

## **Prepared Statement of Elisabeth Chun, Executive Director, Hawaii Good Beginnings Alliance**

As Executive Director of Hawaii's Good Beginnings Alliance I am honored to present testimony as to the importance of investing in early education as a critical path to improving children's success. I bring Hawaii's perspective on this issue and a strong belief that there is a great potential benefit to our nation when we focus our resources on children.

The Good Beginnings Alliance (GBA) is a statewide, non-profit, community organization created in 1997 by the Hawaii State Legislature (Act 77) to provide state and community leadership for the development of an integrated early childhood system in Hawaii.

Since 1997, Good Beginnings Alliance as Hawaii's designated early childhood intermediary organization has followed its mission to ensure that all of Hawaii's children are safe, healthy and ready to succeed by shaping public will and public policy; mobilizing action; and maximizing resources. Our goal is to improve results for young children birth through the first eight years of life—the most critical time of a child's life.

GBA as an organization has 14-member Board of Directors representing each county (Big Island, Kauai, Maui, and Oahu), business, philanthropy, early childhood and early care (ECEC) professionals, consumer of ECEC services, health, resource and referrals, the University of Hawaii, early intervention, Head Start, and the Interdepartmental Council.

The board's composition encourages a public-private partnership in order to collaborate and pool local resources to meet defined needs. The partnership works together to support local community planning efforts, develop policy, build a sustainable resource base, coordinate the early childhood education system, and advocate for comprehensive services for children and families.

### *Why Quality is Important*

Brain research now tells us that children begin their learning even before they are born and that nearly 85% of a child's intellect, personality and social skills are developed by the time a child is five years of age.

It is evident that by age six years there are large and preventable gaps between the development and academic abilities of high and low income children. Research

has shown that high quality early childhood education programs make a difference in the educational, social, emotional, and physical outcomes, especially for high-risk, low-income children. As researchers and noted economists have demonstrated, investing in our youngest children's quality early experiences has short and long term savings for us as a society.

As more states strive to implement quality early learning programs, the results of this investment are apparent. High quality child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, and other early childhood learning experiences exist, but few states and communities have a large supply of high quality programs because resources remain hugely inadequate both for quality of the program and to keep programs affordable for families.

What do we mean by quality? There is no single component, just as children do not develop in silos of cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. What we do know from research on programs such as the child care in Abecedarian, the preschool programs of High Scope, and high quality state prekindergarten programs is that there must be in place standards for programs, such as accreditation and Head Start program performance standards, and standards for children's learning and development, such as state early learning standards and the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, the model for many states' standards. Specifically in a program we know there must be:

- Teachers with education, including ongoing professional development, that allows them to select and use appropriate curriculum to individualize instruction to support children meeting the state's early learning standards and to support children's social and emotional development;
- Learning environments with appropriate teacher-child ratios and groups size, health and safety conditions met, and developmentally appropriate materials for important play and instruction; and
- For those children who need more services, the availability and collaboration with health, social services, and other supports for them and their families;

We also know from the research of programs that had long-term outcomes for the participating children that quality does not come cheaply, regardless of the setting of the program. If we care enough to invest in the education of our young children it will make a life-long difference for them and for all of us.

#### *Critical Role of Federal Support*

The federal investment in early childhood education is critical. The federal Child Care & Development Block Grant provides most of the funding for child care assistance as well as quality initiatives for all programs regardless of the family's income, such as licensing, professional development and education scholarships, and resource and referral. Head Start and Early Head Start are key programs in our states, and yet many eligible children are unable to attend for lack of funding. Special education for infants, toddlers and preschoolers has had its funding cut at the federal level. These programs provide the foundation for early childhood education in Hawaii as in every state, and yet none have had a significant increase in funds for six years. Given what we know from the research on the value of the investment in high quality early childhood programs, they should be made Congress' first priority for increased investment starting now.

While increased federal funding is a top priority, I know that this is not the appropriations committee. It is also important to look for new ways to encourage states to focus on quality. This is especially crucial right now, as state policy makers are feeling political pressure to serve more children. Legislation such as Congresswoman Hirono's PRE-K Act would provide incentives for states to ensure that as they rush to expand capacity, they do not do it at the expense of quality.

One of the specific challenges states are facing around the country (including Hawaii) is a lack of qualified early education teachers. I am encouraged by the actions this Committee has already taken this year to provide loan forgiveness for early educators, and encourage you to continue to focus on increasing access to training in the field of Early Childhood Education.

#### *Hawaii's Progress and Challenges*

I'd like to take a moment now to talk from a state perspective. Hawaii was an early leader in the promotion of early education. Led by advocacy from our philanthropic leaders, Hawaii in 1943 was one of the first states to implement a full day public kindergarten program for all five year old children. This action was prompted by the acknowledgement that children's educational journey must begin early and that our Hawaii economy depended upon an educated future workforce and a current workforce that could be confident that its youngest children were in the best nurturing environment while the parents worked.

