



# Achieving a Shared Statewide Vision for Kindergarten in Hawai'i

**LAURA BUCKNER**  
MARCH 2023

A transformative kindergarten experience can be a powerful lever for equity. Kindergarten is a pivotal time—it is an “on-ramp” to K–12 education, with young learners entering from a variety of settings, including public and private preschool and childcare centers, family childcare, early childhood special education settings, family friend and neighbor care, and other formal and informal venues. Regardless of where young learners are entering kindergarten from, adults can create safe, supportive, and responsive developmental conditions in kindergarten so that every child can thrive and achieve their greatest potential in school and in life.

The Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative, facilitated by the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd, was a yearlong program for state education leaders working to ensure young children experience equitable and developmentally appropriate conditions for learning. Participants in the Collaborative focused on three critical components of kindergarten—developmental relationships, safe and supportive environments, and developmentally appropriate practices—to improve statewide systems to better support educators, students, and families.

### **About the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety**

With a focus on equity, the Center aims to build the knowledge and capacity of state and local education agencies to adopt evidence-based practices in social and emotional learning, school safety, and other integrated whole-person initiatives. [Learn more about the Center and the Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative.](#)

Leaders from the Hawai‘i State Department of Education (Hawai‘i DOE), Office of Curriculum and Instructional Design (OCID) joined the Collaborative to receive guidance as they sought to define a vision for early learning that aligns with the work of other child- and family-serving agencies and reflects the state’s indigenous principles of community and collaboration. Having recently been tasked with implementing a new mandate to conduct kindergarten entry assessments for all children entering the public school system, OCID staff saw an opportunity to revisit how their K–12 work aligned with that of early childhood education systems.

This brief describes the process that leaders in the OCID used to review and align the state agency’s vision for kindergarten with existing policy and developmentally appropriate practice. It discusses how, through their participation in the Collaborative, Hawai‘i’s education leaders are building and integrating their knowledge of best practices for young learners so they can support schools and districts to embed those practices in assessments and classrooms as children enter the K–12 sector. The brief concludes with reflection questions for education leaders in other states to consider as they work toward creating developmentally appropriate and culturally affirming education spaces that bridge the early learning and K–12 sectors.

## Hawai'i's Complex Context

Hawai'i's public school system spans seven islands over an area of nearly 11,000 square miles. It serves over 160,000 students with diverse backgrounds and cultures, including about a quarter of Native Hawaiian descent.<sup>1</sup> Multiple government agencies share responsibility for the state's early childhood programs, with different offices overseeing public preschool programs, K–12 education, and birth through age 3 (B–3) services. Furthermore, indigenous communities throughout the state run their own early childhood education systems that operate independently of government agencies.

In 2020, the state legislature passed a mandate that the Hawai'i DOE (which oversees public K–12 education) select a statewide kindergarten entry assessment that would be given to all students entering a publicly funded school. The mandate was part of the Access to Learning bill, which aimed to expand access to high-quality early education.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after the new legislation passed, the Hawai'i DOE created a new position for an Early Childhood Specialist, who would act as a bridge between systems of early learning and care and the public school system. This person is responsible for creating and implementing a statewide vision for kindergarten that aligns with developmentally appropriate practice, affirms and builds on young children's experiences prior to entering kindergarten, and maintains the DOE's focus on high-quality instruction.

This work was already underway when the OCID joined the Collaborative, and other states were eager to learn about how leaders in Hawai'i approached this visioning process. In a Collaborative session on alignment and coherence of programs, leaders from Hawai'i shared about the state's background and how they developed their vision for kindergarten. Throughout the Collaborative, the OCID group continued to refine their vision as they thought through different elements of developmentally appropriate practice and learned from other states about their approaches to supporting kindergarten students.

## A Statewide Vision for Early Childhood...

As a first step toward alignment, the new Early Childhood Specialist and others in the OCID conducted a crosswalk of state plans and policies that impact early childhood education, including grades K–3. These included the Hawai'i State Literacy Plan, the Early Childhood State Plan, and several state Board of Education policies. The crosswalk also included the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement, which provides an overarching framework for early learning. Reviewers noted shared values and continuity among the plans and opportunities to explore a more coordinated approach among offices within the Hawai'i DOE and other agencies. They also surfaced areas of opportunity to better highlight developmentally appropriate practice and unique aspects of Hawaiian culture that support early learning.

The OCID then set about drafting their own vision statement for early learning with a focus on transitions to kindergarten and developmentally appropriate practice. The process of drafting this statement incorporated perspectives from the behavioral health, whole-child, and social and emotional learning disciplines and incorporated a focus on culturally responsive-sustaining education.

