

Ready For Success In **KINDERGARTEN**

A Comparative Analysis of Community Beliefs: Preschool and Kindergarten Parents,
Teachers, and Administrators

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Informing the Education Community

POLICY REPORT
December, 2001

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank all those who assisted and supported this research project.

- ♥ The Atherton Foundation and the Hawai'i Community Foundation for their funding support and encouragement
- ♥ The Hawai'i State Department of Education for its cooperation and coordination through the Evaluation Section; Planning, Budget and Resource Development Office; Office of the Superintendent
- ♥ Our graduate assistants in early childhood education at the College of Education, UH-Mānoa, Katherine Alvarado Laygo and Cheryl Slattery, for their assistance with focus group facilitation and qualitative data analysis
- ♥ Ian Pagano, graduate student in Psychology, UH-Mānoa, for his quantitative survey analyses
- ♥ The preschool, private school, and public school teachers and administrators who contributed their expertise and perceptions
- ♥ Parents of Hawai'i preschool and kindergarten children who gave their time and shared their beliefs about how best to support our young children in Hawai'i

~ Mahalo ~

Executive Summary



The Readiness Issue

What is readiness? More specifically, how should *readiness to succeed in school* be defined? Defining readiness is not a simple issue. Is it “children who should be ready for school or the schools that should be ready for the children, or the society that should provide appropriate support for the children and the schools (Lewit & Baker, 1995, p. 128)?” Nor is defining readiness an academic issue. How readiness is defined, in large measure, determines where the responsibility for improving readiness lies: the child, the school, or the support provided to both. A readiness definition, then, has practical consequences. It affects decisions about assessment, about the direction and targets of community and state investments, and about how to gauge progress.

Only recently, and then only at the national level, a general consensus on the broad components of readiness has been identified. The National Educational Goals Panel (2000) has recommended three readiness components: (1) readiness in the child; (2) schools’ readiness for children; and (3) family and community supports that contribute to children’s readiness.

States have now turned their attention to more systematically and fully defining each of these parts of readiness; how these parts will be assessed; and how progress in each of these parts will be determined.

The Readiness Issue in Hawai‘i

In Hawai‘i, state agencies, community foundations, and public and private partnerships are poised to support readiness efforts to improve educational outcomes for young children. A necessary foundation for all of these efforts is an agreed upon definition of readiness in Hawai‘i. Yet, Hawai‘i is among the many states without a formal definition (Saluja, Scott-Little & Clifford, 2000).

Purposes of the Research

The purposes of this research project are:

- 1 To discover and document the beliefs held by the Hawai‘i early childhood community (i.e., parents, teachers and administrators affiliated with preschools and public and private kindergartens) about two of the readiness components - children ready for school and schools ready for children.**

Results of national and other states’ studies are instructive and may to some extent generalize to Hawai‘i. Since characteristics of our communities and public school system differ from those in other states, we explored what the Hawai‘i early childhood community thinks about readiness. Hawai‘i results may have greater relevance to and more impact on Hawai‘i policy decisions.

- 2 **To synthesize the readiness beliefs about children and schools held by the Hawai'i early childhood community and those of national experts to arrive at a proposed state-wide definition of readiness that gives more substance to the broad components of children ready for school and schools ready for children.**
- 3 **Based on the synthesis, to provide draft benchmark instruments for gathering system level information on children ready for school and schools ready for children for consideration by the Hawai'i early childhood community.**
- 4 **To make policy recommendations based on Hawai'i readiness findings, and augmented by national early childhood education literature.**

Hawai'i Readiness Research Project

What Was Done. This research project has two studies that explored Hawai'i early childhood community's beliefs about child and school readiness. The first study, using a focus group interview method, gathered group responses to four open-ended topics:

- 1 **What characteristics or abilities make a child ready for success in kindergarten? Which child characteristics or abilities go together? Of all the characteristics or abilities, which are the five most important ones for school success?**
- 2 **What are the most important influences on a child's readiness for school success: the child, the family, the school, the community, or some combination of these?**
- 3 **What can parents, teachers, schools and the community do to help children be successful in kindergarten?**
- 4 **How can teachers and schools build on the cultural background of children?**

Twenty-four parent and teacher focus groups, totaling 178 participants affiliated with either preschools or kindergartens from three of the four major islands in the state of Hawai'i, representing a range of ethnicity and income levels were interviewed.

