Creating the Future for Early Care and Education in Hawai'i

–Randy Hitz

The importance of the early years in creating a foundation for school and later success is well documented. Children who live in healthy, safe, and stimulating environments in the first five years of their lives are more likely to succeed than children who have more negative experiences. Hawai'i policy makers, like others across the nation, are debating whether and how to provide more public support for young children and their families.

The state has a stake in the wellbeing of all citizens. From a humanitarian point of view alone we want people to thrive and be happy. But from a more self-interested perspective, people who fail in school and later life become burdens to society. If it is true that children born into poverty, for example, are more likely to fail in school, then the community is wise to invest in those children early in life to improve their chances of success. And, in fact, there is a significant body of longitudinal research that suggests that there are substantial cost-benefits that result from providing early care and education to low-income children.

The idea of providing education and other social services for young children is certainly not new. Kindergartens began in the second half of the nineteenth century and are universally available today. Full-day kindergarten is becoming more popular thanks in large part to compelling research extolling the benefits of full-day kindergarten. Hawai'i is among the leaders in the nation as one of the few states in which all public school kindergartens are full day (Kauerz, 2005).

The nursery school movement began in the 1920s when the two McMillan sisters brought the moral imperative and the benefits of providing basic health care and education services for preschool-age children to the attention of the public. In the 1960s the federal Head Start program was begun precisely because of evidence that the early years in a child's life are important.

This evidence has grown substantially since the 1960s and policy makers are now trying to find new ways to address the needs of young children. In this issue of *Educational Perspectives*, Alex Harris does an excellent job of summarizing the most recent initiatives including the creation of the Good Beginnings Alliance, the funding of Open Doors, the agreement on a definition of "readiness," and the development of tools to assess school and student readiness. These initiatives are addressed in detail in other articles.

At the time of this writing, the Hawai'i Educational Policy Center, under the auspices of Act 151, is in the act of convening a task force of policy makers and early childhood education professionals to give direction to the future of early care and education in Hawai'i. The articles in this journal provide an excellent foundation for the task force discussions.

In this article, I discuss the challenges facing this task force and state policy makers with regard to the care and education of young children. They must clearly define the problem or problems they are trying to solve, and then deal with issues of accountability, funding, and governance.

Defining the Problem

Is the problem that too many children cannot meet the high academic demands of today's kindergartens, or is it that the kindergartens are imposing unrealistic expectations on five year olds? Or, is it both?

The discussion around the need for programs for young children mostly centers on the issue of school readiness. The excellent articles by Aiona, Sumida, and Brant and Grace make clear just how complex the problem is. The term "school readiness" carries with it issues beyond knowing the letters of the alphabet and colors. It is highly complex and multifaceted. The authors note the need not only for children to be ready for school but for schools to be ready for children. The Hawai'i definition is enlightened in my view for it takes into account the multifaceted nature of the construct of readiness. Teachers and the public, however, continue to struggle with the question, "Ready for what?"

Confusion about the meaning of readiness is widespread, as the following quote from a *Honolulu Advertiser* story indicates—

> The definition [of readiness] varies from classroom to classroom. Some teachers expect children to know their full names and addresses, some letters, numbers, shapes and colors. (Shapiro, 2005)

Considerable public and professional disagreement exists about what kindergarten and first grade curricula should

look like. Several of the authors in this issue note the effects of the escalation in expectations in kindergarten. Harris writes

> Today's kindergarten classrooms are fundamentally different from those of fifty, twenty, or even five years ago. Whereas children once had a year to play and become acclimated to the formal school setting, children are now expected to read write, add, and subtract by the time they arrive in first grade.

Harris goes on to describe the problems associated with children who enter school "unready." Such children are not able to pay attention, get along with peers, or benefit from academic instruction. As a result, they must receive remedial education or be assigned to special education programs. But even with special assistance, most tend never to catch up with their peers.

Is the problem one of equity of access to safe and stimulating environments?

In her thoughtful article Sumida cites research indicating that by age 4 the average child in a welfare family might have more than 30 million fewer words of cumulative experience than the average child in a professional family. Given such disparities, what can the state do to help bridge the gap? The child from the professional family may well be "ready" for the high academic demands placed on today's kindergartens, but the child from the welfare family needs a different kind of experience.

If the problem we are facing in early childhood education is one of equal opportunity, then the state might best be advised to focus attention on providing compensatory services for children from low-income families. This was and still is the focus of the federal Head Start program. Head Start is a comprehensive program that includes health and social services as well as an education program for children and their parents. We know from 40 years of experience with Head Start that even this comprehensive program does not inoculate children from failure later in school and that the benefits of Head Start diminish quickly if additional support for needy children is not provided in the elementary school years.

