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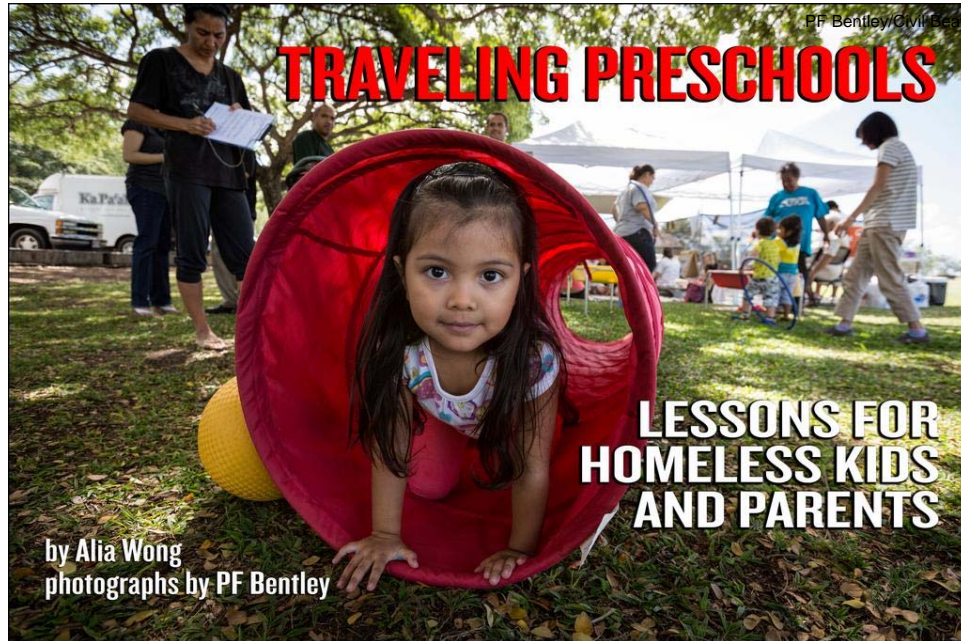
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## Hawaii's Homeless: Kids, Parents Learn Together in Preschool Programs

By Alia Wong

03/24/2014



Ka Paalana preschool at the Waianae Boat Harbor.

Fabian Marshall lives next door to his 4-year-old son's preschool.

But when the day is done, it's as if the preschool wasn't even there. The school is a large mat, or a tent. A park bench under the shade at the grassy area bordering the Waianae Boat Harbor.

This is a traveling preschool, there to serve the homeless that live within the adjacent kiawe-tree encampment and surrounding areas.

On a recent morning, Marshall's gregarious, energetic boy plays tag with his peers, in an out of a collapsible tunnel on the grass and around a folding table topped with a box of sand and some Play-Doh.

Marshall, 34, says he tries to take his kid to the program every Tuesday because he wants him to interact with other children his age and "learn how to be patient."

The boy is dressed up as an astronaut, one of the many outfits and accessories the kids can borrow from the school's drama station, a stand set up under the large canopy tent. Across the way, a string of letters and colorful pictures hangs at a toddler's eye level, next to it a changing table and a row of dry food bundles that participants get to take home after the class.

But the boy's favorite activities, according to Marshall, are arts and crafts and reading; he loves "Curious George."

Marshall, who also participates as a parent educator as required, likes it, too.

"Reading back to him brings back memories," says the former Coast Guardsman, who's part Native Hawaiian.

Marshall, who says he is a high school dropout, is reticent to talk about his past, but readily admits to "messing up" in his social life while growing up in Waianae, his academics "taking a back seat."

Aside from the obvious differences from other established preschools, the "Ka Paalana" program has another

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mission: teach the parent and family along with the child.

Other preschools are typically places where parents drop off their kids while they work. But at Ka Paalana, parents and other adult caregivers are required to sit in on the classes, too.

## Parent Participation

The Waianae Boat Harbor is one of nine sites that every day are transformed into these Ka Paalana preschools. The preschools primarily serve at-risk, underserved and homeless populations near various shelters, public housing facilities and beach parks along the Leeward Coast.

In Hawaiian, "Ka Paalana" means "a light for the future" and Ka Paalana's educators believe this model is key to breaking the cycle of poverty because it helps parents become better role models and teaches them to be their children's educators, too. Even some of the staff teachers and their aides once participated in the program as parents.

Anyone from the community and their children — newborns to 5 year olds — can attend the free preschools. In fact, families that have more means are encouraged to participate as well so that the kids have the opportunity to interact with peers from all walks of life. At Marshall's school, for example, just a handful of the 12 or so children in attendance that day were homeless.



