



Star-Advertiser

# views & voices

## OUR VIEW

### CHILD LITERACY

# Give kids reading help they need

**L**earning to read early and well is the educational building block most essential to a child's future academic success.

Jed Gaines, founder and president of the Hawaii-based program Read Aloud America, explains that reading helps to kick-start a child's thinking process. And in the process of fostering good readers, he told the Star-Advertiser this week, such programs are instilling values and "creating good citizens, civic-minded citizens."

Those are substantial dividends, and some schools have been making substantial investments in the mission to boost reading skills.

The payoff is already in evidence.

One success story is Kalihi Uka Elementary, where more than half the children come from disadvantaged homes and where, in 2010, only 53 percent of the third-graders tested proficient in reading.

What a difference a year can make. Star-Advertiser writer Mary Vorsino reported this week that about 74 percent proficiency

was achieved in 2011, owing to the school's focus on tracking the children's reading progress year-round. Students who need the help get it, in the form of extra tutoring during recess.

Kalihi Uka and other schools benefit from \$11.5 million in grants from the Kellogg Foundation and several local organizations. Additionally, Kamehameha Schools, the educational nonprofit targeting Native Hawaiians, is underwriting literacy programs in 23 public schools.

Much of this effort is aimed at getting children reading at grade-level proficiency by the third grade, a goal that educators now believe helps to keep students on pace to finish high school and move on to higher education or productive working lives.

A Massachusetts-based advocacy group called Strategies for Children last year issued "Turning the Page," a report finding that "the costs of reading failure are high."



"The majority of this large group (of third-graders lacking reading proficiency) will go on to experience significant academic difficulties, jeopardizing individual potential, and also compromising

our society's vitality," wrote its author, early-literacy researcher Nonie Lesaux.

She has published other studies that find early reading proficiency can help raise achievement for English language learners as well as native speakers. It's an educational initiative that seemingly floats all boats.

But there's another aspect that must not be lost in the pile of studies, grants and institutional programs. Producing capable readers is a job for a child's very first teachers: their parents and guardians.

Gaines believes that the best way to teach reading is not through expensive and, he insists, pointless extracurricular programs and software. It's through having the child's primary caregiver and other

family members reading to him or her, for the sheer enjoyment of it.

Lots of free assistance is out there to help parents with the read-aloud mission, so literacy really knows no income barriers.

The state libraries have posted several regular children's story hours (visit [www.librarieshawaii.org/programs/childrenstorytimes.htm](http://www.librarieshawaii.org/programs/childrenstorytimes.htm)).

Gaines' organization also rounds up some supportive information on its website ([www.readaloudamerica.org/moreinfo.htm](http://www.readaloudamerica.org/moreinfo.htm)).

The Abercrombie administration has a stated interest in promoting early education, notwithstanding Hawaii's fiscal problems.

There would be few campaigns more worthy of those scarce dollars than programs helping to identify reading problems early on so that kids can get the help they need.

But their primary partners in this initiative must be the unpaid but devoted army of Hawaii parents who, regardless of their financial means, can put their keiki on the right track.