



# HAWAI'I EDUCATIONAL POLICY CENTER

## Report for the HEPC Annual Meeting

Junior Kindergarten Pilot  
Program Evaluation 2005-2006

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## **Introduction**

Act 219 (04) SB 17 SD1 HD1 CD2 established a two-tiered kindergarten system in Hawai'i. The impetus for Act 219 was concern about the state's early age of entry into kindergarten and the resulting challenge of meeting the developmental and educational needs of the younger kindergarten students.

Starting with the 2006-2007 school year, the age of entry into kindergarten was raised so that eligible students must turn five by August 1. Children who reach the age of five between August 2 and December 31 are now enrolled in the public school system as junior kindergarten students. However, schools have leeway as to whether junior kindergarten children are served in the same classrooms as kindergarten students. At the end of the school year, junior kindergarten students may be promoted to first grade or spend a second year as kindergarten students, depending on their needs.

During the 2005-2006 school year, thirty-seven volunteer elementary schools served as sites for the junior kindergarten pilot program. All pilot schools implemented the junior kindergarten model of their choice. In the 2006-2007 school year all public schools other than charter schools and conversion charter schools implemented the two-tiered program.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this report is to provide an evaluation of the experiences of the 2005-2006 pilot junior kindergarten schools. Data sources included administrative data provided by the Department of Education (DOE) as well as surveys and focus group interviews conducted with pilot school teachers and principals. Surveys were returned from 113 teachers representing thirty-one different schools, or 84 percent of the pilot school cohort. Surveys were also returned from twenty-four school administrators (mostly school principals), representing 65 percent of the pilot school cohort. A total of thirty-six teachers and thirty-three administrators, representing thirty-three of the thirty-seven pilot schools, participated in the focus group interviews.

## **Major Findings**

- *Teacher qualifications.* All teachers in the pilot schools had earned at least a bachelor's degree and held an elementary school teaching license. However, very few teachers had additional qualifications specific to the early childhood years. Only 4 percent of teachers had an early childhood endorsement on their teaching license. Teachers who held this endorsement or who had more years of experience working in kindergarten or preschool settings reported more developmentally appropriate beliefs and classroom practices.

- *Junior kindergarten options used in the pilot schools.* Most pilot schools (60 percent) served all children in mixed-age classrooms, the same arrangement that was in place before Act 219 was implemented. Nineteen percent of schools used age-based classrooms and 13 percent had a combination of age-based and mixed-aged classrooms. Several schools wanted to use age-based grouping but were not large enough to allow for a separate junior kindergarten classroom.

The most frequently cited advantages of mixed-age classrooms were that (a) younger children benefited from the models and support provided by their older peers and (b) such groupings are more egalitarian, offering all children the same challenges and opportunities. The most commonly mentioned benefits of age-based classrooms were that (a) it is easier to plan instruction for classrooms where children are similar in terms of skill and maturity, and (b) teachers could move through the curriculum more slowly in junior kindergarten classrooms and more quickly in kindergarten classrooms.

- *Developmental appropriateness of the pilot classrooms.* A positive outcome attributed to Act 219 has been an increased focus on what the field calls *developmentally appropriate practice*. Some participants were pleased with what they saw as a renewed focus on addressing the needs of young learners, rather than trying to apply a traditional academic model at the kindergarten level. On the average, classrooms had eleven of sixteen environmental resources thought to be important for early childhood classrooms. Many classrooms did not have listening, music, art, or science centers and too many lacked quiet space and access to age-appropriate playground equipment.

Teachers with training and experience in early childhood education showed the highest levels of developmentally appropriate beliefs and classroom practices. Most other participants reported beliefs that were relatively consistent with developmentally appropriate practice. Of concern, however, was the relatively high endorsement given to the use of worksheets, drill, and standardized testing. This may reflect pressures to raise test scores and meet Annual Yearly Progress goals.

- *Curriculum models and modifications.* Schools used a wide variety of commercial curricula and there were no systematic differences in the type of curriculum used in age-based vs. mixed-age classrooms. The most common modification was to teach at a slower pace. The second most common modification was to use more active learning strategies such as hands-on materials and activity centers. Many participants reported that their schools have made no appreciable changes in their approach to curriculum and instruction during the pilot year. This was because they continued to serve the same group of children, whether they were called junior kindergarteners or kindergarteners.

