

**Messaging  
to  
Encourage Support  
of  
Public Preschool Expansion**

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*Hawaii's public preschool program is serving only a small segment of the population of four-year-old children in the state. Advocates wish to expand the program, but expansion would require taxpayer dollars, and, therefore, a groundswell of support. This study looked into what kinds of messages would be the most effective for convincing taxpayers and voters to support increased State spending on public preschool, including messages within a framework of legal rights. Using a focus group and questionnaire for participants, it was found that messages within a legal rights framework do not appear to encourage, and may in fact backfire in encouraging, support for public preschool expansion if they focus so much on the disadvantaged population that they are perceived as being divisive. Messaging that appears to be the most effective are those that help the public to understand that the entire population – the have-nots, other children, K-12 teachers, and adults without children alike – will be helped by public preschool, whether directly or indirectly, and whether in the short-term or long-term; these frameworks include those that focus on both the importance of preschool to K-12 education and child well-being, and investment in terms of helping children to become contributing members of society. This study provides important knowledge for Hawaii should it decide to push for expansion of public preschool, and is useful for other states that wish to promote the creation or expansion of public preschool.*

## **Introduction**

Many states and nations have already realized how supremely important preschool is, with its significant short- and long-term benefits for the individual and the whole of society. But up until 2014, Hawaii was one of the last 10 states without a state-funded preschool program. That year, after a decades-long effort, the State finally designated funds for preschool and paved the way for the joint development of the EOEL Prekindergarten Program by the Executive Office on Early Learning (EOEL) and Hawaii State Department of Education (DOE).

The Program allowed families of low incomes to enroll their four-year-old children in one of 21 public preschool classrooms located at 18 public elementary schools across the state, beginning fall 2014; the majority of classrooms are located on the neighbor islands and in rural areas. Though EOEL's goal was to make the Program available to more children with varying family incomes and at more locations statewide, with the limited funding of \$3 million provided by the State, the Program is currently able to serve only 420 of the more than 17,000 four-year-olds there are in Hawaii every year. This means, with the high cost of living in Hawaii, the Program is not reaching many of the children who need preschool the most.

EOEL's goal would cost taxpayer dollars, of course. For the State to expand the Program, even incrementally, there needs to be another groundswell of support for it, especially given the proposed Constitutional amendment that failed in 2014 (which would have allowed the State to partner with private preschools for more cost-effective delivery of the Program, among other things).

This study aimed to determine what kinds of messages are the most effective for convincing taxpayers and voters to support increased State spending on public preschool. The primary

methodology used was a focus group, the participants of which were also asked to complete a questionnaire.

The study found that while messaging within the framework of legal rights was not considered as convincing as those within other frameworks, what was most convincing were messages that focused on both the importance of preschool to K-12 education and child well-being. The least effective message seemed to be that relating to wasting of available federal dollars for preschool, and the least effective framework was increasing awareness and use of available/possible preschool options. Perhaps the most important theme that emerged from the study is this: while messaging within the framework of legal rights may not work to encourage support of public preschool if it focuses so much on the disadvantaged population that it is perceived as being divisive, what would work best may be messaging that helps the public to understand that the entire population – the have-nots, other children, K-12 teachers, and adults without children alike – will be helped by public preschool, whether directly or indirectly, and whether in the short-term or long-term.

The rest of this paper is organized into four parts. It begins with a review of relevant literature, followed by an explanation of the research design. Next, the findings are presented and analyzed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for Hawaii, which can assist when the State pushes for expansion of the current EOEL Prekindergarten Program, as well as when other states promote creation, or expansion, of their respective public preschool programs.

## **Literature Review**

Though there is an extensive body of research around the benefits of preschool (Gorey, 2001; Kirp, 2009; Temple & Reynolds, 2007), the focus of this study was on messaging to promote public preschool, the expansion or establishment of which, despite widespread recognition of the benefits of preschool, is and has been a contentious issue for policymakers in the United States.

The review of literature relevant to this study started with an examination of articles with a broader perspective – such as the importance of engaging stakeholders in child welfare issues and associated strategies for doing so – then turned to articles that concentrated more specifically on attitudes toward child welfare issues, including public preschool, and explored responses to specific messages promoting those policies or programs. Some articles turned their attention to messaging for child welfare issues and public preschool within a legal rights framework, and whether or not it is effective. Finally, the literature review looked at articles that covered the effect on the public, policy makers, interest groups, and policy itself, of using media to deliver messages, as well as the effectiveness of media coverage in promoting public preschool.