The second study, modeled after two influential national readiness surveys, gathered ratings to survey items on a five point scale, with 1 meaning not at all important and 5 meaning essential to success in school. The survey had three parts: (1) 25 child readiness items, 15 of which were from the national surveys; (2) 18

school practice items; and (3) five items on influences on kindergarten success.

Preschool, private school and public school administrators, teachers, and parents from around the state, totaling 2,604 respondents, completed the survey. The return rate was outstanding, and represented the full range of income levels and ethnicities in Hawai'i.

What Was Found. National comparisons and a synthesis of our findings from the group interviews and surveys are summarized according to two of the three major components of readiness developed for the National Educational Goals Panel: (1) Readiness in children; and (2) Readiness of schools for children. While not part of the research, implications regarding the third readiness component, family and community supports, are noted.

Readiness in Children

Comparison with National Findings. National studies found fairly strong discrepancies between preschool parents' and kindergarten teachers' beliefs, with parents placing greater emphasis on school-related behaviors (such as takes turns and shares; able to sit still and listen) and school-knowledge and skills (such as knows letters of the alphabet, counts to 20, and uses pencils and paint brushes). This was not the case in Hawai'i. Preschool parents and kindergarten teachers in Hawai'i are similar to one another in their high ratings (i.e., very important or essential for kindergarten success) of all child readiness items from the national survey. Such strong agreement can give some direction to readiness efforts and initiatives in the state.

However, these high endorsements raise the issue of expectations for young children. From these findings, young children entering kindergarten are expected to have a wide array of well developed skills and knowledge in order to do well or to be successful in school. Are such high expectations reasonable and developmentally appropriate for young children? The community of early childhood educators and parents should consider this question, particularly in light of the press for high and rigorous educational standards.

Hawai'i Interview and Survey Findings. In Hawai'i, the most salient and shared views about children's characteristics and abilities are summarized by seven child readiness domains adopted for this research project: Physical Health and Well-Being, Social-Emotional Development; School-Related Behavior and Skills, Cognitive Development and General Knowledge,

Approaches to Learning, Language Development and Communication Skills, and Motor Development and Self-Help Skills.

Physical Health and Well-Being. Like the national findings (NCES, 1993b), physical health and well-being of young children is seen as *the* most important and essential readiness characteristic by all survey respondents. Children who are physically fit, well nourished, rested, and in general good health are more likely to benefit from learning experiences provided by families, schools and communities. All survey groups, regardless of their affiliation and role, endorsed this belief, regarding it as essential for children's successful learning. "*Healthy, rested, and well nourished*" was selected by all survey groups as one of the five most important and influential characteristics for school success. Although health and well-being was barely mentioned by our interview groups because of the way our question was worded, health screening for children was high on the list of important things communities can do to help children be successful.

The high agreement and the extremely high ratings for physical health and well-being have strong implications for private and public agencies and their policies, such as access to vision, hearing and dental screening; child immunization efforts; and nutrition and health education programs, to name a few.

Social-Emotional Development. Children's social and emotional skills emerged as central in almost every interview group's beliefs about readiness, and was strongly endorsed as "*very important*" for school success by all survey groups, particularly by parents. The social-emotional domain points in two directions: the external that encompasses children's ability to cooperate, form friendships and understand the perspectives and feelings of others; and the internal that includes recognition and expression of one's own feelings, positive self-regard and a developing sense of independence and efficacy. For the interview groups, "*Gets along well with others*" was one of the five critical readiness qualities. Again, the central importance of this domain is reinforced by the fact that every survey group and interview group selected "*Is confident and feels good about self*" as one of the five most critical characteristics needed for school success.

School-Related Behaviors and Skills. School-related behaviors and skills of young children surfaced in the interviews and on the surveys as a very important readiness domain, particularly among parents, public

school kindergarten teachers and preschool administrators. Children who come to kindergarten with (or who quickly acquire) certain work habits and attitudes (such as completing appropriate tasks, following simple routines and directions, demonstrating common courtesies, and exhibiting self-control in groups) reduce the need for teachers to attend to classroom management issues. Teachers, therefore, can focus more on learning and curriculum. All interview groups had in their top five, items similar to "*Can follow directions, rules and routines,*" as did all survey groups. Administrators, teachers, and parents in our survey also selected another item from this school-related behavior domain as one of the top five readiness characteristics: "*Is respectful of others.*"

Cognitive Development and General Knowledge. General knowledge (such as knows colors, shapes, letters, numbers) was not a highly valued aspect of child readiness. It was mentioned more frequently by parents than by teachers in our group interviews; and on our survey, public school parents rated it more highly than private or preschool parents. Administrators did not see general knowledge as that important to school success. Relative to the other domains, all survey groups considered it the least important domain. No group (survey or interview) selected a basic knowledge characteristic as one of the most critical skills for children's success.