Is the problem one of access to high quality childcare?

Increasingly families are seeking care outside the home for their young children so that both parents can work. Research makes it clear that childcare that addresses only the custodial needs of children is far from sufficient. Any good childcare program includes a strong educational component. Providing care for young children outside the home is a necessity for many if not all parents, many of whom are policy makers. Given that reality, it only makes sense that the state has an obligation to make sure that care environments are safe and stimulating.

Just as the concept of readiness is complex and multifaceted, so too is the definition of the problem the state faces in addressing the educational needs of young children**.** In effect, all three questions have complex answers—readiness is about equity, about access, and about tailoring expectations to programs and to the needs of each child. We must avoid simplistic definitions of the problem which lead to equally simplistic "solutions" and which offer unrealistically optimistic results at little expense. Ultimately we need to address all of the above issues.

The issues in early care and education might be seen as a matrix or patchwork quilt composed of a variety of elements including the needs of children, parents, schools, and communities, and in which all these different pieces must be put carefully into place.

Children need to be helped to become ready for school and schools need to be made ready for children by providing developmentally appropriate experiences. We must

Child care	Universal preschool for 3- and 4-year olds	Infant care
Parent education	Programs for at risk children	Play and learn groups
Schools ready for children	Teacher preparation	Administrator preparation
Early intervention	Resource and Referral	Accreditation
Health care	Social services	

therefore offer special services for children who are at risk of school failure, and we must ensure that all childcare programs are safe and stimulating. The challenge for policy makers is in finding where to place priorities and resources.

Accountability

Parents bear the primary responsibility for the care and education of their children. As a society we agree that children are usually best left in the care of their parents or closest relatives—people who know their child best and who can provide the wonderful, irrational, and unconditional love that every child needs. But states also have a responsibility for the care and education of children. As I stated above, it serves humanitarian purposes as well as the self-interest of the community to provide healthy, safe, and stimulating environments for all young children.

When states get involved in a task, they have a responsibility not only to clients but also to tax payers and this means that service providers must be held accountable for results. The post office, for example, is accountable in providing a dependable, timely, and efficient service. That seems fairly clear. But the issue of accountability in education, and especially early childhood education, is much more complicated. In the K–12 arena the federal government is attempting to define accountability largely by standardized achievement test scores. Most educators, while not necessarily opposing achievements tests, express concerns about narrowing accountability to test results that, by their very nature, cannot measure many, or even most, of the outcomes we seek to achieve in our educational programs. Standardized tests may measure, for example, a fourth grade child's ability to read. But these same tests do not measure the child's disposition to read. Tests are much better at measuring rote memorization and skills than deeper knowledge, understanding, and the ability to think creatively and to solve problems.

In early childhood education the difficulties with standardized testing are even greater, for the tests are less reliable when testing younger children. Anyone who has worked with preschoolers knows how unpredictable they can be. Such unpredictability makes reliable testing very difficult, especially when tests are implemented in unfamiliar surroundings by complete strangers. Moreover, the standardized achievement tests tend to be narrowly focused on academic outcomes without attention to the broad range of developmental needs.

Policy makers have a responsibility to hold providers of early care and education accountable, but they must resist any temptation to use narrowly focused measures, many of which are of questionable validity and reliability.

Children develop at different rates and progress takes time. This creates a mismatch with the timelines of politicians who are elected for a few years at a time. Politicians need immediate "success" to demonstrate to their constituents that they have been effective. Unfortunately, the results of education programs often take many years to come to fruition. We are still learning from some of the research into early childhood education that started in the 1960s. Politicians must therefore be careful in the kinds of accountability measures they require. They must be willing to fund quality longitudinal research, and they must be patient enough to wait for the results.

Funding

Most states spend less than $1000 per child per year for children ages 0–5 and 72% of these funds come from the federal government. Between the ages of six and eight the states spend over $5000 per child each year and only six percent comes from the federal government. For young people between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three the states spend around $3500 and twenty-three percent of this is federal (Voices for America's Children, & Child and Family Policy Center, 2004).

Clearly, the level of investment in the early years is not consistent with what we know about child development. The time of most rapid development and vulnerability is the time in which fewest resources are expended. Of course, not all (and probably not even most) of the needs of children can or even should be provided through government sources of funding. However, it is apparent that the discrepancy in investment among different age groups runs counter to common sense given what we know about the importance of the early years. Moreover, one could argue (and there is plenty of research to support this) that investing more in the early years will, in fact, reduce the costs in later years. So, not only are we short-changing our children, we are not even operating in the best interest of the community.

