

## Introduction: School Readiness in Hawai'i

—Stephanie Feeney and Donna Grace

The last edition of *Educational Perspectives* that was devoted to early childhood education was published in 1976. The field has changed tremendously since that time. We know today that a great deal of learning occurs in the early years and most of adult intellectual potential is developed before a child reaches the age of six. Research employing new technology has shown us that the brain is actually shaped by early experience. New research confirms what early childhood educators have always known, that a nurturing and stimulating environment has much to do with the development of emotional health and intellectual ability—both of which are essential for a child to function well in school.

Today's renewed interest in the early years makes this an auspicious time for another issue that focuses on the education of young children. In this issue we examine a number of intersecting aspects of a single topic that is a subject of great current interest nationally and in Hawai'i—school readiness.

### The movement for accountability

In the 1980s, *A Nation at Risk* launched a national movement for school reform that called for higher standards for student academic achievement and a greater attention to educational accountability. This movement led to the adoption of national education goals, which demanded that “all children in America will start school ready to learn.” In many communities today, however, the phrase “ready to learn” has been replaced with another phrase: “ready to succeed in school.” This new goal better reflects the original intention of the reform movement because it directs attention to creating the necessary conditions for children to meet the expectations they will encounter when they enter kindergarten.

The movement for accountability continues today with the demands for student performance laid down in the *No Child Left Behind* act. As a result of this movement, academic expectations have been pushed down to grades K–2, changing our ideas about what it means to be “ready to succeed in school” in the process. In the past kindergarten was regarded as an important preparation for the more rigorous, academic expectations of the first grade. It offered children a year to adapt to school expectations and to learn to function

in a group of their peers. Children were taught to develop the coordination of hands and fingers that would help them later in writing. They also gained some initial notions about math through hands-on experiences, as well as a basic orientation to reading, books, and writing. Today, kindergarten is a different world: most five-year-olds are now expected to learn to read, write correctly, and do paper and pencil math problems. Many are being asked to perform on standardized tests. Teachers and administrators have noticed that children are having a hard time meeting these expectations and a large number of them are falling behind. As a result, parents, policy makers, and educators across the nation are becoming increasingly concerned about readiness issues and the apparent lack of children's preparedness to meet the demands of schooling.

Some school districts (including Hawai'i's) have responded to this increase in pressure by raising the age of kindergarten entry. They base their decision on the belief that older children will be more successful in meeting academic expectations as measured by standardized tests. Other communities have responded with assessment tests that are used to exclude children who are judged to be “unready” from entering kindergarten. Finally, more and more children are retained in kindergarten because they are regarded as unprepared for the even more rigorous expectations of the first grade.

### What is “readiness”?

While there has been a great deal of recent interest in school readiness, both nationally and in Hawai'i, there has been little agreement about what readiness means and how it should be assessed. Readiness is a complex concept and one that has been much debated. Questions continue to arise, especially with regard to the traits, abilities, and competencies that constitute the “ready child”—questions such as Who decides? On what basis should decisions be made? For what purposes, and with what consequences?

Traditionally, the locus of readiness has been seen as existing primarily within the child. This view has often led to a narrow definition of readiness that focuses on basic knowledge and skills. The National Education Goals Panel, however, has been instrumental in drawing attention to

the multi-faceted nature of child readiness, expanding the construct to include the dimensions of physical well-being, motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, and language development (Halle, Zaff, Calkins, and Margie, 2000). Although their approach is more holistic, and comprehensive and defines “readiness” as the knowledge, skills and abilities that children should possess before entering kindergarten, it is still too narrow and focused on a definition of readiness that is tied exclusively to properties of the child.

We find a more comprehensive and helpful definition by Maxwell and Clifford. In their view,

School readiness involves more than just children. School readiness, in the broadest sense, is about children, families, early environments, schools, and communities. Children are not innately *ready* or *not ready* for school. Their skills and development are strongly influenced by their families and through their interactions with other people and environments before coming to school. (Maxwell & Clifford 2004, 42)

The position statement on school readiness adopted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1995) emphasizes the importance of using a broad definition. It states, “The traditional construct of readiness unduly places the burden of proof on the child. Until the inequities of life experience are addressed, the use of readiness criteria for determining school entry or placement blames children for their lack of opportunity. Furthermore, many of the criteria now used to assess readiness are based in inappropriate expectations of children’s abilities and fail to recognize normal variation in the rate and nature of individual development and learning. NAEYC believes it is the responsibility of schools to *meet the needs of children as they enter school* and to provide whatever services are needed *in the least restrictive environment* to help each child reach his or her fullest potential.