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Ka Paalana

The seven-year-old Ka Paalana program is part of [Partners in Development](#), which oversees a host of education and social services programs.

But it isn't the only organization to run these kinds of parent-participation schools that often serve the homeless.

Six organizations — including the Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture, or INPEACE, and Keiki O Ka Aina — run parent-participation preschools, serving thousands of children and families statewide. These "family-child interaction learning" preschools, as they're known in ed-speak, are all strategically placed in underserved areas with high concentrations of Native Hawaiians and minority populations. They fall under one of four basic kinds of preschools — family-child interaction learning preschools like Ka Paalana, centers, home-based and home-visiting.

Ka Paalana is the only homeless-serving preschool in the country [that's accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children](#), a well-respected national preschool accreditation agency, and the others are hoping to earn the same recognition, too.

The family-interaction preschools typically meet for a few hours several days a week and don't cost parents anything, relying instead on private donations and grants. The schools consider parents' volunteer time their copayment.

And they're relatively cheap to run. Administrators say it takes just \$2,400 a year to educate a child in these programs, less than a third of the estimated \$8,000 per year it costs to educate each child in a center.

Advocates, including lawmakers like Senate Education chair [Jill Tokuda](#), say parent-participation preschools are just as high-quality and produce the same outcomes as any other preschool. They point to the well-trained teachers and teachers' aides, the strategic lesson plans and the focus on things like motor skills, literacy and social interaction.

A bill this session that Tokuda helped introduce, [Senate Bill 2975](#), aims to make an appropriation to the [Executive Office on Early Learning](#) so it can contract with parent-participation preschool providers such as Ka Paalana.

The bill, which is part of Gov. [Neil Abercrombie](#)'s larger initiative to [create a diversified public early education system](#), has already garnered [widespread support](#) from entities ranging from government agencies to education coalitions. The only substantive opposition seems to come from the Hawaii State Teachers Association, which [generally opposes](#) the governor's public-private preschool model because of the union's philosophy that taxpayer



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### Keiki Steps

\$6 million for 900 or so low-income, late-born children through the Department of Human Service's Preschool Open Doors program. Voters will consider a ballot measure in November that seeks approval of a constitutional amendment to allow the state to use public monies for private preschools such as the family-child interaction learning providers.

### Parents Count, Too

In interactive preschools, which play a special role in Hawaii, the focus on parents is just as great if not greater than it is on the children.

Unlike traditional centers, parents — many of whom come from rough, abusive childhoods, and many of whom are immigrants who have very few resources — “learn how children learn” and how to be emotionally nurturing, said Terry Nakamura, a former pastor who supervises the nine Ka Paalana sites. His formal title is “family literacy coordinator,” which means he trains parents to be the primary teachers for their children.

Nakamura discusses the importance of teaching family literacy as he walks through one of the program's other sites, a 100-acre patch adjacent to a pair of shelters in Kapolei that are run by Waianae Community Outreach — one emergency shelter and one transitional shelter.

At the edge of the site is a gazebo where a group of parents, some of whom are fathers, and their children sit in a circle, singing and clapping before snack time. After the break, they all head into a small classroom, with stations set up similarly to the ones at the Waianae Boat Harbor.

A 31-year-old father, Mitchell, sits at a table with his 3-year-old daughter Melanie rolling fake dough and baking pretend



PF Bentley/Civil Beat

### Keiki Steps

cupcakes. Melanie is demanding — “Roll it like this!” she tells her dad repeatedly — as Mitchell, a big guy with tattoos, sits in a miniature plastic chair. Mitchell, a graduate of Campbell High School, is forthcoming when he talks about his past: a short spree of drug abuse and some mistakes put him, his wife and his family, including a now-5-year-old son, on the streets. But they're slowly getting back on their feet; his wife has a job, and he's on the hunt for one as he “clears up” some legal issues. That means he's the one who attends preschool with Melanie.

Mitchell talks about one of the Ka Paalana classes he takes alone — Lanau Iwi, a course for fathers. In the class students learn things like carpentry and Hawaiian ethics, he says; most recently he helped build a tool shed.

“We learn how to be real men, fathers,” he says.

money shouldn't be used for private education.

Advocates point out that access to education is key to a child's success and that Hawaii is one of just 11 states without publicly funded preschool; about half of all children enter kindergarten here without a preschool foundation.

