

Terry Lock

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The potential of preschoolers helps motivate Hawaii's Executive Office of Early Learning director

By Lee Catterall



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Hawaii's public school system will drop the junior kindergarten grade at the end of the 2013-14 school year and make way for a publicly funded preschool network, following last month's new law signed by Gov. Neil Abercrombie.

The governor had appointed Terry Lock a year earlier as his early childhood coordinator, and Lock will work with the state Department of Education in fashioning the new system. Starting with the 2014 school year, incoming preschool students must be at least 5 years old by July 31 of the year that they begin school. An "early learning program" would be eligible for late-born 5-year-olds and 4-year-olds.

Lock, a graduate of Maui High School, is Hawaii's first childhood coordinator and was named in June to head the state Executive Office of Early Learning to begin phasing in the preschool network. She has been immersed in the field for 36 years, beginning in graduate work to obtain her graduate work in human development at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, Calif. It was there where she became intrigued by the education of preschool children.

"Once I stepped into a classroom and started working with them, I was just amazed at how much they absorbed, their curiosity and their interest in the world and about the things that are new to them," Lock said.

"It's just the freshness about them and curiosity that I felt like this is something that I'd like to spend my career in," she remembered. "And so the more I began to study child development, the more I began to be more interested in how preschool systems in schools were set up, and how parents were engaged or not engaged in school."

Before her appointment by Abercrombie, Lock served six years as director of early childhood at Kamehameha Schools. She worked previously in the Office of Head Start in Washington, D.C., and as early childhood resource coordinator for Maui County.

QUESTION: Can you say what the transition will be toward the preschool program in the next two or three years?

ANSWER: The plan is not done. In a priority, it would be phased in over time, and starting in school year 2014, when the kindergarten age change takes place, when the students will have to be 5 years old to attend kindergarten, and that fits with what many states are doing at this time, I think over 45 states.

That year, we're going to have a program for priority first, with children who would have attended, who have gone into the DOE (Department of Education) but don't have a place to go. We want to start off, depending on that research again, probably with those who are on the free- and reduced-lunch category, those children who really are

most disadvantaged. Thinking of that, we probably won't be able to serve all. And from that, the next ... phases I believe will follow the legislative biennial. The first phase will be 2013-14, 2014-15, so those two years will be the first phase. The second phase will be the next biennium: 2015-16, 2016-17.

Q: What will be the status of junior kindergarten?

A: The status of the junior kindergarten policy will be that the last year of junior kindergarten will be the school year 2013-2014; and the next year, 2014-2015, will be when the kindergarten age change will happen, and it will be the first year of this new preschool program.

Q: So there won't be any transition in which both of those programs will exist at the same time?

A: Right. The goal is that there will be a smooth transition and there won't be gaps in services.

Q: But is that really a transition, when you go from one system to another?

A: There is going to be some transition. I think there's going to be an adjustment for all families and children, so I think part of the work going forward is really providing information out to families about what their options could be. The eventual goal over time is to serve all 4-year-olds. Realistically, when it comes to what will it cost and will we be able to serve all "4s" immediately, that probably is not realistic. That is why my office will come up with a phased-in implementation plan.

Q: What do parents need to know?

A: First of all, if they're wanting to send their child to a preschool, that there are agencies that can give them information about what's available now; an agency is PATCH, People Attentive to Children, and you can call them and they do child resource and referral.

Another thing parents need to know is that having their child in preschool is really an important thing in terms of their child's educational experience. We are finding that children who are in preschool, especially a quality preschool, that over time they really do well. They do well in preschool, but they also do well in school. That's an important thing that parents should know, because I think it would be parents who really desire for their children to be in preschool, to really take advantage of this opportunity for their child. In particular, I'm concerned about families who might not have the wherewithal to really understand that, and so we want to get to those families and children who really can benefit from this experience.

Q: Kindergarten is not required?

A: Kindergarten is not required, and this program, too, will not be required. It is an option for families.

Q: What aren't parents enrolling their children in kindergarten now?