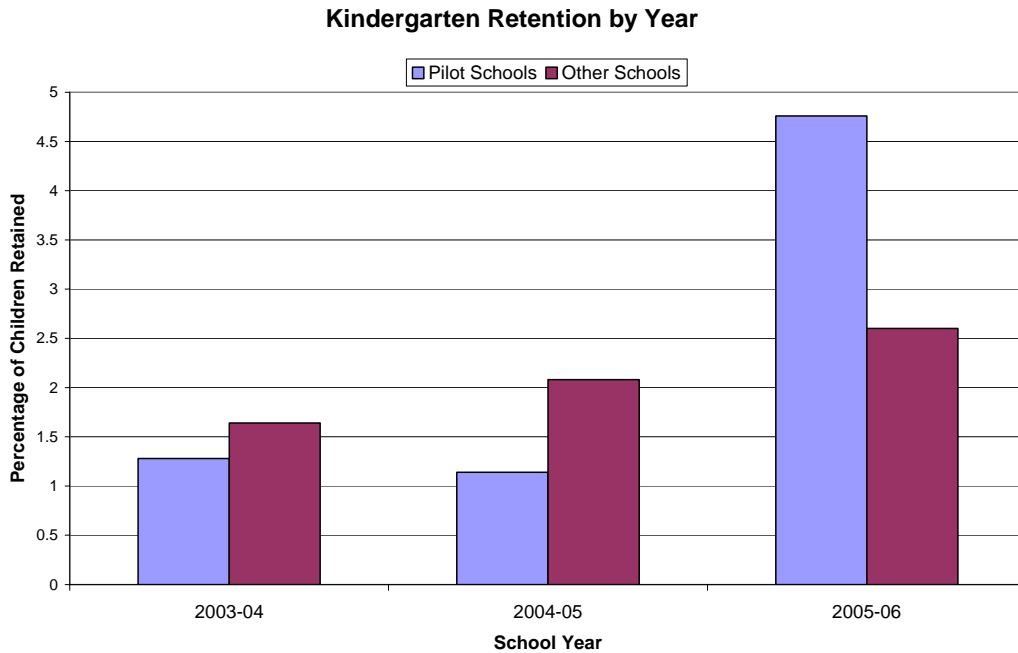
There was confusion as to whether Act 219 implies that junior kindergarten children should be offered a different curriculum. Note that offering a 'scaled

down' curriculum to junior kindergarten students is not in line with DOE policy which indicates that junior kindergarten children should be taught the same content but with different teaching methods (State of Hawai'i Department of Education, 2005). Since many teachers did use a slower pace for junior kindergarten students, these teachers were concerned that their students would not be able to meet the kindergarten learning standards and meet the expectations held for entering first grade students.

- *Perceived tension between accountability and developmentally appropriate practice.* Many teachers felt that the Hawai'i Content and Performance Standards for the kindergarten grade level were not developmentally appropriate, especially for junior kindergarten children. The same attitude was expressed about the new kindergarten report card format.
- *Assessment-based classroom grouping.* Many schools saw Act 219 as a call to assign children to classrooms based on 'readiness' or entry skills. This is of concern because there is little evidence that so-called readiness tests can accurately predict children's progress in school. In addition, skills-based classroom groupings are an informal version of tracking, which has been shown to harm children's academic progress and is not in alignment with DOE policy (State of Hawai'i Department of Education, 2005; National Association of Early Childhood Specialist in State Departments of Education, 2000; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2001)
- *Promotion and retention issues.* There was confusion over a very basic issue; i.e., whether the intention of Act 219 is to provide most children with an extra year in school. Some participants assumed that junior kindergarten children would proceed directly to first grade, while others believed the expected progression would be from junior kindergarten to kindergarten to first grade. Junior kindergarten children who remain in kindergarten for a second year do not have an 'R,' indicating grade retention on their records, and they are not counted as retained for reporting purposes under the No Child Left Behind Act. Some respondents felt this reduces the stigma for children who stay at the kindergarten level for two years and also makes the state 'look good' in terms of NCLB accountability.
- *Changes in grade retention.* Retention rates for the pilot schools increased dramatically (see the figure below). Kindergarten retention rates increased in 2005-2006 over four-fold, to 4.76 percent from the prior two years' rates of 1.14 percent and 1.28 percent. In the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years, kindergarten retention rates at the pilot school campuses were somewhat lower than rates for other DOE schools. This picture reversed in 2005-2006, when the pilot schools had much higher retention than the other DOE campuses.

The increase in grade retention is an area of significant concern that requires careful monitoring once Act 219 is implemented in all schools. Keeping children

in kindergarten for two years is a subtle form of retention, even if the R is not placed on their records. More important, there is no compelling evidence that two-year kindergarten programs have long-term academic benefits (Stipek, 2002). Moreover, grade retention is a highly controversial practice. There is little evidence of any lasting academic benefits of grade retention and some evidence of harmful consequences, especially for children’s social and emotional outcomes (NAECS/SDE, 2000; Shepard & Smith, 1990).



- Priorities for resources, training, and support.* The highest priority topics for professional development included emergent and early literacy instruction, working with English language learners, linking assessment to instruction, differentiated instruction, addressing children’s social-emotional development, and using portfolios to assess children’s learning. Participants were most interested in professional development activities that provide a forum for dialogue and collaboration across schools.

Teachers emphatically expressed a desire for classroom aides, smaller class sizes, and more hands-on learning materials. Finally, participants requested support in the form of clear guidelines concerning junior kindergarten policies and procedures. They requested a uniform policy on promotion and retention practices, and more guidance concerning assessment practices and tools.