Because the subject of effective messaging to encourage support of public preschool in Hawaii is often specific to the state and its constituencies, most analogous research explored advocacy approaches, especially community mobilization strategies, to strengthen support for child welfare programs and policies, generally, and public preschool in particular, from a broad, cross-state standpoint, or even using international examples (Allen & Martinez, 2005; Brodtkin, 1994;

Dombro et al., 1996; Kagan & Cohen, 1997; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Wright, 2011). Dombro, O'Donnell, Galinsky, Melchar, and Farber, as well as Kagan and Cohen, recognized the importance of generating public will for, and engaging stakeholders in, child welfare issues including public preschool – the public must be convinced that reform is necessary and feasible. They offered strategies to accomplish this: understand current thinking and attitudes, develop effective messaging using such information and with the help of focus groups and opinion polls, establish a broad-based constituency that is committed to advancing the well-being of children and families, mobilize parent advocacy groups and provide them with training and support, work with legislators, and work with the media.

An example of research looking at advocacy in other countries, Wright (2011) studied two highly reputable models of public preschool in Europe, which began with the heavy involvement of communities and eventually reached a countrywide, cultural commitment to preschool and valuing of the importance of early childhood development.

Dombro et. al (1996) discussed the techniques of using research, focus groups, and opinion polls to develop public engagement campaigns on child welfare issues. Research to determine public perception of an issue, and how perception may be influenced by rhetoric, is necessary to ensure a campaign's effectiveness. The use of focus groups for such research provides valuable insight, but also provides only a slice of opinion; nevertheless, politicians rely heavily on these opinions, so focus groups are a good tool to influence them.

A body of literature measured the public's attitudes toward child welfare issues in general, and also specifically toward public preschool. The Public Agenda Foundation's research (as cited in Dombro et al., 1996) covered concepts that were counterproductive and motivating for the public to support child welfare issues – helpful information for developing messaging frameworks. Rose and Gallup (2006) gauged public opinion about the educational achievement gap between lower-income and higher-income children and asked respondents how they felt about using preschool programs to narrow the gap.

Studies also measured the attitudes of certain populations. Similar to Rose and Gallup's poll, Valencia's 2006 public opinion survey of Latino adults demonstrated a strong public belief that preschool programs for low-income children would better prepare them for grades kindergarten through 12. Respondents in the Hawaii-specific studies done on the topic recognized the importance of preschool in early childhood development and supported assisting more children in obtaining access to preschool with a State-supported program (Ward Research Incorporated, 2012; Qmark Research, 2014).

Maybe most pertinent to the research question covered by this study are the opinions of respondents about how convinced they were by specific messages in support of, or against, child welfare issues, including public preschool. Use of positive words in communication (e.g., future, investing, success) resonated with participants (Qmark Research, 2014). Respondents in Valencia's research (2006) were most convinced by the academic and literacy benefits of preschool. According to the Ward Research Incorporated study, the most convincing of the arguments presented in its survey were:

- “Studies show that children who attend preschool are more likely to be ready for and successful in kindergarten and later school years”; followed by,
- “85% of a child’s brain develops by age 5. We need to spend more money on services that have an impact on the healthy development of children.”

Of the arguments presented against public preschool, none were especially convincing. The most convincing was, “The time spent between birth and kindergarten entry is solely a parent’s responsibility” (only 30% of respondents rated it “very convincing”). The least convincing was, “State funding for education should not begin until a child is 5 years old.”

What these studies that covered messaging do not seem to have explored in-depth are messages within the framework of legal rights. Kagan and Cohen (1997) suggested that judicial action may be effective; claims that early care and education services are an entitlement and that a lack of services is discrimination could be the thrust for establishment of a public preschool system. Harlin and Brown (2006) also offered the more effective method of presenting public preschool as a constitutional right and necessary part of our society, rather than framing it as a return on investment even if excellent, as many advocacy campaigns do, and thus making it a choice.

Other articles suggest, however, that the public seems to dislike when a particular population is separated from the whole and targeted for services, and is thus less supportive of targeted efforts. Lawrence (as cited in Zigler & Barnett, 2011), described these findings best in his article: “It is never a good strategy to attempt to divide Americans. Social Security would never have passed if it had been about some senior citizens and not others”; and “the rest of the community may say, ‘Oh, I understand. It is about those children.’ They may not become as passionate or as willing to fight for the cause as they may be if their own children or grandchildren were included ... A movement for everyone’s child is basic American fairness. Poor families need more help, of course, but the way to help them the most is to help everyone.”

The Public Agenda Foundation (as cited in Dombro et al., 1996), discovered why this might be – it found that the populations they studied actually blame parents who may need support, stereotyping them as uncaring and irresponsible and therefore not making an effort to help themselves. This perception provides great insight into why the public might not support certain child welfare issues, including public preschool, especially when messaging around the issues focuses on helping the have-nots, or disadvantaged groups, thereby creating, or further creating, a divide between different populations.

In regards to preschool, for example, the public may agree with the need of all children for preschool, but may disagree with providing disadvantaged families a better (financial) benefit to access preschool (i.e., preschool is free for low-income families but not others). Research explored the advantages and flaws of making preschool an entitlement shared by all, rather than for only disadvantaged populations (Bassok, 2010; Ceci and Papierno, 2005; Fuller, as cited in Zigler & Barnett). Some research focused on just the advantages of universal preschool, since dividing a population from another could be a surefire way to tank an effort in general (Barnett, as cited in Zigler & Barnett, 2011; Lawrence, as cited in Zigler & Barnett), an example of which may be found in Dade County’s initial failure to garner public support for the establishment of public preschool (Lawrence, as cited in Zigler & Barnett).