Cognitive development (meaning the development of concepts and understandings, such as emergent literacy concepts, concepts of number, space and time; and cognitive processes, such as comparing, synthesizing, reflecting and evaluating new knowledge) did not emerge in the interviews. Our survey items, modeled as they were on national surveys, did not represent this aspect of the domain. The lack of cognitive survey items is a limitation of our study, since cognitive development has a prominent role in children's readiness for school success in the research literature.

Greater knowledge of cognition and its development needs to be promoted in the early childhood community of parents, caregivers and professional educators. Awareness and knowledge of this domain are particularly needed for systematically planning and maintaining a balanced, comprehensive curriculum for young children. Attention to cognition and its development in the curriculum, particularly by kindergarten teachers, will provide the scaffolding of higher level thinking processes and skills expected and needed for learning in later grades.

Approaches to Learning. Characteristics related to how children approach learning experiences and opportunities (such as curiosity, willingness to try new tasks and challenges, persistence, taking a problem-solving approach, etc.) were rarely mentioned in the group interviews. When these characteristics did come to mind, teacher focus groups, primarily preschool teacher groups, brought them up as important. However, the items regarding approaches to learning that occurred on the survey were highly endorsed as essential for school success by parents, teachers and administrators. "*Is enthusiastic and curious in approaching new activities*" ranked in the top five qualities selected by all survey groups.

Language Development and Communication. Communication skills were mentioned in the group interviews, but not often; and they did not form a separate category for any of the interview groups. Most communication skills, particularly by preschool teacher interview groups, were grouped with other items depending on the function served. For example, "saying 'please' and 'thank you'" would be placed with social skill items. Both parent and teacher interview groups did single out the importance of a child being "*able to communicate his or her needs, wants and feelings*" as one of the top five child characteristics for success. On

the survey, parents and teachers endorsed communication skills as very important, and thought they were more important than did administrators. For the survey respondents, however, no communication item was placed in the top five.

Language development never came up in the group interviews, and unfortunately was not represented on the survey. Because language acquisition is seen as a universal phenomenon, it may be overlooked in education or its promotion may be seen as unnecessary. As the saying goes, "Language is caught rather than taught." The challenge in education, then, is how to thoughtfully and systematically create a language rich oral environment for young children.

Motor Development and Self-Help Skills. Motor development skills were mentioned infrequently and less often than self-help skills in the group interviews. When they did emerge, teacher groups more often than parent groups noted their importance. However, both teachers and parents groups placed "*Able to care for personal needs*" as one of the top five characteristics necessary for kindergarten success. With the exception of public school administrators, all survey groups placed a high value on self-help skills ("*very important*" or higher) and a lesser value on motor development.



Child Readiness Summary. The findings from both studies indicate that the child readiness characteristics judged as most important to kindergarten success for Hawai'i come from the following domains:

- ♥ **Physical health and well-being; i.e., “Is healthy, rested and well nourished.”**
- ♥ **Social-emotional domain; i.e., “Is confident and feels good about self” and “Gets along well with others.”**
- ♥ **School-related behaviors and skills; i.e., “Can follow directions, rules and routines” and “Is respectful of others.”**
- ♥ **Communication skills; i.e., “Is able to verbally express needs, wants and feelings.”**
- ♥ **Self-help skills; i.e., “Is able to care for personal needs.”**
- ♥ **Approaches to learning; i.e., “Is enthusiastic and curious in approaching new situations.”**

Relative to the above domains, child readiness characteristics in language development, motor development, and cognitive development and general knowledge domains were viewed as less critical to success in kindergarten.

Readiness of Schools for Children

In the focus group interviews, we asked what schools can do to help children be successful in kindergarten. Overall, the largest cluster of actions across parent and teacher interview groups focused on staffing/structure (such as having enough adults to give individual attention to children both through smaller class size and more adults in the classroom). Actions that ensure schools are caring, nurturing, and safe places for young children was the second largest cluster and tied with actions that promote communication between parents and school, and parent education. Curriculum, teaching strategies and assessments appropriate and responsive to young children's development formed the remaining cluster.

