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Christina Cox

KCAA Preschool President talks about running a nonprofit like a business

SHARA ENAY

When Christina Cox became president of KCAA Preschools 10 years ago, she worked hard to add business leaders to the board. “The business community has provided us with the innovation, opportunities and connections to take us to the next level,” Cox says. “We’re proof of the good that can come out of public-private partnerships and a lot of passion.” In this picture, Cox asks the children to help pull clouds in front of the sun to create better lighting for the photograph.

Q: What does it take to run a successful nonprofit?

A: We run it like a business. The difference is, we base all of our decisions on whether they support our mission, which is to build a solid foundation for Hawaii’s children through excellent early-education programs. Whether you’re a nonprofit or a for-profit, your operational needs are the same. It’s the nature of our business in which the difference lies. We’re responsible to our board, donors, taxpayers and to the community. We’re an almost \$8 million organization and I know every single line of that budget. I know if I make adjustments over here, it’s going to impact over there, so we’re very conscious of trying to make adjustments to the things that aren’t going to impact the quality of the program. If you think of it from a business perspective, we’re building tomorrow’s workforce and raising tomorrow’s leaders.

Q: How has early childhood education changed over the years?

A: The big changes started in the ’80s when more women began entering the workforce and there was an increase in single, working parents. At that time, nursery school was the place you sent your children for half a day a few days a week for a happy, warm experience. They could paint, learn to socialize and develop skills. However, as that societal shift occurred, researchers said, “We should start paying attention to what happens in preschool classrooms because now those kids are there for eight to 10 hours a day. We probably should do some studies.” All of these societal changes led to an increase in standards. It’s not just childcare anymore. We’re really looking at the quality of the education.

Q: What were the results of the studies?

A: Neuroscientists found conclusively that the brain grows at its highest rate during the first five years of life. About 10 years ago, the level of investment that the Feds started putting into early education nationwide and developing different kinds of incentive and subsidy programs increased dramatically, and it was tied to the brain research. At the same time, the performance of public school students was declining, so everybody decided that it would be best to leverage our dollars and start investing in the early years. Then, the longitudinal studies on those children showed that you get an increased dollar return if you start investing early. For every dollar invested in a child when they’re young, nationally, the data says you have a \$7 return rate. A specific study was done in Hawaii using that same model and it says that for every \$1 invested you have a \$4 ROI. What it means is that those children, especially the low-income children that go through high-quality programs, have a lower rate of contact and experience with the criminal justice system, they have fewer incidences of special-education services and they have greater ability to generate higher income and more of them complete college. So, basically, you can pay now or pay later.

Q: Are kids learning or developing differently from a decade or two ago?

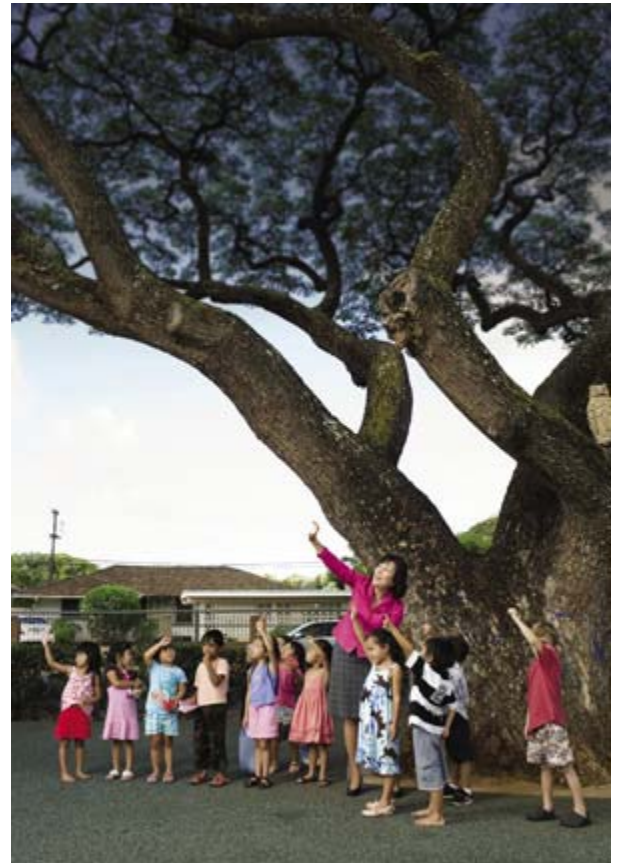


Photo: Olivier Koning

A: Children now come with different skill sets. The best example I can give you is that we had a booth at the Baby Expo. There's this 18-month-old boy who's sitting in the stroller and he's got his dad's iPhone. I asked the mom, "What is he doing?" She said, "He's playing games. His brother taught him." So he couldn't even talk but he knew exactly how to play the game. It's my opinion that you don't make technology the primary focus of your early learning curriculum, but it should be used to support teachers. I don't think it's good for kids to sit in front of a screen all day. It's not good for their developing eyesight or social skills.

Q: What setbacks and challenges have you experienced?

A: The reductions in assistance for low-income families have been hard. We really had to look differently at how we were going to support them and provide their children with access to quality preschools. If those children are going to break out of the cycle, they need to have a good beginning. The best way is if they come into a quality program and that is how you start to access their families and get them into the services they need and help support their movement forward. Other challenges are just the ongoing tension between managing cost, maintaining quality and raising money.

Q: What makes an effective fundraiser?

A: You have to be committed. You have to believe in what you're selling and you have to have good connections. We've seen some great success with online efforts. You have to be creative. When you're doing the fundraising at the board level, it's all about relationships. So, businesses that have supported our campaign to date – First Hawaiian Bank, Bank of Hawaii, Alexander and Baldwin, HEI, ASB, AIG, the Kosasa Foundation, and Servco – that's all direct results from all of our trustees.

Q: Where do you hope KCAA will be in the next several years?

A: I remember the first day I took this job as president. I drove into the driveway and I thought to myself, "Someday, we're going to have a great teacher training center here and we're going to have all of these great partnerships." That's sort of the mana and vibe I felt, so I'm happy that we're finally on our way to creating our Center for Early Education and Development right here on our Mother Rice campus (in Moiliili). It's what the kids need. What we really want to do is make this a wonderful hub for early childhood learning and a great support ground for teachers. We still have so much to give. It's not just about expanding to include more sites. We have such a huge responsibility to the community.