

# Column: Early education addresses inequities and provides better outcomes for keiki

By [Terry George](#) and [Jack Wong](#) • Feb. 23, 2020

Our community has one of the most exciting opportunities in decades to make a difference in the lives of thousands of children and improve our entire education system. We can make early childhood learning accessible for the thousands of Hawaii families who just can't afford it. Dollar for dollar, this is the single most beneficial investment we can make in our future.

The long-term benefits of early education have been studied since the 1960s, and research has demonstrated that access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education is critical for brain development, life and family success and community well-being. Decades of evidence shows children with access to early learning are more likely to graduate from high school, increasing their opportunities to pursue higher education and achieve success in the work force.

In addition, early education programs provide a safe, enriching and reliable childcare option, which can make all the difference for parents who work multiple jobs or are trying to improve their financial stability.

In Hawaii, we have approximately 40,000 children ages 3 and 4. One of out every two children at these ages — approximately 20,000 keiki — does not attend nursery school, preschool or kindergarten. The biggest hurdle remains simple economics. More than half of Hawaii families struggle to keep up with our high cost of living. For them, paying \$1,000 a month or more for private preschool just isn't an option.

Public preschool and the federally funded Head Start program for low-income families serve less than 4,000 students. At our current pace of growth, it would take decades to expand access to early learning to all 3- and 4-year-olds in Hawaii.

We need to do better, for our keiki and for the future of our state. Investing in early childhood education creates a brighter future for Hawaii. The Harvard Graduate School of Education reported in 2018 that public funding for early childhood education has the potential to mitigate the high cost of special education and lower dropout rates, leading to more positive educational outcomes.

If we want to make a real difference for our youngest learners, we must take a collaborative approach.

Currently, state legislators are considering a proposal, House Bill 2543, HD1, which is part of a package of legislative bills that aims to address the issues most important to Hawaii's working families. The bill proposes to increase funding for early learning programs. The approach also seeks to identify existing facilities that can serve as preschool classrooms, such as college campuses, public schools, public libraries and commercial properties.

The state Executive Office on Early Learning, Department of Education and many other dedicated organizations are doing amazing work to serve our keiki, but resources are limited and time is of the essence.

We can find solutions to reach the state's new ambitious goal of providing access to early education for every 3- and 4-year-old in Hawaii by 2030. It all starts with legal and policy changes at the state level. HB 2543, HD1, provides a foundation for building on the work of the early learning community. Together, we can find multiple solutions to meet the need for early education throughout our state.

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