On the flip side are how the have-nots, would respond to a program that targets them; Barnett (as cited in Zigler & Barnett, 2011) suggested the “stigma may discourage parents from enrolling their children (in a targeted preschool program)” (pp. 34-39).

A large body of research studies the effect of media on the public, policy makers, interest groups, and policy itself. Though not specific to public preschool, this research suggests that mass media coverage should be considered an important tool for communicating messaging (Cook, Tyler, Goetz, Gordon, Protes, Leff, & Molotch, 1983; Hill, 1985; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Media coverage can be especially effective if public preschool is framed appropriately. Brown and Wright (2011) performed a content analysis of several major print publications to look at how media is framing the public preschool movement – media bias toward public preschool was demonstrated by word choice and the tone of articles, description of preschool dissenters as “bad guys,” highlighting of state and local initiatives for public preschool, and featuring of business leaders among supportive experts. Kagan and Cohen (1997) in their research also discuss effective communication with the public as necessary to the creation of a public preschool system (e.g., clearly defining and carefully naming the problem, emphasizing the importance of quality early childhood services).

## **Research Design**

Having considered the available literature, the intent of this study was to expand upon research that has already been done on what messages would most convince people in Hawaii to support State-subsidized public preschool, by gauging current public opinion and looking at certain messages that have not been studied in depth.

Since it has been suggested that framing public preschool as a constitutional right and necessary part of our society (Harlin and Brown, 2006), and even judicial action along the same vein (Kagan and Cohen, 1997), may be more effective methods of gaining support for and pushing the implementation of public preschool, and since it does not seem to have been intentionally tested in Hawaii, this study focused in part on whether such messages – those within a legal rights framework – would encourage support for increased State spending on public preschool.

The study hypothesized that if legal rights is effective as a framework for promoting the expansion of public preschool, Hawaii taxpayers and voters in a focus group would be more supportive of using taxpayer dollars to do so than if the promotion was based on frameworks like child well-being, importance to K-12 education, investment, and proximity and availability to families.

The dependent variable of the study was support for public preschool. The independent variables were various messaging frameworks that aim to gain support for public preschool and various demographics.

Observations were made using focus groups and a questionnaire participants were asked to complete. Though qualitative research using a focus group has inherent limitations – due in large part to small sample size, the results from such studies do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the overall population – a focus group serves as the best method to delve as deeply as possible into what taxpayers and voters think about public preschool.

Observations were of a cross-sectional nature; individuals who taxpaying and voting residents of Honolulu were asked to participate in the study to represent a cross section of the public who would be affected by State spending on a public preschool program, and could affect the outcome of legislation, whether through the elections or legislative process. Participants were recruited from among working professionals and families of current preschoolers, and thus represent both younger and older generations, those who have children and those who don't (and of those who have children, those who have children currently attending preschool, children who are not yet of preschool age, and older children) – and of course, individuals who have some knowledge about preschool in Hawaii and others who don't. Participants were offered a light meal in return for their participation.

Upon arrival at the scheduled focus group meeting, each participant was given a questionnaire and waiver form to complete, which requested demographic and other information that included questions about whether they support public preschool in Hawaii. Included was a list of messages that aimed to cull support for expansion of Hawaii's public preschool program. Participants were asked to rank, on their own and with a pen, how convincing each message was to them (as opposed to how effective it would be for other people) relative to the other messages, to encourage their support of increased State spending on public preschool. The intent was to allow participants to note their initial thoughts.

When all the participants had completed their questionnaires, the format of the rest of the meeting was described.

At the start of the meeting, the group was asked to give a brief introduction of themselves, and received a brief explanation of why the focus group was being conducted, which included information to provide them with background (e.g., efforts have been under way to expand Hawaii's public preschool program). The group was told that more details would be provided later.

Then each message was taken up, beginning with the researcher's explanation of the context specific to the question, including relevant arguments against it. Participants were encouraged to discuss each message, including how they thought the message might be received by others, and how each message could be improved to be more convincing.

If participants reconsidered their rankings of the messages as a result of the discussion, they were welcomed to edit their rankings; they were also asked to reconsider their rankings near the conclusion of the meeting and re-rank if necessary. Edits made by the participants on their papers using the pens provided helped indicate that discussions may have changed thoughts in some way.

If participants changed their rankings, they were asked what changed their minds.

Participants were given the opportunity to offer additional suggestions and comments at the conclusion of the meeting.

Focus group discussions were recorded with a video camera, and transcribed thereafter. This paper includes themes and trends that emerged, and quotes from the participants that highlight their thoughts on the various messaging frameworks and messages.