Interaction preschools didn't get any specific mention in last year's legislation, which ended up granting just

Other parent courses include exercise and computer classes, as well as a job training program that includes trips to career fairs in town. Ka Paalana also offers GED help, while its home-visiting teams help monitor participating families to make sure they're staying on track.

But more than anything, Nakamura says, preschools such as Ka Paalana offer judgment-free zones where parents have the opportunity to embrace their own lives as both parents and contributing members of the community.

Barriers often are simple but important: a lot of parents don't want to participate initially because they don't have decent clothes, for instance, he says.

"We're not social workers or counselors, but because we get to know families and love them, they trust us," Nakamura says. "We'll just give you this vibe of Aloha and acceptance."

## Keiki Steps

As Lisa Pakele says, the parents and children "are doing life together."

Pakele runs INPEACE's Keiki Steps, whose sites often serve a more diverse mix of families, from people on the streets to white-collar parents who simply prefer to be active players in their kids' early education.

Attorney Ninia Elsey, for example, chose to take her kids to Keiki Steps because she wanted to be with them in the classroom.

"They've learned just as much here if not more" than they would in a traditional preschool, the mother of five says.

She's standing next to a stroller in one of Keiki Steps' gardens, below a tangerine tree. The children and their parents visit the garden often to grow produce ranging from lettuce to lemons. Families can visit the plots on their own any day of the week to pick what they want.

"When you take the kids to Keiki Steps, they really want to go to school — learning is ingrained in them," Elsey says.

Keiki Steps currently operates 12 sites on Oahu and Hilo, some out of school cafeterias and one within [Ulu Ke Kuku'i](#), a transitional shelter for families in Waianae.

Sandi Nihipali, a parent of two, sits at a coffee table molding Play-Doh with her 2-year-old son at a Keiki Steps' site at Barber's Point Elementary School. The 35-year-old says she likes Keiki Steps for her son because "it's easier to influence what he learns." She likes it better than the traditional preschool she sends her 4-year-old daughter to.

Nihipali, who herself has applied for a summer teaching aide position with Keiki Steps, says she's noticed remarkable strides in her son since he joined the program. When he started in December he could only speak 50 or so words, she said; now he's a loquacious little boy who knows all his shapes, can count to 10 and loves riding his bike.

Every activity they do at the preschool, she notes, is a learning activity designed as playtime. For example, the Play-Doh helps teach literacy and fine motor skills.

And the learning doesn't stop there. Nihipali and her family "redo" what they do at school at home — activities such as "Open Shut Them," which teaches kids basic opposites. "There's no free play," she says.



PF Bentley/Civil Beat

Keiki Steps garden at Makakilo Elementary

The vast majority of Keiki Steps' staffers — 90 percent — were once parents who themselves participated in the program.

Keiki Steps even pays interested teachers to go to school and pursue degrees such as a child development associate or a bachelor's in education.

Like the Ka Paalana preschools, Keiki Steps integrates Native Hawaiian culture into the classroom and activities. Children and

their parents, for example, take field trips to kalo patches and learn Hawaiian words.

It's all part of the family-child interaction learning model, in which a top priority is to make learning culturally relevant so that both parents and children are engaged and are motivated to keep coming back. Advocates point out that local families struggling with homelessness can lose touch with their cultural roots.

"We're here to live, learn and perpetuate culture," Pakele says.

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**DISCUSSION:** What do you think about these programs?

8

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Discussion



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**Blake McElheny**

Thank you for this great article that highlights an important point: "Advocates point out that access to education is key to a child's success and that Hawaii is one of just 11 states without publicly funded preschool; about half of all children enter kindergarten here without a preschool foundation." Given these factors, it is especially sad that the Kamehameha Schools Preschool in Hale'iwa is being permanently closed at the end of this school year. Much like the parent-participation preschools referenced in the article, the successful Kamehameha Schools Community-Based Early Childhood Education program is based on the principle that children learn best with the help of their parents, teachers, and peers and through experiences with their physical and social environment in their own geographic community.

The abrupt and unexpected Hale'iwa Preschool closure is on the agenda for the North Shore Neighborhood Board meeting at 7:00 pm at the Waiialua Elementary School on Tuesday, 3/25.

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**Angela Huntemer** · Top Commenter

Preschool is very important. Now that DOE have raised the K age, there will be a lot more children going longer without school and a lot of parents struggling to pay for preschool.

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**Patricia Blair** · Top Commenter · University of Nebraska-Lincoln

What a lovely story of a lovely program! May the schools flourish as well as the children and parents.

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