

GG Weisenfeld

The state's point person for early education aims to improve opportunities for tots

By [Christine Donnelly](#)

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Feb 07, 2014



Georgette "GG" Weisenfeld moved to Oahu from New York City six years ago seeking a better life for her family, which includes her husband and two children. Satisfied that they made the right move, Weisenfeld is applying her broad experience in the field of early education to help craft a comprehensive pre-kindergarten program in Hawaii — an investment not only in children and families "but the overall good of the state."

"Education transforms lives in the most positive ways. We know that. Early education, making sure that children are ready for kindergarten, is a really important element," said Weisenfeld, who before becoming director of the state's Executive Office on Early Learning (EOEL) six months ago was with Hawaii's P-20 Partnerships for Education, a consortium of the EOEL, the state Department of Education and the University of Hawaii. There she was the P-3 director of learning, focused on improving opportunities for children from birth to third grade.

Expanding state partnerships with public and private preschools is the key to making high-quality programs available to more children in Hawaii, Weisenfeld said. If approved by the Legislature, an \$8 million supplemental budget request would expand access for some children starting next school year.

Another key to increasing capacity is voter approval of a constitutional amendment in November that would allow the state to contract directly with private providers and set quality standards for those programs.

"We have to build a mixed-delivery system (both public and private programs). I think that's really the only thing that could work in our state, to build the capacity we need," said Weisenfeld, who holds a bachelor's degree in early childhood/elementary education from New York University, a master's in museum education from Bank Street College and a master's and doctorate in organizational leadership and educational administration from Columbia University's Teachers College.

The societal benefits of having the government subsidize high-quality preschool programs, especially for lower-income children, have been well documented; the EOEL's report to the Legislature last year cited a likely return over time of \$4.20 for every \$1 spent.

Weisenfeld has witnessed those positive impacts — and learned of pitfalls to avoid — throughout more than 25 years as a teacher, administrator, policymaker and professor. She was involved early on with New York City's publicly funded pre-kindergarten program and analyzed a similar program in Jersey City, N.J., for her dissertation.

"My experience has given me a lot of insight into things that we might want to avoid as we build our program, as well as things we might want to do," she said. "Family choice brought us to Hawaii — we wanted a better quality of life for our children. We moved when our children were young and thought this would be a wonderful place to raise them and that's been correct. So it's very exciting to be helping advance opportunities for children and families in a place that cares so much about them."

QUESTION: Is this new program for 4-year-olds intended to be a distinctly different ... from what was previously offered in the DOE's old junior kindergarten?

ANSWER: Yes. It will be different than junior kindergarten. ... It's a stand-alone, 4-year-old program developmentally appropriate for that age group. ... It will be focused on quality. We've identified what those quality indicators look like. We see our role at the Executive Office on Early Learning as supporting the professional development and implementation of quality in those programs. ...

Q: The research that I've been looking at emphasizes the importance of quality. It seems that some publicly funded preschools -- Head Start is mentioned -- have not been high-quality enough to have the outcomes that people want, which is to jumpstart these kids for their educations for their whole lives. Could you tell me a little bit about what the state considers high quality and what you are looking for in a high-quality program?

A: Sure. And also, I just want to say that Head Start has made some great strides and improvements over the past few years, based on the research that has come out, and that includes our Head Start programs here. ... One of our key quality indicators looks at child-teacher interactions: The better the interactions ... the higher the quality of the program. The second is family engagement. Families need to be involved. They need to be equal partners in their child's education. The third is the integration of the Hawaii Early Learning Development standards, which means that everything that the program is doing should be based on child development. ... The fourth thing that we look at is the use of formative child assessment, which means we're continually collecting information about how the children are doing and adapting curriculum to meet their individual needs. ...

Q: And how do you measure that?

A: There are actually some tools that are valid and reliable to assess those indicators. ... One is the CLASS, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, that Head Start programs are now using as part of their triennial review. There are a number of people in Hawaii who have gone through the training and are valid and reliable observers. ... And we have the ability to train people locally to be able to assess programs.