School practices also encompass what teachers could do to help young children be successful in school. The two largest clusters across parent and teacher interview groups were actions that support children's development (such as give individual attention, show interest and empathy, nurture, care and praise, etc.) and

actions focused on parent-school communication and relationships (such as, welcome parents, explain child's progress, share classroom activities, etc.). Kindergarten teacher interview groups, while supporting parent-school communication and relationships, considered teachers' actions that support children learning as more relevant to children's success.

On the survey, we asked respondents to rate the importance of school actions and practices on children's kindergarten success. These items formed four clusters, along with a set of independent items. Two clusters (one addressed curriculum practices that provide active and individualized learning experiences, and one focused on home-school communication and transition to kindergarten) were the most highly rated by all survey groups. These clusters, on the average, were considered more than “very important” to children's success in school.

Within these two highly rated clusters, we identified school practice items that were strongly endorsed as “essential” to children's success in kindergarten. These are:

- ♥ **“School communicates well with families about child's school experiences;**
- ♥ **Entering kindergarten children visit the school they will be attending;**
- ♥ **Children can choose from a variety of hands-on activities; and**
- ♥ **Teachers individualize the curriculum to meet the needs and abilities of children.”**

From the set of individual school practice items strongly endorsed as “essential” to kindergarten success were:

- ♥ **“Children listen to stories read aloud;**
- ♥ **Parents are provided with education about child development and learning; and**
- ♥ **Children's health is screened before they enter kindergarten.”**

In general, important and valued school actions and practices are consistent between interview and

survey findings. Schools and teachers can best assist children's success in school by (1) demonstrating care and support for young children's emotional well-being; (2) establishing positive home-school relationships through communication and transition activities; and (3) providing active and individualized learning experiences for young children.

At the present time, there is little information on the extent of these practices in Hawai'i schools, nor is there a formal, systemic infrastructure to gather, evaluate, and make such information accessible for use. Initial attention by the early childhood community to home-school communication and transition activities may be a good first step since it would encompass both pre-school and kindergarten communities.

Family, Community and Cultural Factors Influencing Readiness

When asked about the relative importance of factors influencing children's readiness, the interview participants more often saw child characteristics and experiences provided by the family as most influential, and community characteristics as least influential on children's success in kindergarten. All survey groups also considered family experiences as "very important" to "essential" factors for school success. Like the interview participants, administrators, teachers, and parents as-a-whole judged community characteristics to be the least important factor of all.

On our survey, preschool experience (a factor omitted in the focus group interview protocol) was viewed as a highly influential factor by preschool teachers and preschool parents.

Thus, survey respondents held views much like our focus group participants, who ranked family experience as a very strong influence on school success, and considered school and community of lesser importance.

Consideration of children's home languages and cultures in the curriculum was important to the survey participants, but seen as less essential to school success than many of the other given school practices. Neither did the interview groups generate these areas as things that teachers, parents, schools, or communities should address.

When specifically asked during the interview, however, how teachers and schools could build on children's cultural backgrounds, the preschool parent and teacher interview groups proposed incorporating cultural awareness into the curriculum and accepting and building on children's home languages. Kindergar-

ten parent and teacher interview groups focused more on having cultural awareness in the curriculum and less on home language.

If cultural and language backgrounds of children and families are to be valued, then greater awareness about these influences along with strategies about how to build on them should be part of community education efforts and professional development programs for educators.

Recommendations

Awareness of views about readiness held by parents, teachers and school administrators in our state and those held by nationally recognized early childhood experts helped us focus our recommendations on both shared perspectives and unique beliefs.

RECOMMENDATION 1: *Adopt a statewide definition of readiness that recognizes its complex and dynamic nature and corresponds to the central values expressed by Hawai'i early childhood education community.*

A definition of readiness should:

- ♥ **be sufficiently complex to incorporate the three critical attributes (i.e., child characteristics, school characteristics, and family/community characteristics) that interact to increase the likelihood of children learning;**
- ♥ **have common, core aspects valued by Hawai'i early childhood community of parents, teachers, and administrators; and**
- ♥ **recognize its dynamic nature (i.e., readiness is not a single point in time, nor are children "ready" or "not ready").**

The value of a common and shared definition has been noted by many. It has the potential of serving as a central focus around which the early childhood community can organize its efforts; guide its expenditure of energy and resources; and give sustaining purpose for public and private partnerships. Hawai'i, with its small size and centralized school system, is in a good position to be one of the leaders among the states to arrive at a common definition of readiness.