## ...Grounded in Indigenous Culture

A critical aspect of this work in Hawai'i is a commitment to indigenous principles and values. The Hawai'i DOE uses a framework called Nā Hopena A'o, commonly referred to as HĀ, to describe the "skills, behaviors and dispositions that are reminiscent of Hawai'i's unique context, and to honor the qualities and values of the indigenous language and culture of Hawai'i."<sup>3</sup> The framework was codified as state policy E-3 in 2015. It includes six elements that all Hawai'i DOE programs and services should seek to embody:

- Strengthened Sense of Belonging
- Strengthened Sense of Responsibility
- Strengthened Sense of Excellence
- Strengthened Sense of Aloha (care and respect for myself, families, and communities; empathy and appreciation for the symbiotic relationship between all)
- Strengthened Sense of Total Well-Being
- Strengthened Sense of Hawai'i (demonstrated through an appreciation for its rich history, diversity, and indigenous language and culture)<sup>4</sup>

The OCID team found opportunities to include the elements of HĀ as they created a comprehensive vision for kindergarten. As a grounding phrase to describe the vision, they used the term *KEIKI* (which means "child" in Hawaiian) as an acronym for "Keiki enjoying impactful PK3 instruction." Table 1 provides details of how the team used the ideas of KEIKI and HĀ to outline their work to promote equitable, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive kindergarten.

Table 1. KEIKI: Keiki Enjoying Impactful PK3 Instruction

Concept	Commitment
Keiki	<p><b>We believe:</b></p> <p>All children, inclusive of all previous experiences and all individual needs, have a place in public education classrooms in Hawai'i.</p>
Enjoying	<p><b>We promote:</b></p> <p>Early education in Hawai'i that is joyful, playful, responsive, culturally sustaining, and developmentally appropriate.</p>
Impactful	<p><b>We provide:</b></p> <p>Tools, resources, professional development, and support for teachers to apply culturally sustaining, developmentally appropriate, and evidence-based instruction and assessment to individualize instruction and meet diverse student needs.</p>
PK3	<p><b>We ensure:</b></p> <p>Teachers in Hawai'i have access to PK3 instructional standards that meet all five domains of early childhood education and HĀ.</p>
Instruction	<p><b>We apply:</b></p> <p>Evidence-based practices in teacher coaching and professional development to empower teachers to embody KEIKI's vision.</p>

## What's Next

---

Through their work with the Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative, leaders from the OCID have deepened their knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten and identified important considerations for supporting transitions into kindergarten. This knowledge helped define their vision.

With this clear vision, the OCID can now set about aligning their programs and services—including the selection and implementation of kindergarten entry assessments—to appropriately support students from the moment they enter the K–12 education system. The team is currently working with native communities to ensure integration of and alignment with cultural and linguistic values as they plan for implementation of the statewide kindergarten readiness assessment.

The vision can also guide the OCID as they engage with partners and secure funding to expand developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten and build connections between early learning and K–12.

## Reflection Questions for State Leaders

---

State leaders can learn from Hawai'i's efforts to create a comprehensive vision for kindergarten. The following questions can serve as prompts for understanding where your state is, and what work still needs to be done, in working toward developmentally appropriate programs and services that equitably and effectively support all young children to thrive.

- What other state agencies also serve the early learning and development needs of young people in our state? Do we regularly communicate or partner with these agencies?
- Are our kindergarten and transition programs—including kindergarten entry assessments—aligned with early education systems? Are they developmentally appropriate? How might we ensure alignment?
- Are our kindergarten entry assessments aligned with kindergarten standards, curricula, and professional learning opportunities in our state?
- How are community values included (or not) in our policies and practices? Are there opportunities to better align with these values?

## Resources for Learning More About Hawai'i's Work to Provide Developmentally Appropriate Kindergarten Rooted in Indigenous Values

---

- [Nā Hopena A'o \(HĀ\)](#)
- [Nā Hopena A'o Statements: HĀ: BREATH](#)
- [NAEYC Developmentally Appropriate Practice \(DAP\) Position Statement](#)



## Endnotes

---

- 1 Hawai'i State Department of Education. (n.d.). *Media kit*.  
<https://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/ConnectWithUs/MediaRoom/MediaKit/Pages/home.aspx>
- 2 Hawai'i State Legislature. (2020). HB2543 HD1 SD2 (Section 2, §302A-A). [https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session/archives/measure\\_indiv\\_Archives.aspx?billtype=HB&billnumber=2543&year=2020](https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session/archives/measure_indiv_Archives.aspx?billtype=HB&billnumber=2543&year=2020)
- 3 Hawai'i State Department of Education. (n.d.). *Nā Hopena A'o (HĀ)*. <https://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/TeachingAndLearning/StudentLearning/HawaiianEducation/Pages/HA.aspx>
- 4 Hawai'i State Department of Education. (2015). *Nā Hopena A'o Statements: HĀ: BREATH*.  
<https://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/DOE%20Forms/NaHopenaAoE3.pdf>

©2023 WestEd. All rights reserved.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that partners with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide. More information about WestEd is available at [WestEd.org](https://www.wested.org).

Suggested Citation: Buckner, L. (2023). *Achieving a shared statewide vision for kindergarten in Hawai'i*. Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd.

The authors would like to thank Nadine Marchessault, Michael Meli, Lauren Padesky, Leslie Stiller-West, Carey Tambio, and Esther Tokihiro at the Hawai'i Department of Education for their contributions to this brief and for their partnership as participants in the Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative.

This brief was prepared by the national Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education under grant S424B180004. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.