Following are the messaging frameworks and associated messages, as well as the context for each, that were presented to participants. Note that some messages were categorized under multiple frameworks after the discussion, since participants seemed to hone in on different parts of each message.

**Messaging framework(s): child well-being**

Messages that explain the significance of early childhood in a person’s life may help the public to understand why preschool, which serves to nurture their growth and learning during this time, is important.

Message #1
<i>The years from birth through age 3 have been identified as a period of time when a person learns the most. More keiki will be supported during the most critical time in their development.</i>

**Messaging framework(s): importance to K-12 education, child well-being**

The fact that about 40 percent of children in Hawaii’s public school kindergarteners have not attended a preschool program (Hawaii State Department of Education & Good Beginnings Alliance, 2012) has much to do with the illiteracy of our third graders. Third-grade reading proficiency is one of the strongest indicators of high school graduation achievement across the nation (Hernandez, 2011; Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, & Gwynne, 2010). Unfortunately, 70 percent of Hawaii’s kids are still not reading proficiently by the time they finish third grade (University of Hawaii Center on the Family, 2014).

Message #2
<i>Preschool prepares your child to succeed in school.</i>
Message #3
<i>Public preschool strengthens our K-12 schools by helping more keiki attend preschool and be better prepared to learn and succeed when they enter kindergarten.</i>
This message expands upon Message #2 and helps counter arguments that public preschool funnels funds away from the public kindergarten through grade 12 system (K-12). DOE teachers can distinguish between who in their classroom has and has not gone to preschool. Children who start kindergarten without the skills that are expected of them to be ready to

learn kindergarten skills and material, affect the whole class. Therefore, preschool helps raise the level of achievement in K-12; it helps the teachers, other students, and overall scores, too.

### **Messaging framework: legal rights**

The reasoning for using messaging within the framework of legal rights – which might also be referred to as social justice – was covered in the literature review section of this paper. Advocates have suggested that talking about preschool within this framework might convince people more than other kinds of frameworks. For example, referring to preschool as an investment frames public preschool as a choice, but referring to it as a matter of legal rights makes it a have-to-do rather than a should-do type of thing.

Message #4
<b><i>Preschool helps level the playing field so all children can have an equal chance at life.</i></b>
This quote is from former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, which was lauded in the early learning community. Due to its benefits and proven outcomes, preschool has often been referred to as the universal equalizer.
Message #5
<b><i>High-quality education is a right of every child, regardless of a parent's ability to pay. Lack of access to preschool is discrimination against those who cannot afford private preschool.</i></b>
This message focuses on the educational advantage offered by preschool, but introduces the issue of affordability.
Message #6
<b><i>A child's education begins in preschool.</i></b>
This message focuses on the educational advantage offered by preschool, but introduces the issue of who should pay, since government already offers a free K-12 education. The message is intended to get people to start thinking that government's role in education is not just K-12 but preschool as well.

### **Messaging framework(s): investment**

Message #7
<b><i>Hawaii won't continue to miss out on millions of dollars per year in federal funds that go to other states for public preschool programs.</i></b>
Recognizing the benefits of preschool, the federal government has made millions of dollars in grant funding available to states that can demonstrate planning for robust public preschool systems, with the caveat that the states themselves must also contribute their own funding.
Message #8
<b><i>Invest now in preschool, or pay more later (e.g., for welfare, crime, special education).</i></b>
Significant research affirms that children who have had high-quality preschool are more likely to succeed in kindergarten and beyond, grow into capable adults who contribute positively to the larger community, reach higher levels of educational attainment, earn higher salaries, and

be healthier. Preschool ensures significant returns on investment, so much so that some of the country's most respected economists are touting preschool as an economic development strategy, better than any investment on Wall Street (Heckman, 2000). Several of the most rigorous long-term studies done in this area determined returns between four to nine dollars for every dollar invested; in Hawaii, the return on investment is estimated to be \$4.20 (Belfield, 2008). The public sees returns in the form of reduced welfare, crime, and special education costs; reduced homelessness and substance abuse; and increased tax revenues from preschool attendees later in life.

**Messaging framework(s): increasing awareness and use of available/possible preschool options**

Families may not be aware that preschool programs are available in their communities, or may consider preschool to be cost-prohibitive. Informing parents that a program could be near them and that they could access the program if preschool were available at the local elementary school may garner their support for public preschool.

Message #9

***Having your child be prepared to succeed in school is/can be closer than you think.***

**Oppositional messages:**

Messages that would convince people to oppose increased State spending on public preschool should also be considered.

Oppositional Message #1

***We're already paying so much for K-12 public school and it's not great.***

Many people are reluctant to spend their taxpayer dollars on yet another government initiative if other government programs do not show the positive outcomes they expect.

Oppositional Message #2

***Public preschool will take money away from K-12 education.***

In the past campaign for public preschool in Hawaii, opponents argued that State funds should be put into the public K-12 system that is already underfunded, instead funneling dollars away for a new preschool program.

