

A RUNNING START

ENSURING QUALITY IN THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE ON EARLY LEARNING PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM

Recent legislative initiatives to establish a state-supported preK program represent an exciting opportunity to provide significant benefits for children in Hawai'i. We should ensure the strongest possible start to the state preK plan and commit to doing what it takes to provide the caliber of program needed to show desired results and make a difference in the lives of our young keiki. The new public preK program could serve as a model for other preschool classrooms and provide the foundation for a vibrant, broadly-based early learning system for our state.

Strong early learning programs promote school readiness and can show lasting effects on school achievement, social wellbeing, and even adult adjustment.¹ However, only those of exceptional quality are successful in closing the achievement gap between advantaged and at-risk children.² To maximize potential child outcomes, Hawai'i should design the new preK program based on current research in education science. We should also take advantage of lessons learned from other states and municipalities with the strongest track record of success in providing public preK.³⁻⁶ Below is a list of research-based recommendations for implementing a preK program.



Steps to quality in preK:

Set the stage with structural requirements

These elements facilitate teachers' ability to provide children with excellent learning experiences:⁷⁻¹⁰

- Limit the teacher-child ratio to 10:1 or less, with a maximum class size of 20 children staffed by a lead teacher with a bachelor's degree or higher in early childhood education (or equivalent with HI ECE endorsement) and an assistant teacher with an associate's degree in ECE or higher.
- Provide a material-rich, center-based classroom environment and outdoor play area designed for preschoolers.
- In addition to meeting the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) quality benchmarks, assist classrooms in attaining the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation or the top tier quality rating in a future state quality rating system, whichever is more stringent.
- Provide pay, benefits, and a work environment conducive to long-term staff retention.

Provide high quality teacher-child interactions

Since teacher-child interaction is the strongest classroom influence on child outcomes:¹⁰⁻¹¹

- Ensure a high frequency of rich language use, strategic questioning, and warm responsiveness to children's interests and needs.
- Engage with children and scaffold their learning throughout the day.

Use developmentally-appropriate, evidence-based curriculum and instruction

These elements of preK pedagogy set the foundation for later learning:^{1,7,8,10, 12-14}

- Design the instructional program around those aspects of child development that are the foundation for later learning, namely socio-emotional competence, language development, higher-order thinking, and approaches to learning.
- Provide ample time for exploration and indoor/outdoor play, a balance of teacher- vs. child-initiated activity, and a blend of large group vs. small group vs. individual settings.
- Use validated curricula to address age-appropriate content areas, i.e., language, literacy, math, science, social studies, ethics, nutrition, health, physical education, music, and art, using integrated instruction and units of study.
- Include home languages and cultures in the classroom and have bilingual staff to support children and families as needed.
- Have teachers use valid observation and curriculum-based assessments to track each child's progress and individualize instruction.
- Align all elements of the instructional program with the Hawai'i Early Learning and Development Standards.

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Steps to quality in preK (cont.):

Engage families

When schools and families are true partners, children develop skills and attitudes that promote school success and families are more effective advocates:^{7,8,15-18}

- Ensure that classrooms are welcoming and families have a meaningful role in decision-making and leadership.
- Provide frequent, reciprocal communication in varied formats.
- Work with families to support their children's learning, particularly through strategies such as family workshops, home visits, and home learning activities.
- Provide resources and referrals relating to child and family wellbeing.

Provide evidence-based professional development

These elements support growth in teachers' knowledge, skills, and commitment to educational innovation:^{10,15,19-27}

- Create a learning community among teachers, principals, and support personnel.
- Promote a shared vision of program goals and commitment to professional growth.
- Provide evidence-based coursework and/or in-service training focused on classroom implementation integrated with substantial, ongoing, on-site support from highly qualified coaches.
- Encourage self-reflection on one's own practice and the examination of classroom and child data in a constructive, non-punitive context.

Use evaluation to its full potential for quality monitoring and improvement

These practices support the long-term success of educational change:²⁸

- Empower the Executive Office on Early Learning to provide creative leadership and allow risk-taking as the program develops.
- Provide sufficient time for change to occur and desired outcomes to be reached.
- Contract with an external evaluator to conduct a rigorous assessment of the new program with an emphasis on guidance for program development and improvement.
- Collect data on: observed classroom quality (including teacher-child interaction, time use, and the physical environment); curriculum implementation; family engagement; teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and needs; and child outcomes.
- Once a sufficient level of program quality is established, evaluate short- and long-term program outcomes on children's learning compared to those not enrolled in public preK using appropriate research designs.
- Provide annual reporting to the Early Learning Advisory Board, the DOE, and the Legislature on progress towards outcomes.



Suggested Citation

DeBaryshe, B. D. (2015). *A running start: Ensuring quality in the Executive Office on Early Learning pre-kindergarten program*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i, Center on the Family.

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