

## ISLAND VOICES

# State-funded pre-kindergarten just the start

By **Jill Tokuda**

Starting this August, Hawaii will finally come out of the shadows and join 41 other states that publicly fund prekindergarten education.

With the inclusion of \$3 million in the state budget to enhance our school readiness efforts, we will be able to enroll more than 400 children in pre-kindergarten at targeted public elementary schools across the state.

While I would have liked to have gotten more funding and the flexibility to serve more children through a variety of program options such as Family Child Interaction Learning (FCIL) programs and increasing access to our Preschool Open Doors program, what we have will reach those in our most rural and underserved communities.



*Sen. Jill Tokuda chairs the state Senate Committee on Education.*

If there is one good thing about being late to the game with publicly funded pre-kindergarten education, it is that we can look to the example of other states. What works best, and is fiscally responsible and sustainable, is a system with both public and private

providers. Resources, both the capacity and expertise, are maximized and there are more options available for different families across our unique communities.

While public pre-kindergarten is a big win, it is only the first phase of our efforts toward

creating a high-quality early learning system in Hawaii. The next phases involve supporting and expanding the role of other providers, such as FCILs, which provide family and caregiver support and education, and private, licensed community-based providers, like Rainbow Schools and KCAA

Preschools of Hawaii.

For this to happen, voters must first approve the constitutional amendment that will appear on the November ballot. This ballot initiative is necessary to partner with our private providers and maximize the use of tax dollars to help other state is able to do more children, which every other state is able to do.

Concerns have been raised that the implementation plan for the constitutional amendment is not known, and that it could become a voucher program. House Bill 2276, which almost passed this legislative session, explicitly states that if established, the pre-kindergarten program would not be a voucher program.

Again, as one of the last states in the nation to fund early childhood education, we can learn from other states ways to provide these young children the educational foundation they need while staying true to our Constitution's provisions and our adherence to a clear separation

of church and state.

And, like all other states, if future legislatures decided to fully fund prekindergarten opportunities for a majority of 4-year-olds, the state's estimated share after taking into account federal, private and special education funds would be about \$48 million, or less than 40 percent of the \$125 million yearly total.

Ultimately, the question on the ballot gives the public, through the legislative and rules process, a considerable amount of control over how our early learning system will be created and sustained through the very words "as provided by law."

As the mother of two young boys, I have seen firsthand the power of preschool, and I want that for all of our keiki so they have every opportunity to succeed in life, no matter what their socio-economic situation may be or what community they come from.

This is a big first step for Hawaii, and I look forward to the leaps and bounds ahead of us.