Oppositional Message #3

***This is just another way to snatch kids away from the womb.***

Some people view public preschool as taking away from the family unit.

Oppositional Message #4

***This is another way to make government responsible for a parent's duty.***

Some people are of the opinion that if you choose to have children, you should face the consequence of raising them; you should not be excused from the consequences with government coming to the rescue.

## Findings

The explanation of this study’s findings is structured to answer questions that a State pushing for the expansion or creation of a public preschool program would want to ask.

**Table 1. Participant Rankings of Messages (after focus group discussion)**

Message	Framework(s)	% Rating "Very Convincing" (ranking of 1-3)	% Rating "Somewhat Convincing" (ranking of 4-6)	% Rating "Not Very Convincing" (ranking of 7-9)
The years from birth through age 3 have been identified as a period of time when a person learns the most. More keiki will be supported during the most critical time in their development.	child well-being	50%	50%	0%
Preschool prepares your child to succeed in school.	importance to K-12 education, child well-being	50%	50%	0%
Public preschool strengthens our K-12 schools by helping more keiki attend preschool and be better prepared to learn and succeed when they enter kindergarten.	importance to K-12 education, child well-being	63%	38%	0%
Preschool helps level the playing field so all children can have an equal chance at life.	legal rights	25%	38%	38%
High-quality education is a right of every child, regardless of a parent’s ability to pay. Lack of access to preschool is discrimination against those who cannot afford private preschool.	legal rights	38%	25%	38%
A child's education begins in preschool.	legal rights	25%	0%	50%
Hawaii won’t continue to miss out on millions of dollars per year in federal funds that go to other states for public preschool programs.	investment	0%	13%	88%

Invest now in preschool, or pay more later (e.g., for welfare, crime, special education).	investment	50%	50%	0%
Having your child be prepared to succeed in school is closer than you think.	increasing awareness and use of available/possible preschool options	0%	13%	88%
<b>N</b>		8	8	8

*Ranking of 1 = most convincing of 9 messages. Ranking of 9 = least convincing.*

*≥50% = high percentage of participants rating message in the respective category*

Messages that were rated a “1” through “3” by the focus group participants were labeled as “very convincing”; those rated “4” through “6” were labeled “somewhat convincing,” and “7” through “9” were labeled “not very convincing.”

**Were messages within a legal rights framework more effective to convince people to support public preschool expansion, than those of other frameworks?**

Though advocates have suggested that the legal rights framework would work better, the hypothesis – that Hawaii taxpayers and voters in a focus group would be more supportive of using taxpayer dollars to do so if legal rights is used as a framework for promoting the expansion of public preschool, rather than if the promotion were based on frameworks like child well-being, importance to K-12 education, investment, and proximity and availability to families – is proven wrong in this study ... if only because one of the three messages presented to the participants was perceived as divisive (Message #5), and another message was perceived as a secondary message to be used in conjunction with a primary one (Message #6).

Messages within this framework were not rated as convincing as those of other frameworks (see Table 1).

Responses to Message #5, “High-quality education is a right of every child, regardless of a parent’s ability to pay. Lack of access to preschool is discrimination against those who cannot afford private preschool” (only 38% rated it “very convincing” and 38% rated it “not very convincing”):

- *“My grandparents would be described as blue-collar, working class. My parents would be described as underclass. For me to be where I am now coming from that, it really is education that got me there ... But I have run into far too many people who say you don’t have any rights to anything you don’t work for. So with this message, people are going to say, ‘No, you don’t have a right to education. If your parents can’t do it, so sad for you.’ I completely disagree, but there’s a huge contingent out there that would react negatively to that.”*

- *“It just sounds angry so I think it will rub people the wrong way. It sounds like it’s dividing people, so if you find a message where it’s ‘we’re all in this together,’ (it would be better). I think the third message – about how it helps kids in your class and helps kindergarten teachers – spread the benefits more.”*
- *“Right now the status quo is lack of access, so if you’re saying lack of access is discrimination, it’s almost like telling us we’re discriminating against (those who don’t have access) and I don’t think you want to be told you’re discriminating.”*
- *“I liked #5 (as the most convincing) because it meant fairness to me.”* However, this participant also went on to state, *“I don’t necessarily agree that anybody who because they are low-income should be getting that money; I think everybody should get it. Put more into the taxpayers (hands) ... I’d like my kid to be able to go to preschool because it’s expensive.”*
- *“Especially if you have more than one kid, (preschool means) a second mortgage. There are people who are in that (middle class) gap group who don’t have access to the same resources that really poor folks have and yet they’re not making enough to be able to send their kids to preschool and still be comfortable without making some kind of sacrifice, and there’s a huge group of people in that ...*
- *“Take out (from the message) the “it’s discrimination against those who cannot afford private preschool.” Just because you can afford it ... that still means resources are going elsewhere.”*
- *“So the people who can afford preschool; this wouldn’t really affect those people (if the program targets children from low-income families). They would continue to pay the high tuitions and keep sending them to private preschools. If you include plans to use a sliding fee scale, where most (rather than just the low-income families) can benefit, you might get more support from people.”*
- *“To include the sliding fee scale (in the message) would be persuasive. It does make you spread the money around, and it’s kind of like shared sacrifice. It doesn’t help everyone completely, but everyone can be helped a little.”*

