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Excellent preschool requires quality teachers

By Liz Chun and Christina Cox

Many of us remember those teachers who had the greatest impact on our desire to learn.

Teachers with a genuine love of learning, along with the requisite skills and knowledge, approach teaching energetically and passionately, transforming classrooms from the daily drudge of "correct and direct" to places of joyful noise and meaningful learning.

Sadly, our shortage of qualified teachers continues to grow. The Economic Policy Institute released a study last year that documents the decline in education levels of both preschool administrators and teachers from 1979 to 2004. Nationally, less than one third of early educators have college degrees, and yet research clearly and repeatedly shows that a preschool teacher's level of education and specialized early education training are the strongest determinants of successful outcomes for children.

Quality early childhood education provided by highly qualified teachers has long-term benefits to society — there is less need for remedial education in elementary school; social costs later in life are reduced; and well-educated students contribute to tax rolls as they enter the workforce (Lynch, 2004). Preparation for life begins with the family and with quality early education.

Based on the growing evidence of the link between teacher education and training and improved child outcomes, national accrediting bodies for preschools, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, recently adopted higher teacher education standards.

We can learn much from KCAA Preschools of Hawai'i, which, when faced with this development and their need and determination to create a thoughtful solution, launched an effort to embrace new methods of delivery for early childhood teacher education, to expand their pool of quality teachers and to better prepare these teachers to support children's learning in the "digital age."

As background, KCAA operates seven licensed preschools and employs 46 teachers and 48 aides. They compete with about 390 other preschools to hire from an ever-dwindling pool of qualified staff, often requiring three to six months to fill a position.

KCAA's Board of Trustees approved a bold strategic plan, "Excellence in Education," establishing teaching excellence as the top priority and identifying strategies to improve compensation, develop a merit-based performance review tied to wages, adopt a nationally recognized, standards-based curriculum, and make teacher training a key component while still maintaining affordable preschool education.

It had become evident that, despite an increase in both federal and state spending for early education programs and despite working tirelessly as an advocate for early education, whatever positive changes might be unfolding, KCAA could not wait for the tides to turn. They would have to develop their own solutions. KCAA also knew they could not give their staff extended time off for education, because of the dire shortage of substitute teachers.

After exploring options with various institutions of higher education in Hawai'i, a door opened with Chaminade University. Chaminade had staff experienced in developing online early childhood education degree programs. The Samuel N. and Mary Castle Foundation, with a long history of

supporting early education and teacher training, funded the effort. Three basic early education courses were converted to an online format. KCAA identified staff interested in increasing their education while remaining employed full-time, and then secured additional funding to provide three hours of release time per week to support these efforts.

Wireless laptops were purchased to allow employees access to online courses during the workday. Funds were found to pay a student adviser who assists employees to become online learners, handles registration details and all work related to course selection based on the employee's needs.

The coursework is especially meaningful to employees because they can apply their new knowledge and practice what they are learning at work every day. Preschool directors and program specialists provide mentoring and coaching to staff as they progress.

One of the unanticipated outcomes of this effort is the confidence that teachers and aides with limited computer skills are gaining as their abilities grow. Aides with little more than a high school degree are now seeing themselves as successful students. And, the support and encouragement they give each other is invaluable.

Employees must sign an agreement committing to repay the organization if they resign within one year of completing a course. They must also commit to continuing to pursue their degree in early education, as long as funds are available to assist them in this effort.

KCAA's Virtual Training Institute has enabled 35 KCAA employees and 12 PACT/Head Start employees to further their education while remaining employed full-time. Their hope is to expand services statewide over the next two years, increasing the number of qualified teachers and improving outcomes for the young children they serve.

Over the past three months in this column, the Voices of Educators have set forth their perspectives on Schools of the Future. Today's case study from early education illuminates our broader concern for all levels of schooling; that is, we must educate both current and new teachers to teach in new ways, to address the learning styles of 21st-century students, children born into a computer-literate and "connected world." Next month's column will examine efforts already under way to meet this challenge at one of Hawai'i's public high schools.

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