Having said this, the costs associated with properly investing in early education could be quite large. If Hawai'i were to increase the funding per child for all 0-5 year olds by just $2000 per year, the cost would amount to $160 million. Clearly, the state will need to establish priorities and develop a long-term plan to properly fund programs for young chil-

dren. I urge state policy makers to set a timeline of not more than ten years to fully fund all of the necessary priorities.

It is worth noting that America lags behind most industrialized nations when it comes to investing in young children. In France, nearly all children from three to five years of age attend publicly funded preschools and the teachers in those schools are paid far better and are better qualified than are teachers in American preschools. Almost all four-year-olds in England, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands go to public school. Preschool attendance rates in Greece, Spain, Germany, Denmark, and Italy range from 70 to 90 percent as opposed to less than 50 percent in the U.S. (Stipek, 2005).

While investing in early care and education is important, it is also vital to keep in mind that quality matters. The very positive research results so often quoted on the effects of early childhood education are, for the most part, based on work in very high quality programs in which teachers are well-educated, and resources for professional development, materials and other educational needs are readily available. We cannot expect the kinds of excellent results that are quoted in this research by investing cheaply in early childhood education. Policy makers must insist that programs meet high standards and ensure that they have the resources necessary to do so.

It is still common to hear policy makers state that we cannot increase funding in certain areas because money is so scarce. I argue, in response, that scarcity of resources is less the issue than the appropriate distribution of resources. The national and state economies are very healthy. The U.S. continues to have the strongest economy in the world. The fact is that we live in the wealthiest and strongest nation the world has ever known. How we chose to invest our wealth will determine the future of our nation and the world. Investing in the care and education of our young children must be among the highest priorities for any state or nation that seeks to perpetuate a vibrant economy, peace, and justice for its citizens.

Governance

Government programs come in institutional categories (Education Department, Department of Health and Human Services), but children's developmental needs do not. We know, for example, that a child's health impacts her ability to learn and that children in poverty are at risk of school failure. If we are to fully address school readiness, we must attend to the health and social service needs of children. We know that good quality childcare programs include strong educational programs for children. What is required, then, is a system that coordinates the health, welfare, and social services for young children—a system that is responsive to each of the early care and education needs referred to in the above matrix.

A lot of debate takes place at the state and federal government levels about the right location for early childhood education programs. The current debate about Head Start is notable in this respect. The Bush administration wants Head Start to be part of the Department of Education rather than the Department of Health and Human Services. Many people object to this change. In Hawai'i and other states we also ask whether or not programs for three and four year olds should be under the department of education or a social service agency. The arguments for and against these competing proposals often have to do with perceived tensions between developmentally appropriate practices and formal academic instruction and between public providers versus private providers.

Frankly, I have seen excellent developmentally appropriate early childhood programs offered through departments of education and through departments of human services. I have also seen very poor programs offered by both kinds of departments. Similarly, neither public nor private schools hold a monopoly on excellent and poor early childhood programs.

It is more important that there is consensus on the nature of the programs and on a shared vision that includes all aspects of a child's development rather than debates about where early childhood programs are housed. It is the role of the state to promote quality by setting standards for programs and for teacher licensure.

What the state can do at this time is create a unit of government that focuses on early care and education and that has real authority and resources to coordinate and direct health, education, and social services. Hawai'i has been well served by the Good Beginnings Alliance (GBA), which has facilitated some excellent programs and made striking advances in policy. However, the GBA relies almost entirely on private sources of funding and the goodwill of people in the state departments and other agencies. The GBA has very limited resources and no real power to convene stakeholders and expect their cooperation. Nor does GBA have the power necessary to effectively set priorities, shape policy, or implement programs.

Conclusion

Hawai'i has much to be proud of in its efforts to provide appropriate educational and care services for young children. But the state is far from providing the full-range of quality services needed to ensure that every child is healthy, safe, and ready to succeed. A state government unit with resources and authority is needed to provide leadership and oversight of the full-range of early childhood programs. That unit can help clearly define the problems we are trying to address. It can also provide the leadership necessary to determine what resources and accountability measures are needed. With the right investments, Hawai'i can be a leader in the nation and the world in the care and education of young children.

References

Voices for America's Children, & Child and Family Policy Center. (2004). *Early Learning left out: An examination of public investment in education and development by child age*. Des Moines: Child and Family Policy Center.

Stipek D. (2005) Early childhood education at a crossroads. *Harvard Education Letter.* July/August. www.edletter.org/current/crossroads.shtml. p. 1

Shapiro, T. (2005). Is your 5-year-old kindergarten-ready? *Honolulu Advertiser.* July 7, 2005. http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2005/Jul/07In/507070351.html/?print=on

Kauerz, K. (2005). Full-day kindergarten: *A study of state policies in the United States*. Education Commission of the States. Denver. www.ecs.org