

A Bill for an Act Relating to Education.

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Hawaii:

SECTION 1. The legislature finds that the Good Beginnings Alliance, established in response to Act 77, Session Laws of Hawaii 1997, is a public-private partnership charged with the responsibility for improving early childhood outcomes through the development of quality early childhood education and care and related family support services. Specifically, the Good Beginnings Alliance must develop policy recommendations concerning all aspects of a coordinated early childhood education and care system, including coordination strategies, resource development, and advocacy.

Through Act 77, Session Laws of Hawaii 1997, the Good Beginnings Alliance is charged with ensuring forward and strategic movement with partners — families, communities, providers, and policy makers — who share a commitment to the goal of all children in Hawaii starting school safe, healthy, and ready to succeed.

The legislature also recognizes that recent reports on the science of child development continue to emphasize that during the first five years of life it is critical for optimum growth and development that a child be in an early education and care environment that stimulates the child's curiosity and creativity, is safe and healthy, and nurtures the child's spirit. Studies have shown that young children thrive when they live in families and communities that foster their "warm heartedness", respect their dignity, and encourage their life-long learning.

Hawaii recognizes the importance of early childhood development on future learning so that children will be ready to succeed in school. Public and private agencies in partnership with communities across the State have implemented the state policy adopted in 1998 by the legislature in House Concurrent Resolution No. 38, S.D. 1, "All of Hawaii's Children Will Be Safe, Healthy and Ready to Succeed."

There is increasing national and local focus on the need for quality early childhood programs and experiences in preparing children for kindergarten. The public is becoming more aware that addressing the school readiness of young children is essential for meeting the standards that the federal government will be putting into place as part of education reform. As growing numbers of kindergarten teachers report that children are entering kindergarten not ready for success, the focus is beginning to fall on how families, communities, and early education can support a child to become ready for school, and on how the schools can become better prepared to meet the needs of each individual child entering kindergarten.

The 2001 census reports state that Hawaii has 31,751 children three and four years of age. Of those children, 14,967 are from low-income families. However, fifty-one per cent of three and four-year-old children whose families are considered "low-income" (meaning they earn less than one hundred eighty-five per cent of the Federal Poverty Index) do not receive preschool subsidies. Studies in Hawaii and around the nation have demonstrated that children from low-income families who are in quality early childhood education environments and programs prior to entry into kindergarten show greater gains in later school achievement than children who did not have these opportunities.

The recent report entitled "From Neurons to Neighborhoods", developed by a committee of seventeen national leaders in the fields of early childhood education, psychiatry, neuroscience, economics, and public policy convened by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, states that "striking disparities in what children know and can do are

evident well before they enter kindergarten. These differences are strongly associated with social and economic circumstances, and they are predictive of subsequent academic performance.” The report goes on to state, “children grow and thrive in the context of close and dependable relationships that provide love and nurturance, security, responsive interactions, and encouragement for exploration. These conditions most often occur when there is a positive interaction among family, school, community, and the child.” The report emphasizes the importance of ensuring that young children’s needs are met through sustained relationships with qualified caregivers, that the special needs of children with developmental disabilities or chronic health conditions are addressed, and that the settings in which children spend their time are safe, stimulating, and compatible with the values and priorities of their families.

The legislature, by codifying the definition of “school readiness”, recognizes the importance of positive interactions among family, school, community, and the child. The legislature affirms the progress of the interdepartmental council school readiness task force and the results and performance framework underway. The overriding purpose for developing a definition of readiness is to create conditions that will enable children in Hawaii to succeed in kindergarten and subsequent school experiences. In order to realize this purpose, Hawaii is following the lead of the National Education Goals Panel and national and state early childhood research and defining readiness broadly to include the critical attributes of child, school, and family and community support.

This definition of “school readiness” is one of shared responsibility and accountability. Children’s developmental characteristics and abilities vary widely in individual children and include: physical health and well being, social and emotional development, school-related behaviors and skills, approaches to learning, motor development and self-help skills, communication and language developmental skills, general knowledge, and cognitive development.

Family support includes meeting children’s basic needs, providing emotional support, supporting learning by providing stimulating experiences, talking to children, and reading to them every day.

School support includes welcoming children and families, involving families in school, providing transitions between the home or early education program and the school, providing active, hands-on learning experiences, supporting quality instructional methods, building relationships between children and teachers, honoring individual and cultural diversity, and partnering with community agencies.

Community support includes provisions for children to have adequate nutrition, opportunity for physical activity, health care, enriching preschool and home experiences, and programs that help families to be their child’s first teacher.

The purpose of the Act is to add the definition of “school readiness” to Act 77, Session Laws of Hawaii 1997. The inclusion of the definition of “school readiness” is in keeping with the intent of Act 77, which recognizes the Good Beginnings Alliance as the focal point for policy development, and is dedicated to enhancing, developing, and coordinating quality early childhood services.

The school readiness task force of the interdepartmental council, the private nonprofit corporation, and the community councils are committed to improving the school readiness of Hawaii’s children and joining with families, schools, and communities to further support children’s readiness for school and school’s readiness for children. This Act requires the foregoing partners to present to the legislature an annual report of progress in enlisting public and community support and family participation in school readiness and in developing policies and strategies for measuring results and performance indicators of school readiness that will strengthen Hawaii’s early childhood system and build capacity for sustainability.

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SECTION 2. Act 77, Session Laws of Hawaii 1997, section 2, as amended by Act 60, Session Laws of Hawaii 2000, is amended by adding a new section to read as follows:

“§ -6 School readiness; progress report. (a) “School readiness” means that young children are ready to have successful learning experiences in school when there is a positive interaction among the child’s developmental characteristics, school practices, and family and community support.

(b) The corporation designated in section -1 and the interdepartmental council shall jointly submit, in their annual report to the governor and the legislature, a description of the progress achieved in enlisting public, private, and community support and family participation in school readiness and in developing policies and strategies for measuring results and performance indicators of school readiness that will strengthen Hawaii’s early childhood system and build capacity for sustainability.”

SECTION 3. New statutory material is underscored.¹

SECTION 4. This Act shall take effect upon its approval.

(Approved April 8, 2002.)

Note

1. Edited pursuant to HRS §23G-16.5.