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## Early education must start with involved parents -- and a good book By Jim Harstad

Much has been written recently about Hawaii's quest to give its children the best possible early learning experience. Senate Bill 2545, introduced by Senate Education Chairwoman Jill Tokuda and Human Services Chairwoman Suzanne Chun Oakland, seeks to establish an Executive Office on Early Learning to provide a coordinated effort among the several groups dedicated to early childhood education.

The issues are complex. Teaching essential attitudes and skills often overwhelms hardworking teachers and underfunded nonprofit programs. Maybe the answer is not in spending more money for children's programs, but in enabling parents to do more?

One Hawaii-founded enterprise does exactly that. Read Aloud America, through its Read Aloud Program (RAP), provides parents with the tools they need to communicate with their children from an early age and helps them instill a love of reading and learning. RAP also helps bridge the gap for those who don't have a family heritage of literacy or a burning desire to read.



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Parents are a child's best teacher. Educator and author Jim Trelease writes that children spend an average of 900 hours a year in school, but more than 7,800 hours outside of school. If we focus only on early education programs, we miss a large opportunity to provide a healthy home learning environment for each child. Give a man a fish and he will eat for one day, but teach him to fish and he and his family will eat for a lifetime.

RAP teaches parents how to turn off electronic media, how to start and maintain positive conversations with their children, how to choose books and read them together, and how to inspire a kind of family bonding that has almost been lost in our technological age. Most young parents in Hawaii today have grown up with distracting video games, cell phones, computers and at least one TV playing constantly somewhere in their house. The No. 1 complaint that middle-school counselors hear is that parents feel "disconnected" from their children, and that their children won't talk with them. RAP can help restart that essential family communication.

To quote President Barack Obama, in January 2011: "The question is whether all of us — as citizens, and as parents — are willing to do what's necessary to give every child a chance to succeed. That responsibility begins not in our classrooms, but in our homes and communities. It's family that first instills the love of learning in a child ... "

RAP exists to inspire families to read, but it does much more. It strengthens bonds between parents and children and opens channels of communication between schools and homes. Whole families share an evening of fulfilling fun. Where else can a family go to have fun together for free? What better place than their neighborhood school to learn about books, to get tips about reading and learning together, and to build and reinforce positive values?

Tens of thousands of children have attended RAP programs across the state. At 64 schools in the past four years, more than 15,000 infants, toddlers, pre-kindergarteners and children in grades kindergarten through third grade have attended RAP. Even more important, these 64 programs have drawn more than 19,000 impassioned parents and caregivers. No other educational program in the state draws this many family participants of all ages, and at less than \$20 per participant per session, it is one of the most cost-effective education programs anywhere.

We ask that the Read Aloud America Program be included as a serious component of any discussion of early childhood education in Hawaii. That includes the discussion surrounding SB 2545.