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# Name in the News: Lauren Moriguchi

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Lauren Moriguchi, director of the state Executive Office on Early Learning (EOEL).

Among the top initiatives in Gov. David Ige's State of the State address, delivered at the Capitol a few months ago, was a pitch for "statewide, high-quality public preschool." There are now 26 preschool classrooms in public schools across the state. Delivery of the envisioned universal system would mean expanding that count to more than 300 classrooms.

The pre-K program started five years ago, through the state Executive Office of Early Learning (EOEL), which was established in 2012 to serve as the lead agency overseeing the development of the statewide early-childhood system. The EOEL's director, Lauren Moriguchi, describes Ige's call as a "tall order" that's worthy of support from state lawmakers and others.

Key to success, Moriguchi said, would be the element of choice. The overall landscape “must be a public-private partnership, and must involve multi-generational programs, Head Start and inclusion programs, charter schools and community-based programs that have been the mainstay of the early care and learning community for decades,” she said.

“The EOEL Public Prekindergarten Program is just one of these options. EOEL’s charge is to work across the public and private sectors, and the various types of early learning settings available to children.”

Also, Moriguchi’s office recently wrapped up facilitation of the “Early Childhood State Plan 2019-2024,” in tandem with public- and private-sector collaborators. The document addresses well-being issues for children from birth through age 8.

Before Ige tapped her to head the EOEL four years ago, the Oahu native had worked in Hawaii public schools as a preschool teacher, special educator, resource teacher, mentor teacher and educational specialist.

“By training, I am an early childhood educator. ... My love of the learning process anchored me to working with young children. My commitment to this purpose continues to guide me today in my role as director.”

Moriguchi added, “I believe commitment is about persistence ... not compromising on what we know is right, even when facing resistance. Commitment is vital if we are to achieve the high-quality programs children and families deserve and that the early learning professionals deserve as well.”

**Question:** How’s the EOEL-DOE (state Department of Education) Public Prekindergarten effort going?

**Answer:** Though it targets our at-risk and underserved children, more than 9 out of 10 children in the program have met and/or exceeded expectations in all areas of child development and learning by the end of each school year — demonstrating their readiness for kindergarten — since the program started in 2014.

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) rated Hawaii’s program at an 8 out of a total score of 10 on the 2017 Quality Standards Checklist. The areas where Hawaii falls short are related to the workforce as there currently isn’t a requirement for teaching staff (teachers and educational assistants) to have specialized training in early childhood education. ...

Also, one year of pre-kindergarten is not a magic bullet to ensuring positive outcomes for our keiki. ... The years before and after pre-K are equally important. Therefore, EOEL also collaborates with schools and district teams to support alignment between grade levels to ensure that the benefits of attending a high-quality early childhood program will be continued beyond pre-K. ...

**Q:** Despite success in implementation, the program is having difficulty finding qualified teachers?

**A:** The need for qualified early childhood teachers is even more severe than that of K-12. Expanding pre-K without making sure we have a qualified teacher for every classroom would not only be a waste of taxpayer dollars because it

wouldn't make the difference intended; it could even make things worse.

If we don't have teachers who understand how young children learn and grow, students could be inappropriately referred to special education and even suspended and expelled, which is what other states see happening.

It also goes against the ethics code that many early childhood educators abide by — the National Association for the Education of Young Children Code of Ethical Conduct. It stresses basing program practices on current knowledge and research in the field of early childhood education and child development as well as on knowledge of each child ...

Although Hawaii's public school teachers are required to have a teaching license, there is currently no requirement for teachers in public pre-kindergarten settings to have any coursework in early childhood education; passing an exam is all that is needed to be licensed in early childhood education. We are working to change that. Significant research shows that teachers with coursework and who are supported by ongoing training are those who will make a difference.

To address the fact that 67 percent of the teachers in the EOEL Public Prekindergarten Program do not have early childhood coursework, we provide intense professional learning supports for principals and teaching staff, including individual coaching and mentoring.

**Q:**The Early Childhood State Plan is described as a "roadmap for collective action," starting at or even before birth. What sorts of action, for example?

**A:** We need all expecting families and newborns to receive screening and any needed support as early as possible as health and safety risks can cause developmental delays and other long-term challenges for children, families and the community. ...

Our state's future depends upon all children having access to high-quality early learning options. We need to invest in expanding public pre-kindergarten and increasing capacity in the full range of early care and education settings ... to create a strong, statewide early learning system.

We need to help talented individuals enter and remain in early childhood professions as our state's early childhood workforce is essential to helping children establish their foundations for a promising future.

**Q:** You have described the new state plan as establishing an "overarching framework" that will help coordinate state, county and other efforts?

**A:** Currently, Hawaii's early childhood system is a patchwork of public and private programs and services for young children administered by multiple state and county agencies, private child-care providers, and nonprofit agencies that are not necessarily coordinated. One child could unintentionally receive multiple services through various agencies and organizations, all addressing the same concern, while another could fall through the cracks and receive nothing.

To create the more cohesive and comprehensive system ... we have identified collective priorities and described key actions needed. We also want to build on the good work being done by the various public and private entities, and mobilize efforts to build system capacity.

Our intent is for the early childhood community to see themselves as valued contributors in helping to accomplish our shared vision for Hawaii's keiki. This is why we do not call this EOEL's plan, but the community's plan — informed by, and supported by, the community as a whole.

**Q:** What is EOEL monitoring during the 2019 Legislature's regular session?

**A:** Though we may not be able to testify on all legislation that aims to improve the health and well-being of our children and families, we definitely support their intent.

We have several budget bills moving through the legislative session: To support the EOEL Public Pre-K Program, and expand it with 22 new classrooms; and support for EOEL's overall charge to develop the state's early learning system, including a position to focus on addressing the critical need for early childhood workforce development.

We also have a bill to prohibit suspension and expulsion in our own EOEL Public Prekindergarten Program, which follows national best practices and is based on the premise that our teachers are provided with knowledge support to deal with what are perceived as challenging behaviors, which we are doing.

The EOEL Public Pre-K Program specifically prioritizes our underserved and at-risk populations — those children who can benefit the most from early learning — and suspending or expelling them would not only leave them with no early learning opportunities but send them a completely wrong message that may affect them for a lifetime.