federal/state partnership.

In terms of a statewide early childhood education program for Hawai'i's keiki, the Executive Office on Early Learning (EOEL) has a plan and will be working with the Department of Human Services (DHS) to implement it. Since its creation, EOEL has been meeting with Department of Education, DHS and private providers to determine capacity, understand needs and address challenges to implementing a cohesive, statewide early learning system.

Information gathered from these meetings is being used to draft consistent standards and provider eligibility requirements for the first phase, the School Readiness Program (SRP), which will immediately serve the needs of the gap group. Built into the SRP are program measures that EOEL and DHS will use to assess the delivery of services, ensure consistency and hold providers accountable.

EOEL and DHS are developing an application process that is convenient and simplified as much as possible. Once the process is established, public and private partners will be equipped to reach out to families and assist them. Applications will be available to the public starting January 2014.

The School Readiness Program is meant to strengthen a child's capacity to learn, encourage creativity and curiosity, and lay a foundation for socio-emotional skills. The SRP also lays the groundwork for the full-scale Early Childhood Education Program where program standards will be higher.

EOEL and DHS will work with providers on growing the quality of services and increasing capacity so more children can be served. Under each program, school/family partnerships will be encouraged, boosting a child's learning and development because a child continues to learn even after he or she leaves a classroom.

Here, in the 21st century, there's no question that early education sets a child up for success in school and life. A child's socio-economic situation should not predetermine the quality and access of his or her educational opportunities. I urge Hawai'i's legislators to support our youngest keiki by funding the proposed School Readiness Program; they deserve your vote.

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About the author: *Tom Apple is the chancellor of the University of Hawaii at Manoa.*

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