Today we, like many states, are grappling with how to best serve our children in the years before kindergarten. Almost 40% of our young children live in families who cannot afford to send their children to early education programs. The early childhood programs that do receive federal and state subsidies—such as Head Start—are filled to capacity and have waiting lists. This is troubling because low-income families require this support for their youngest children if they are to seek employment and lift themselves out of poverty.

We also recognize an increase in the number of “gap group” families. These parents earn too much to qualify for federal or state need-based subsidies or programs such as Head Start, and yet do not earn enough to pay for preschool tuition. Their choices of placements for young children are limited, often not stable, and of unknown quality.

We have made some progress in increasing capacity. The 2001 Legislature with the support of then Lieutenant Governor Mazie Hirono allocated \$5 million dollars for the biennium to build preschool facilities on elementary school campuses. This program known as Pre Plus is now a very successful public/private partnership. Private agencies are contracted to operate the preschool programs on public school land. PrePlus resulted in the construction of 16 new preschool sites allowing over 300 preschool children to be served.

Hawaii is also envisioning its four year old program to be available in three different types of settings: center-based preschool; family child care; and family child interaction learning programs in which the adult caregiver remains with the child and also receives education as how best to support the child’s learning.

But even with the three options, more investment is needed if we are to accommodate the growing demand for early education. We must increase the capacity of the current system to address the expanded need for early education programs, as the graphs attached show. One illustrates the number of low-income four year olds now receiving subsidized preschool or tuition payments as well as the estimated percentage of four year olds that could be served in 2009 given Hawaii’s current capacity by school district. Both of these graphs demonstrate the lack of enrollment for our low-income children as well as the lack of capacity to increase enrollment.

Of course, preschool is about more than just providing a safe place for children while parents work. In Hawaii, as in states across the country, we are constantly struggling to improve academic achievement. We know that young children are entering kindergarten not prepared for success in school. The 2007 Hawai’i State School Readiness Assessment report reflects that only one out of every five children entering kindergarten classes possessed adequate early literacy skills. And, in 70% of these classes the majority of entering kindergarteners did not possess skills in critical pre-math concepts.

While 61% of entering kindergarten children attended some preschool or formal early learning experiences before kindergarten, a significant percentage of children had no such experience. In Hawaii, we estimate that 5,530 four year old children are currently not being served in any type of program.

Even for those children lucky enough to attend preschool, the quality of their early education programs is not even. In Hawaii we estimate that 6950 children are currently in programs that need quality improvements to instruction and program. Approximately 22% of our preschool programs are nationally accredited mostly by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Hawaii has been fortunate to have an ongoing mentoring program for early childhood programs seeking National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation. However, Hawaii needs new investment to encourage programs to seek such accreditation and to gradually address program improvements leading to higher quality.

Hawaii, like other states, recognizes that we need early childhood teachers who are well-prepared and qualified to teach and inspire others to follow their path. I do not want to imply that we have not made progress in this area—we have. But there is still substantial room for improvement. In order to deliver quality early education services to the over 83,000 children under six years of age in Hawaii, our current teacher resources are woefully lacking.

In order for Hawaii to serve 80% of its four year old children in an early education experience with a teacher who has a bachelor’s degree and training in early education, 370 new early education teachers need to be recruited and trained with an additional 470 new recruits for associate teachers. Furthermore, 310 of our existing teachers will require more early childhood education courses, and 200 existing teachers will need to attain a bachelor’s degree. These numbers may sound small to those of you from larger states, but consider this: we essentially need to double our early childhood educator workforce immediately if we are to provide universal, voluntary four year old program.

This brings me back to where I began my testimony: the need for new federal support. Our teachers will need scholarships and loan forgiveness. Our public universities will need incentives to provide expanded access to early childhood education courses. Our early childhood programs will need quality improvement funding.

Hawaii's early learning community, plus business and state and county departments have come together in a legislatively created Early Learning Task Force to describe the needs and recommend solutions for Hawaii's early education system. This Task Force's plan "Keiki First" estimates that Hawaii will need \$170 million annually to deliver a quality early learning program to approximately 12,640 four year olds. This figure includes funds for direct services, infrastructure, and capitol investment for facilities. Every state is working to make these large scale investments—some are further along than others—but as we—the advocates—push the states to fund these crucial programs, we need federal support as well.

Our children, and ultimately our communities and our country, will benefit greatly from a visionary and holistic approach to expanded federal support for quality early education.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify, and I look forward to answering any questions you might have.