### **School readiness in Hawai‘i**

A school readiness task force, co-chaired by Pat Hamamoto, the Superintendent of the Hawai‘i State Department of Education, and Dee Jay Mailer, the Chief Executive Officer of Kamehameha Schools, has been created in Hawai‘i to focus on the issue of readiness and to seek ways to insure that all children are ready for a successful kindergarten experience. The Hawai‘i initiative is built on the view that readiness is a broad construct that incorporates all aspects of a child’s life, including environmental factors, which contrib-

ute to his or her ability to function in school.

Based on the belief that readiness is an essential first step in addressing children’s preparedness for school success and that community views must be at the core of school readiness efforts, a study was conducted at the University of Hawai‘i to learn about perceptions of readiness in Hawai‘i. This issue of *Educational Perspectives* reports on details of the study, the work involved in developing a statewide definition of readiness, and the implications that these ideas have for taking a new approach to the idea of school readiness.

### **About this issue**

In this issue of *Educational Perspectives* we will take an in-depth look at efforts, both nationally and in Hawai‘i, to enable all children to enter school ready to succeed.

In the first article, “From Baby Steps to Policy Initiative: Hawai‘i’s Efforts to Promote School Readiness” Alex Harris provides an overview of the landscape of reform, its potential impact on children in Hawai‘i and the ongoing progress being made on the readiness initiative.

In the second article, “Ready for Success in Kindergarten: Perspectives of Teachers, Parents and Administrators in Hawai‘i” Donna Grace and Mary E. Brandt describe a community-based study in which parents of four-year-old and five-year-old children, preschool and kindergarten teachers, and administrators were asked what they thought young children needed to know, and be able to do in order to be successful in school. The findings of this study formed the foundation for subsequent school readiness efforts in Hawai‘i.

In the article, “Play and School Readiness,” national early childhood education expert Sue Bredekamp reminds us of the importance of play in young children’s learning. Play is the ultimate realization of the early childhood educator’s maxim of “learning by doing.” And yet today its significance is not generally well understood and it is in danger of being lost as a part of young children’s school experiences because of the current emphasis on the development of academic skills through rote learning.

In their article, “What *Should* They Be Learning in Preschool? The Development of Preschool Content Standards in Hawai‘i” Stephanie Feeney and Eva Moravcik discuss the importance of appropriate early learning standards in promoting school readiness and describe the development of these standards in Hawai‘i.

Mike Fahey and Jeanne Riley describe efforts nationally and in Hawai‘i to support children’s successful transition

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from home or preschool to kindergarten in the article “The Transition to Kindergarten in Hawai‘i.”

The article by Donna Grace and Betsy Brandt, “Emergent Literacy and the Development of the Early Literacy Program Evaluation Guide,” discusses the importance of developing literacy skills in programs for four- and five-year olds and stresses the necessity of doing this in ways that are developmentally and culturally appropriate for young children. The guide, developed by the Hawai‘i Early Literacy Consortium, was written to assist teachers in evaluating their own or commercial literacy programs, and is presented at the end of the article.

In the next article, “*Loko i`a*: Enriching Educational Waters for Hawaiian Children,” Anna Sumida provides suggestions for pedagogically and culturally sound early learning while developing her theory of T4 or Teaching to the fourth power.

In “Assessing School Readiness,” Shelly Aiona provides an overview of issues related to readiness assessment.

In a second article on the topic of assessment, “Development, Validation, and Field Testing of ‘Readiness’ Instruments for the State of Hawai‘i,” Betsy Brandt and Donna Grace describe the development of two readiness assessment instruments, *Schools Ready for Children* and *Children Ready for School*.

The concluding two articles, “Lessons Learned and Directions for the Future” by Elizabeth Chun, Director of the Good Beginnings Alliance, and “Creating the Future for Early Care and Education in Hawai‘i” by Randy Hitz, Dean of the UH College of Education, summarize the lessons that have been learned and point to some directions for the future.

We hope that this issue of *Educational Perspectives* will call attention to the great importance of what happens to children in their early years and will help to illuminate the multi-faceted and often misunderstood topic of school readiness.

## References

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