A: I think one, is it is not mandatory. I think families want choice, and they might choose not to send their child to kindergarten and they might keep them at home. But similar to homeschooling, I think we can make that option. If that kindergarten was mandatory, I think we would especially get to the children who really need to be in kindergarten, and we could have an option where, like a homeschooling option, where they could go through the same experience like other homeschoolers in DOE.

Q: How will preschool be different from the present junior kindergarten system that will encourage parents to enroll their children?

A: I think one of the components I like to emphasize through my office is more information to parents about the importance of early learning, the importance about doing things at home but also having experiences that are good for young children. I think more awareness about the importance of these types of programs will be one thing that's different.

One of the things about how children learn and develop is that there are some general categories about it. At every age they learn different things and are able to do different things, and that's called "developmentally appropriate," so we want to ensure that there is developmentally appropriate practices that our teachers are doing with children, whether they're 3 years old, 4 years old, 5 years old. They're slightly different because the child is maturing and beginning to really understand different kinds of concepts. So you want to see differences in the curriculum, and also in the kind of exposure that children have.

Q: A lot of them are younger than the junior kindergarten. Is there a different curriculum?

A: You can have a group of mixed age, and this often happens in early childhood programs in preschools. ... But the type of lesson and activities that are designed might vary according to the maturity of the children. So it really takes a skillful teacher to observe the child, be able to really know what the kinds of differences these are and then adjust the curriculum with that. So, yes, you can make variations in your curriculum, even in the mixed age, but I would say, in general, a program that's for young "4s" as opposed to older "4s" would be slightly different.

Q: What would be the appeal here that hasn't been present?

A: One of the things is that Hawaii is one of the few states in our nation — 11 states — that don't have a state-funded preschool. We know that preschool today in our state is mostly done by the private sector. Many churches provide preschool; there's also preschool through Kamehameha Schools; there's also preschool under Head Start, a publicly funded federal program that's free for 3- and 4-year-old children who qualify, based on (family) income. But most of our working families, actually, who don't qualify for either Kamehameha Schools or Head Start really have to pay out of pocket. I would say today's cost is probably about \$700 to \$800 a month for preschool.

Q: Is that the major reason for parents not putting their children in preschool?

A: I think that's a huge reason, because it's hard to make it affordable when parents are working and don't have that kind of income.

Q: But the public schools' junior kindergarten now is free. Why are parents who are not putting their children in free junior kindergarten going to put their 4-year-olds in preschool?

A: There might be a lack of awareness by parents that preschool or even kindergarten is even an important aspect of our schools, their educational experience. I think that's one of the main reasons. And there might be some cultural differences. There might be language differences as well. I think we have a fairly substantial population, especially in Honolulu, of English-language learners, if you take communities like our Farrington complex, the Kalihi area.

I think whether those children all go to preschool or kindergarten, we'd like to ensure that they do. ... Consumer education and being able to do outreach to families. ... We hope that this time will give us more opportunity to engage with our public and find out what's preventing them from sending their children to preschool.

Q: How will the curriculum be different?

A: That's really an important question for the Department of Education. I look forward to working closely with the Department of Education in really examining that for kindergarten, 1st, 2nd and 3rd (grades), because some of the other research that's emerging now is that not only do we want our children to have a high-quality experience in pre-school, we want the same in kindergarten, first, second and third, and that children will be reading proficiently at 3rd grade. We're finding that children who are reading proficiently at third grade often had high-quality preschool experiences, and those children who don't, often there's a trend of students actually dropping out. That is a critical component, I think, of a continuum of high-quality experience.

Q: Why has Hawaii been so slow in doing this?

A: I think there's been multiple reasons. What makes it happen is really both having the political will to be able to make these decisions as policy makers and also the public will to say to our policy makers that this is critical. ... Many states have begun to do that and have been a number of years ahead of us with publicly-funded preschool, with

more options for families with opportunities to make it more affordable.

Q: What is your goal in the next two or three years?

A: My goal is to carry out the governor's vision, and that is all 4-year-olds in a high-quality preschool experience, and through utilizing the public and private system. It's really bringing more attention to this area, but also really having actual services for children.

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