Response to Message #6, “A child’s education begins in preschool” (only 25% rated it “very convincing” and 50% rated it “not very convincing”):

- *“(This is) an idea you have to plant into people’s heads (but would be better to use in conjunction with another message).”*

Participants liked the idea of shared sacrifices, such as paying or not paying for preschool based on a sliding fee scale (i.e., preschool is free for families below a certain income level, but families with slightly higher incomes can also pay reduced fees based on their ability to pay), rather than benefits only for low-income families. This is consistent with previous research that suggested the public’s preference for messaging that doesn’t divide (i.e., the public seems to dislike when a particular population is separated from the whole and targeted for services, and is thus less supportive of targeted efforts).

The responses received may be a reflection of the values of hard work held by many Hawaii families, many of which have immigrant backgrounds and are from cultures that have this value ingrained. The frequently held perception is that the have-nots probably are lazy or do not work hard enough and therefore are unable to afford things.

On hindsight, the findings of the Hawaii studies that focus group participants gravitated away from messages about inequity between groups provided some indication of the non-preference for a legal rights messaging framework.

### **What kind of messaging frameworks or messaging seemed most effective to convince people to support public preschool expansion?**

While messaging within the legal rights framework was not considered as convincing, what was most convincing were messages that focused on both the importance of preschool to K-12 education and child well-being.

Response to Message #2, “Preschool prepares your child to succeed in school” (50% rated it “very convincing” and 0% rated it “not very convincing”):

- *“It teaches them life skills and gives them a sense of confidence.”*

Responses to Message #3, “Public preschool strengthens our K-12 schools by helping more keiki attend preschool and be better prepared to learn and succeed when they enter kindergarten” (63% rated it “very convincing” and 0% rated it “not very convincing”):

- In response to another participant’s statement that he did not attend preschool but turned out “okay”: *“The ... thing to keep in mind, though, is that kindergarten today is not kindergarten the way it was when we were in kindergarten. Kindergarten today is more like what first or second grade was for us. So it’s even more essential that kids come in with a certain base knowledge because if not, it’s really screwing them up and screwing everyone in the class up.”*
- *“I’ve already been through the preschool-to-kindergarten transition, so (Message #1) doesn’t really benefit me or my older kids, but this message that public preschool will benefit my older children is convincing. It made me realize ... the way they both will benefit is that the kids who come in are ready and at a higher educational level that will bring up the whole class level and they can learn more because they are ready to learn. This was the most convincing. There are the parents of the kids who will directly benefit, but (the benefit) is 10 times more if you look at the whole K-12 program and if everybody realizes this affects all of the kids in the program.”*
- *“I think that saying (in the message that) preschools help make a kindergarten teacher’s job easier would be a convincing argument, particularly for the union folks.”*
- *“People without kids still have to contribute to raising the education standards. I look at it as it’s going to make my life easier ... Educated people have more of a dog in the fight.”*
- *“We must increase the quality of kids. They didn’t pick their parents. Let’s give (the kids) a chance.”*

Participants recognized that individuals with preschool experience affect other children in the classroom during the school years, and also affect others in the workplace in their adult years; otherwise, they may have to work with people who do not have the skills preschool can help develop. Businesses (e.g., hotels) want an employee base that has the skills preschool can help develop; unfortunately, they have workers now who do not have these skills.

Of note is the response to Message #8 of the investment framework, “Invest now in preschool, or pay more later (e.g., for welfare, crime, special education.” Several participants who did not rank Message #3 as highly as Message #8 noted that they believed all of these messages were inter-related. Participants who ranked Message #8 highly focused on the ability of children with preschool experience do well in their school years and go on to contribute to society.

Responses to Message #8, “Invest now in preschool, or pay more later (e.g., for welfare, crime, special education)” (50% rated it “very convincing” and 0% rated it “not very convincing”):

- *“I think that would resonate with those who negatively respond to “education is a right.” I think those people would be more likely to feel positively about invest now or pay later.”*
- *“My top (message). Being a person without children, that seemed to reach me. I think to reach the whole populous in Hawaii, you’re going to have to hit the guys with children – it’ll probably be easier to convince them to support preschool – but I think the harder to convince are the ones who don’t have kids. I think (this message) will have some kind of overlap (between the two populations). The (reduced) welfare and the crime ... if you can emphasize that, that will kind of convince me why preschool is important.”*
- *“You need to educate people about how they’re going to gain. Provide more information about the examples of reduced crime and so on.”*
- *“I was told (by my parents) that, ‘I want you to go to college so you can pay taxes.’ More people paying taxes just makes my life easier. Less people on welfare makes my life easier. (It seems) this is not about you, but it really is. I don’t have any kids, but if kids got better educated, they contribute more, pay more taxes, spreads the tax load. It just makes better people.”*
- *“It’s like everything – how is this going to benefit me?”*
- *“This could have been a counter to the HSTA ads with parents with children on their hips who said (about the proposed public preschool program), ‘I’m not paying for someone else’s kid.’”*

### **What kind of messaging frameworks or messaging seemed least effective?**

The least effective message seemed to that relating to wasting of available federal dollars for preschool, and the least effective framework was increasing awareness and use of available/possible preschool options.