The overriding purpose, however, for developing a statewide definition of readiness is to create a context that will enable children to succeed in kindergarten and subsequent school experiences. To realize this purpose, we recommend that Hawai'i's definition of

readiness follow the lead of the National Education Goals Panel and national early childhood experts. It should address the three critical attributes of child, school, and family/community supports valued by Hawai'i early childhood stakeholders and address the dynamic nature of the concept of readiness. We offer the following definition for consideration:

Readiness is the interactive outcome of a child's early development, school practices, and family and community supports that enable a child to engage in and benefit from school learning experiences.

Further, we recommend that the three attributes embedded in this draft definition be more fully described so as to communicate to parents and teachers of young children and policy makers.

Readiness of Children. This refers to the characteristics that children bring to the school setting that enhance the likelihood of learning. These characteristics, in terms of the seven developmental domains addressed in our research project, are: social-emotional development, school-related behaviors and skills, approaches to learning, language development and communication skills, cognitive development and general knowledge, motor development and self-help skills, and physical health and well-being. Our findings on child characteristics valued in these domains by parents, teachers and administrators in Hawai'i form the essence of the child benchmarking instrument that we have drafted for consideration by the early childhood community.

Readiness of Schools. This refers to characteristics and practices of schools and teachers that are most likely to produce positive outcomes for young children. Overall, actions that schools and teachers can take are those that demonstrate caring and support for young children's well-being; actions that establish positive home-school relationships through communication and transition activities; and curriculum practices that emphasizes active, individualized, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences for young children.

Community and Family Supports. This attribute of readiness addresses programs and policies in commu-

nities that support the well-being of children and families. Although this component was not an objective of our research, we recommend an excellent review on community programs and practices that work by Halle, Zaff, Calkins, and Margie (December 2000) to the Hawai'i Good Beginnings Alliance (GBA), which is in the process of collecting baseline data for community benchmarking.

RECOMMENDATION 2: *Establish an inclusive, stable mechanism and infrastructure with authority and support to coordinate and oversee readiness initiatives in Hawai'i.*

To assure conditions that enable a child to engage in and benefit from learning experiences, there needs to be a mechanism and infrastructure in place for coordinating and overseeing statewide readiness efforts. Currently, readiness initiatives and efforts are undertaken in an independent, non-systematic, and often isolated fashion, sometimes resulting in efforts that are duplicated, and sometimes leaving gaps that may go unnoticed. The mechanism and infrastructure set up should be:

- ♥ **inclusive, that is, geographically representative of the state and of the public, private and preschool sectors;**
- ♥ **stable, that is, insulated from changing political and educational leadership by having stable positions and personnel sufficient to carry out its responsibilities; and**
- ♥ **imbued with sufficient authority and support from the public and private sectors.**

The Good Beginnings Alliance, if given expanded public-private support, has the potential of fulfilling all of these attributes, and thus would be capable of carrying out these new and necessary readiness functions and responsibilities.

The Interdepartmental Council (IDC) of the Hawai'i Good Beginnings Alliance has been involved in a School Readiness Partnership. At their meeting on September 2001, the CEO of Kamehameha Schools and the State Superintendent of Education agreed to co-chair a Readiness Task Force. We recommend that this Task Force be responsible for establishing inclusive, stable, and supported mechanisms and infrastructure for coordinating and monitoring state readiness efforts and tasks.

Some of these are:

- ♥ **Finalizing the state definition of readiness, having it endorsed by appropriate agencies and organizations, promoting it through public awareness campaigns focusing on the importance of all three readiness components, and working to assure that it is implemented and utilized in all Hawai'i state readiness efforts;**
- ♥ **Facilitating the development of standards and indicators for early childhood education in Hawai'i. [A number of groups are currently working on this task. It would be helpful to convene members of these groups to work together.];**
- ♥ **Guiding the development of assessment efforts that gather systemic information on young children ready for school, schools ready for children, and the quality and extent of community and family support;**
- ♥ **Establishing appropriate transition activities and communication channels between homes/preschools and kindergartens, both public and private, in the state;**
- ♥ **Overseeing the development and delivery of early childhood training of caregivers, teachers and administrators to help them better support children's development;**
- ♥ **Arranging for the provision of technical assistance for readiness efforts.**

RECOMMENDATION 3: *Develop a systematic, comprehensive approach to readiness assessment that has clarity of purpose and is in accordance with the best practices in early childhood assessment.*

