

Investing in Hawaii's working families

Boosting wages, housing and pre-K will strengthen our community, the economy

By Colbert Matsumoto, Pono Shim and Richard Wacker

Early education addresses inequities and provides better outcomes for keiki

By Terry George and Jack Wong

ISLAND VOICES



Colbert Matsumoto, top, chairman of Island Holdings, chairs the Government and Civic Engagement Committee of the Hawaii Executive Collaborative; Pono Shim is president/CEO of the Oahu Economic Development Board; Richard Wacker, CEO of American Savings Bank, chairs the Innovation Economy Task Force of the Hawaii Business Roundtable.

Leading economists at UHERO (University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization) and the state DBEDT (Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism) have forecast Hawaii's economic growth over the next three years as falling to 1% or less annually. This will lag the forecasted national average by 50%, putting our state among the nation's weakest in economic vitality.

With Honolulu's recent restrictions on transient vacation rentals and the probable decline in tourism activity due to the coronavirus outbreak remaining to be seen, even that forecast might be incomplete.

The ramifications of an economic decline will be far-reaching. All sectors of society will experience consequences, but individuals who already live paycheck to paycheck — more than half of Hawaii's residents — will have the most to lose. Unless the inertia in our economic growth is reversed, our community faces the prospects of lost jobs, increased business insolvencies, cuts in government services, curtailment of grants-in-aid to social service agencies, and increased tax burdens for taxpayers at all income levels.

Overall the quality of life in Hawaii will decline for its citizens.

With this in mind, leaders in the Legislature and the governor have agreed upon an unprecedented joint package of proposals to address the challenges posed by a slowing economy.

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Our community has one of the most exciting opportunities in decades to make a difference in the lives of thousands of children and improve our entire education system. We can make early childhood learning accessible for the thousands of Hawaii families who just can't afford it. Dollar for dollar, this is the single most beneficial investment we can make in our future.

The long-term benefits of early education have been studied since the 1960s, and research has demonstrated that access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education is critical for brain development, life and family success and community well-being. Decades of evidence shows children with access to early learning are more likely to graduate from high school, increasing their opportunities to pursue higher education and achieve success in the work force.

In addition, early education programs provide a safe, enriching and reliable childcare option, which can make all the difference for parents who work multiple jobs or are trying to improve their financial stability.

In Hawaii, we have approximately 40,000 children ages 3 and 4. One of out every two children at these ages — approximately 20,000 keiki — does not attend nursery school, pre-school or kindergarten. The biggest hurdle remains simple economics. More than half of Hawaii families

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ISLAND VOICES



Terry George, top, is president/CEO of the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation, and Jack Wong is CEO of Kamehameha Schools; both are members of the Hawaii Executive Collaborative.

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FUTURE

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>> House Bill 2543 and Senate Bill 3101, relating to access to learning, proposes to make early education more accessible and affordable to all Hawaii's families.

>> HB 2541 and SB 3102, relating to helping working families, will raise the minimum wage to put more money in the hands of residents.

>> HB 2544 and SB 3103, relating to a school facilities agency, will fund improvements for Hawaii's aging schools, improving learning environments for our keiki.

>> HB 2542 and SB 3104, relating to land development, addresses the critical need for affordable housing in Hawaii.

The initiatives within this joint legislative package address economic inequality, reform governmental processes, promote development of housing for local residents, expand educational op-

portunities and increase the workforce talent pool.

Unlike measures adopted in the past that have tended to be piecemeal and focused on specific interests, this comprehensive set of measures are solidly aimed at launching fundamental change to benefit the community at large and stimulate economic growth. They represent the most ambitious set of legislative proposals in recent years, a collaborative effort aimed at fulfilling a renewed vision for Hawaii.

Why now? Because the future of Hawaii depends on it. Our state cannot succeed if more than half its residents are one medical emergency or unexpected car repair away from financial disaster. We cannot stand by and watch our best and brightest keiki move to mainland cities for better paying jobs and a higher quality of life.

The long-term effects of the bills can help to lift the economy and create opportunities for upward mobility for thousands of

residents. The combined benefit of early education and affordable childcare improve earning potential for parents and children. An increase in affordable housing availability and wages combined with tax relief will put more money in the pockets of residents, allowing them to live beyond their next paycheck.

As will be expected, naysayers have already come forth to criticize the proposed measures. Is it perfect? There is no such thing. Politics is the art of the possible. While refinements might be appropriate over the course of the legislative session, the joint package offers a comprehensive approach to strengthen our economy and the vitality of our community. They represent a thoughtful effort to balance divergent viewpoints and interests.

If our state's elected officials can work together with the private and nonprofit sectors to turn these proposals into a reality, Hawaii's people will be better assured of a stable future.

EDUCATION

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struggle to keep up with our high cost of living. For them, paying \$1,000 a month or more for private preschool just isn't an option.

Public preschool and the federally funded Head Start program for low-income families serve less than 4,000 students. At our current pace of growth, it would take decades to expand access to early learning to all 3- and 4-year-olds in Hawaii.

We need to do better, for our keiki and for the future of our state. Investing in early childhood education creates a brighter future for Hawaii. The Harvard Graduate School of Education reported in

2018 that public funding for early childhood education has the potential to mitigate the high cost of special education and lower dropout rates, leading to more positive educational outcomes.

If we want to make a real difference for our youngest learners, we must take a collaborative approach.

Currently, state legislators are considering a proposal, House Bill 2543, HD1, which is part of a package of legislative bills that aims to address the issues most important to Hawaii's working families. The bill proposes to increase funding for early learning programs. The approach also seeks to identify existing facilities that can serve as preschool classrooms, such as college campuses, public schools,

public libraries and commercial properties.

The state Executive Office on Early Learning, Department of Education and many other dedicated organizations are doing amazing work to serve our keiki, but resources are limited and time is of the essence.

We can find solutions to reach the state's new ambitious goal of providing access to early education for every 3- and 4-year-old in Hawaii by 2030. It all starts with legal and policy changes at the state level. HB 2543, HD1, provides a foundation for building on the work of the early learning community. Together, we can find multiple solutions to meet the need for early education throughout our state.