Message #7, “Hawaii won’t continue to miss out on millions of dollars per year in federal funds that go to other states for public preschool programs,” did not resonate with many participants: 0% rated it “very convincing” and 88% rated it “not very convincing”.

Neither did Message #9, “Having your child be prepared to succeed in school is/can be closer than you think”: 0% rated it “very convincing” and 88% rated it “not very convincing”. Note, however, that some participants misinterpreted this message as being more about how soon kindergarten is coming up, and the need to consider preparing for school.

**What are the preferred messaging frameworks or messages for participants without children – those who do not directly benefit from public preschool?**

Messages within both of the frameworks of importance of preschool to K-12 education and child well-being, and the framework of investment were ranked as very convincing to participants without children (see the responses to Messages #3 and #8).

**Table 2. Most and Least Convincing Messages (After Discussion) - As Distinguished Between Participants Who Have and Don't Have Children**

	Message	Framework(s)	Most Convincing (Ranking of "1")		Least Convincing (Ranking of "9")	
			Have Children	Don't Have Children	Have Children	Don't Have Children
1	The years from birth through age 3 have been identified as a period of time when a person learns the most. More keiki will be supported during the most critical time in their development.	child well-being	1			
2	Preschool prepares your child to succeed in school.	importance to K-12 education, child well-being	3	2		
3	Public preschool strengthens our K-12 schools by helping more keiki attend preschool and be better prepared to learn and succeed when they enter kindergarten.					
4	Preschool helps level the playing field so all children can have an equal chance at life.	legal rights	1			1

5	High-quality education is a right of every child, regardless of a parent's ability to pay. Lack of access to preschool is discrimination against those who cannot afford private preschool.					
6	A child's education begins in preschool.					
7	Hawaii won't continue to miss out on millions of dollars per year in federal funds that go to other states for public preschool programs.	investment		1	2	
8	Invest now in preschool, or pay more later (e.g., for welfare, crime, special education).					
9	Having your child be prepared to succeed in school is closer than you think.	increasing awareness and use of available/possible preschool options			3	2

*Ranking of 1 = most convincing of 9 messages. Ranking of 9 = least convincing.*

**Did people change their minds? What made them change their minds?**

What seemed to move many participants about public preschool were the following ideas, based on head nods, the length of discussion, and excitement with which comments were made:

- Children can't choose their parents. (messaging frameworks: importance to K-12 education, child well-being)
- With preschool, more children will grow up to contributing more to society instead of costing society, so it will benefit everyone. (messaging framework: investment)

Due to her consideration of these ideas, the one participant who initially neither supported nor opposed public preschool (“*It depends.*”) – all other participants supported it from the outset – changed her mind to support public preschool by the end of the focus group meeting. In the beginning, she could not see her hard-earned money going to benefit other families while she was struggling herself to pay for preschool, but understood that with preschool, more children would grow up contributing more to society, so it would benefit her, too. She was also swayed by the support of other participants, even those without children.

### What kind of messages would convince someone to oppose increased State spending on public preschool?

**Table 3. Messages that Could Encourage Opposition of Public Preschool**

		YES (convincing)	% SAYING "YES"	NO (not convincing)	% SAYING "NO"	N
1	We’re already paying so much for K-12 public school and it’s not great.	4	50%	4	50%	8
2	Public preschool will take money away from K-12 education.	4	50%	4	50%	8
3	This is just another way to snatch kids away from the womb.	0	0%	8	100%	8
4	This is another way to make government responsible for a parent’s duty.	1	13%	7	88%	8

One participant explained best the need to consider oppositional messages: “*Overall, I think that people are supporting public preschool. It’s like a lot of things – most people want something that they know may not directly benefit them, but there are always going to be the loud ones – they may not be the majority, but they are the loud minority, and they’re the ones who are going to get everyone’s attention. When you go to vote, it’s, I wonder how I should vote. That guy said this and he sounded really confident and smart, so ...*”

Responses to Oppositional Message #1, “We’re already paying so much for K-12 public school and it’s not great” (50% said it might convince them):

- “*I think – guarantee – people would be willing to pay more taxes to help preschool education if they felt their money was going to be spent wisely. The perception, whether it’s real or not, is that the State is wasting our money.*”
- “*My answer (about whether I support public preschools) is it depends. A lot of people would think, ‘Yeah, I want to support it, but I would want to make sure the system works.’*”
- “*Try to change the perception of public schools.*”

Based on these responses, counter arguments/messages could include:

- Success stories about other public preschool programs that work.
- Highlights about how the program is working well, which includes establishing trust about the effective use of funding for the program (Dombro et. al, 1996; Lawrence, as cited in Zigler & Barnett, 2011).
- Hawaii's Executive Office on Early Learning has instituted a high-quality public preschool program that is based on best practices and evidence-based, because high-quality programs are those that have positive outcomes and make differences.