Q: Does it look like the supplemental funding will come through? Are you confident?

A: I'm hopeful. I really think that everybody knows that it's a priority. I think the governor has been making a really strong case on the importance of pre-kindergarten. ... Really, it's a legislative decision. We're

doing as much we can to share our information and our plans with all of the legislators.

Q: (Along with starting or continuing pre-kindergarten programs at 30 public schools) ... the other part of the governor's proposal is increasing funding for Preschool Open Doors?

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: That's basically fee waivers for private programs? Is that correct?

A: It's actually funds that the family applies for, and, based on their income, they receive a certificate, and they can select a program that they choose. ... It has to be a Department of Human Services-licensed program.

Q: So that leads me to a question that we hear a lot, which is about the constitutional amendment. Why do we need a constitutional amendment if we already have Preschool Open Doors, which provides public funding for private preschools?

A: It's really about how the funds move. So right now, with Preschool Open Doors, the funds go from the DHS provider, which is PATCH, to the families and then the families give the money to the preschools. If the constitutional amendment passes, we would as a state be able to contract directly with private providers such as KCAA, Kama'aina Kids, Seagull Schools, PACT. Once we could contract directly with all the different providers then we could stipulate what those quality indicators would look like.

Q: And since quality is so important, assuring those standards is a big part of it?

A: That's right.

Q: What about the religious preschools? Would they be eligible?

A: Yes, if they meet the state's requirements. If the constitutional amendment passes, we'll need to have administrative rules in place in order to be able to develop the contracts with private providers. We are in the process of working that out ... So technically everybody can participate, but some may select not to, depending on the administrative rules.

Q: But the First Amendment will still apply (requiring the separation of church and state)?

A: Yes.

Q: I've read that in some states schools (affiliated with churches) secularize their curriculum in order to qualify (for the public funds). Is that a possibility?

A: Yes. It will be up to the programs to decide whether or not they want to participate under the state's rules. We have been engaging a number of the faith-based directors on what the expectations will be. ... Our goal is to

engage as many people as we can and build a true mixed-delivery system. ... I think that's really the only thing that could work in our state, to build the capacity we need.

Q: In a recent study I read, another thing that preschool improved was the quality of the parenting, for the kids who went to preschool. The mothers of lower-income kids were shown to read to their children more, once their kids were in preschool. Does that jibe with what you see?

A: Yes, completely. ... One of our areas of focus is to involve families more, because they are the young child's primary educator.

Q: Now if we could talk a little bit about the criticism of this proposal, because there has been some. One of the things we hear is that middle-class parents (are losing out). ... The DOE junior kindergarten program was open to everybody, and now the 4-year-old program is only targeting lower-income families. How do you react?

A: Well, there are two issues there. One is that based on last year's legislative actions, we're really focusing on working families, the lower-income families, because that was the direction that we saw happening last year with the funding of Preschool Open Doors. So we're continuing that focus. ... The other issue is that ... what was in place was junior kindergarten, which is not the same as pre-kindergarten. Often junior kindergarten was operated like kindergarten, with the same curriculum, which we know is developmentally not appropriate for 4-year-olds. So we're really working on establishing a program for 4-year-olds that can have quality indicators and be implemented consistently throughout the state.

Q: Is the eventual goal a universal program for all 4-year-olds? ...

A: I think the governor has been consistent in wanting children to have access to programs.

I think last year it was clear that the legislators weren't interested in going full forward, in going 100 percent at that point. So we had to scale back and think realistically about how we could create the infrastructure to support his vision. ... We did come up with a five-year plan. ... We do need to see what happens with the constitutional amendment because that does have implications for the plan as we move forward. We do have our projections based on it passing.

Q: So what are your projections five years out?

A: By school year 2018-19, we'd be able to create capacity and access for 85 percent of 4-year-olds in Hawaii. That would require about \$50 million of state funding and continued funding from other sources, such as federal, parent, private foundation and special-education funds. We believe it's an important investment that will pay huge dividends for our state.