## Recommendations

1. *Ensure that teachers with the highest level of qualifications in early childhood education are placed in the junior kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms.*

The early childhood endorsement was a strong correlate of appropriate teaching practices. Given this finding, we urge the DOE to work closely with teacher education programs at the local colleges and universities to increase the number of graduates in early childhood education.

2. *Provide material resources and related professional development to improve the developmental appropriateness of learning materials and the physical aspects of classroom environments.*

Too many teachers report deficiencies in the areas of classroom furniture, learning materials (e.g., manipulatives; children's books; and science, art, and music materials), and appropriate playground equipment. It also appears that many teachers would benefit from professional development on creating developmentally appropriate classroom environments.

3. *Provide resources to allow for smaller classes and/or smaller adult-child ratios.*

Either smaller classes or the addition of part-time teachers or assistants would allow for more small-group instruction, individualized teaching, and adult mediation of children's learning in classroom centers.

4. *Provide clear policy guidelines for administrators, teachers, and parents about the meaning of the two-tiered kindergarten system. Clarification is needed in the areas of (a) expected progression through grade levels, (b) preferred grouping practices, and (c) promotion and retention issues.*

There were many different interpretations of Act 219, leading to inconsistencies in practice. These inconsistencies included whether or not junior kindergarten children were placed in separate classrooms and whether the baseline expectation was that junior kindergarten children progress to first grade or complete a second year of kindergarten. Most schools reported having no clear criteria for deciding whether or not a child would be promoted to first grade. Since research shows no clear long-term benefits of grade retention, it is important for administrators, teachers, and parents to be clear about the factors that need to be considered when deciding that a child is better served by spending more time at the kindergarten grade level.

5. *Provide resources and professional development to ensure that all children receive a high quality, developmentally appropriate education regardless of age. This professional development should be coherent, comprehensive, and ongoing, and should make use of hands-on training and self-reflective practice.*

We suggest that the DOE commit significant resources to designing and implementing an ongoing program of professional development and support for all junior kindergarten and kindergarten teachers and relevant administrators and support staff. These activities should follow current recommendations for effective in-service education, including hands-on learning and in-class practice and reflection. Schools should be encouraged to share with others what they have tried to determine which routes and models lead to the most promising outcomes.

- 6. Provide guidance and professional development on the appropriate uses of child assessment data.*

Pilot schools used a wide variety of assessment tools and strategies. It was not clear whether assessment was used for its most useful and valid purpose--namely for individualized instructional planning. The topic of assessment should be a focus of professional development activities, as both teachers and principals identified 'assessment for instructional improvement' as a high priority need.

- 7. Provide guidance and professional development on meeting the Hawai'i Content and Performance Standards for kindergarten and use of the new kindergarten report card.*

It would be helpful to provide professional development on the topic of integrating the current standards and reporting system with developmentally appropriate practice. It may also be useful to review the standards and report cards for possible revision, taking into consideration the use of the 2003 State Preschool Content Standards for four year olds for the junior kindergarten children.

- 8. Pay close attention to grouping and retention practices to avoid inequitable outcomes such as informal tracking or unnecessary retention. Provide related professional development on appropriate grouping and promotion/retention practices.*

The evaluation results raise three areas of concern. First, retention rates rose dramatically in the pilot schools. Second, many schools appeared to group children into classrooms on the basis of readiness testing conducted early in the school year. Third, if age-based junior kindergarten classrooms consistently deliver a slower curriculum, these students may be more likely to be judged to need a second year of kindergarten. There is a clear need for professional development that focuses on current, comprehensive research findings concerning the (mostly negative) outcomes of homogeneous age and skill-based classroom groupings and grade retention.

- 9. Provide a fully-funded summer transition program for children who have not attended preschool.*

The transition to kindergarten is more challenging for children who have not attended preschool. Extended transition programs of several weeks or even months duration help

children adjust to classroom routines and expectations, separate from their family members, and establish relationships with their teachers and peers in a more relaxed and intimate setting before the rest of the school population arrives on campus. The DOE should review the guidelines developed by the School Readiness Task Force Committee on Transition to Kindergarten, make suggestions concerning implementation models, and provide the resources needed to offer such programs on all campuses.

10. *Design and implement a rigorous evaluation of the junior kindergarten program, starting as early as possible.*

Act 219 marked a significant change in school policy and, therefore, a commensurate effort to evaluate the results of this new policy is warranted. This evaluation should include input from all constituents including teachers, school administrators, complex and district staff, and parents. To be of the greatest use to the school system, results should be shared as quickly as possible with participants at the school level, as well as on at least a yearly basis.

11. *Discuss whether other junior kindergarten models or policies are worthy of consideration.*

There is no clear research-based evidence that raising the age of kindergarten entry or offering a second year of kindergarten to younger or less ‘ready’ children has significant long-term advantages for children’s academic outcomes (Brandt, 2006; Stipek, 2002). Given this situation, further consideration of the intentions of Act 219 may be warranted



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