Response to Oppositional Message #2, "Public preschool will take money away from K-12 education" (50% said it might convince them):

- *"This would be concerning to parents if money really was coming from DOE funds."*

Based on this response, counter arguments/messages could include:

- Money will not be taken from the Hawaii DOE budget.
- Preschool actually helps K-12 education (see messaging framework of importance to K-12 education). As one participant commented, *"Call it 'value-added' education."*

Also see responses to Message #3.

Responses to Oppositional Message #3, "This is just another way to snatch kids away from the womb" (0% said it might convince them):

- See responses to Message #1.

Based on these responses, counter arguments/messages could include:

- Dispersing the assumption that all families are the nurturing type that will encourage their children's learning and maximize their potential (this is not the case).
- Public preschool in Hawaii is not mandatory, but ensures the opportunity for preschool, for those who want it.

Responses to Oppositional Message #4, "This is another way to make government responsible for a parent's duty" (13% said it might convince them):

- *"And then we blame teachers for what happens to kids, rather than blaming the parents."*
- *"It's like what Michael W. Perry says: 'You chose to have that child; you take care of it' ... it shouldn't be government."*
- *"Reinforces the opinion that government is increasingly becoming big brother."*

Based on these responses, counter arguments/messages could include:

- Children, who are helpless at such a young age, should not suffer at the hands of negligent, or even abusive, parents.
- Preschool reinforces what "good" parents try to teach their children at home.

## **Other input**

Participants also provided other input that would be helpful to messaging around public preschool:

- Do not mention that preschool as a significant determinant of third-grade proficiency in a message.
  - *“In Waldorf schools, they don’t start teaching kids how to read until third grade (so Waldorf families would be left out of this message). There are a lot of kids who contradict that research (on third-grade reading proficiency).”*
  - *“A high percentage of Hawaii kids who can’t read proficiently may include those with learning disabilities (and preschool won’t necessarily help those kids). If I’m a taxpayer and you’re trying to sell me on that, (I’d say) preschool is not a magic bullet or a cure-all.”*
- Mention that preschool is not one-size-fits-all.
  - *“There are lots of different kinds of different preschools that you can send your child to – one that works for your family and works with your own family values and philosophy.”*
- Choose message(s) that would resonate with the most people.
  - *“Are there more families in Hawaii with kids than those who don’t? What messaging you pick depends on that. And the Legislature ... ? If you want to tailor it toward the Legislature, maybe you find out more (about them). They’re focused on the now, so you get a more immediate message to them, and for the general public, you do a more general message.”*
- Use multiple messages.
  - *“Ultimately, you’re not going to be able to go with just one message. You’re going to have to tailor the message to the (different audiences).”*

## **Conclusion**

Hawaii’s public preschool program is serving only a small segment of the population of four-year-old children in the state. To expand the program would require taxpayer dollars, and, therefore, a groundswell of support.

This study found that while using messaging within the framework of legal rights may not work to encourage support of public preschool if it focuses so much on the disadvantaged population that it is perceived as being divisive, what would work best may be messaging that helps the public to understand that everyone – the have-nots, other children, K-12 teachers, and adults without children alike – benefits from public preschool, whether directly or indirectly, and whether in the short-term or long-term. These more effective messaging frameworks include those that focus on both the importance of preschool to K-12 education and child well-being, and investment in terms of helping children to become contributing members of society.

Literature has identified other possible motivators for the public to act on child welfare issues, such as communicating the need to help families who are temporarily facing difficult times and trying to care for their children in circumstances that would defeat the best of us. Use of these messaging frameworks to promote public preschool can be explored in future research; for

example, potentially effective messaging could explain that though young children cannot help the unfortunate situations their families are in, they should not fall victim during this key stage of their lives and can be helped with public preschool. Another possible motivator plays on the almost-universally held opinion that parenting is a tough job, but one of the most important in society (Dombro et. al, 1996). Messaging could relay the idea that preschools help parents raise better children.

Regardless of the messaging framework or messages used, a future campaign for public preschool must consider preparing counters to the oppositional messaging that seem to have swayed participants in this study.

Participants were moved by discussion about the benefits to them from more children attending preschool; any future campaign should expand upon the messages presented in this study, by communicating more details about these benefits either in the messages themselves or otherwise.

This study imparts important knowledge for Hawaii should it decide to push for expansion of public preschool, and is useful for other states that wish to promote the creation or expansion of public preschool.

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