Our third recommendation is for the development of a systematic approach for the assessment of readiness. This approach should:

- ♥ **have *clarity of purpose* and use of these results;**
- ♥ **be *comprehensive* by encompassing all three aspects of readiness—child, school, and family/community support; and**
- ♥ **be in *accordance with best practices and guidelines* put forth by early childhood associations and early childhood assessment experts.**

A great deal has been written in recent years about the assessment of children's readiness. In fact, the current interest in this topic is at least partly motivated by concerns about the use of tests to determine children's readiness for school. Questions have been raised about the nature of the tests, the uses to which they were put, and the kinds of educational decisions that were being made based on results from these tests. (See Crnic & Lamberty, 1994; Halle, Zaff, Calkins & Margie, 2000; Meisels, 1987; and Shepherd, 1994; Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000). *"Thus assessments must be used carefully and appropriately to resolve educational problems, rather than to create such problems (Meisels, 1999, 59- 61)."*

National Educational Goals Panel (NEGP) planning group (1995), while agreeing that assessment of child outcomes is an important and necessary step, note that it is insufficient. Assessment of children must be coupled with a commitment to examining social and institutional readiness to support children's early development and learning. To that end, the planning group strongly urged *"that energy be devoted to examining the readiness and capacity of the nation's schools to receive young children (p. 4)."*

Readiness assessment should be well thought out so that the approach has all three readiness components, the results of which are set in a system of use. Gathering and reporting data do not necessarily change or improve conditions: "Weighing a hog does not make it fatter." Use of readiness assessment results need to be articulated and agreed upon.

Before a viable assessment system can be designed, it is necessary to be clear about the different purposes and uses of assessment results and appropriate methodology to achieve each purpose. The very essence of validity is proper use of results.

NEGP, the National Association of the Education of Young Children, and other national organizations have set forth important principles for readiness assessment. We recommend that the state of Hawai'i adopt such principles and use them in developing its systematic approach to readiness assessment.

RECOMMENDATION 4: *Promote school practices that facilitate home-school communication, particularly transition activities between home/early childhood programs and kindergarten.*

This recommendation requires public and private preschools and public and private elementary schools to work together, a complex enterprise. The transition from preschool or home to kindergarten can be a stressful time for children just entering kindergarten. Our findings

suggest that children face high expectations and that kindergarten teachers place a lesser emphasis on supporting children's overall development than preschool teachers do. Larger classes and more formal settings contribute further to the adjustment in kindergarten. This transition can be even more difficult for poor and minority children who have not attended preschool and whose families are not aware of school expectations. In order to facilitate a successful transition to kindergarten, connections between children, families, schools and communities need to be made (Halle, et al., December 2000).

The long term goal is that every family in Hawai'i with a child who is about to enter kindergarten have access to activities that smooth the transition between the home/early childhood program and the kindergarten. The short term goal is to establish the means and mechanisms by which this long term goal can be accomplished; identify the steps to be taken; and establish how progress toward this goal can be gauged. This calls for a statewide plan that facilitates collaborative transitions to kindergarten for children and their families that focuses on two areas:

- ♥ **Coordination and communication between the kindergarten and preschool/child care programs that children attend. Activities might include transfer of records to kindergarten teachers; communication between kindergarten teachers and previous caregivers about students and their previous learning experiences; and school visits by entering kindergarten students.**
- ♥ **Coordination and communication between the kindergarten and parents of entering kindergartners. Activities might include formal arrangements for visits by parents of entering kindergarten students; distribution of letters and/or packets of material about the kindergarten program; information about parental rights and responsibilities; ways parents may smooth children's entry into kindergarten.**

Transition activities may be in place in a number of schools and communities. The state level GBA Quality Assurance Committee has expressed interest in doing work on transitions and could seek funding for initial work in this area.

RECOMMENDATION 5: *Coordinate and promote education and training for preschool and kindergarten teachers, parents, and administrators appropriate to their respective roles and based on the project's findings.*

Focus group and survey findings suggest that parents, teachers and administrators could better support children's development and have schools be more ready for young children if they had additional training in identified areas including: language development, cognitive development related to early literacy, numeracy and science concepts; curriculum and learning experiences relevant to children's home language and culture; effective communication and family involvement in education, and finally, creation of supportive, nurturing settings for young children.



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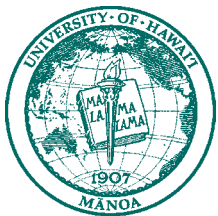


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