

June 8, 2017

To: Board of Education Members Mizumoto, De Lima, Bergin, Chun, Cox, Minn, Uemura, and Voss

re: Please Adopt a Research-based Framework for Community Schools

Aloha State of Hawaii Board of Education Members,

In the five years I attended BOE meetings (2012-17), I witnessed a major overhaul of Board Policies. What we have now is a vast improvement over what existed in the past. They are much better organized. However, at the time of these massive revisions, I protested the rapid changes because I felt the process did not provide sufficient opportunity for public input. I feared that once this overhaul was complete, the Board would be reticent to make policy changes again so soon. I hope my fears are unfounded, and that the Board will make changes in policies and rules as needed.

The Board has expressed interest in giving more control to local schools. Without a framework that supports community schools, “local control” will mean little more than dictatorships with unqualified rulers (not leaders) at the helm. That’s we have now at far too many DOE schools. It’s too dangerous to hand over the keys and let some of these people drive unsupervised without better training, decent rules of the road, and *accountability* for following simple rules. Current Board policies and Title 8 of the Hawaii Administrative Rules are inadequate in affecting much needed changes in the DOE and the BOE that are essential to building community schools. A substantial body of literature documents the positive impact of parent, family, and community engagement on student achievement.[1] What does that literature tell us we need to do to improve our schools?

The best guide for building community schools I have found is published by the Institute for Educational Leadership and its sister organization, the Coalition for Community Schools: *Community Schools – A Whole-Child Framework for School Improvement*. It is available here: <http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Community-Schools-A-Whole-Child-Approach-to-School-Improvement.pdf> For me, it’s a depressing read – not because of content, but because I compare it to my experiences with the Hawaii DOE administration and local school administrators for the last decade. We are so far from this community school model framework in so many areas, and there is no land in sight. The powers that be aren’t even trying to go toward a healthy place. Community engagement receives lip service. The stakeholders’ cries for action fall on deaf ears. We continue to drift without paddles or navigation tools in a sea of nothingness while leaders give sermons about bright spots. We’re supposed to be grateful, I suppose. At least we have a boat. At least we’re pretending to be in favor of community engagement.

The first step in building community schools is for the Board of Education to care enough to consider this issue in all its discussions. Improving family and community engagement has never been given serious, holistic attention by the Board in all the years I have advocating for a change in attitude. The topic has been relegated to a couple mentions during Student Achievement Committee (SAC) meetings only, and should be an integral part of the infrastructure (FIC), human resources (HR), and

accountability (Audit) committees, too. Improving community engagement has no real forum anywhere in the BOE. Perhaps an ad hoc or standing committee devoted to Family and Community Engagement (FCE) is what's needed to escape imprisonment in this rickety community engagement boat that goes nowhere and floats aimlessly.

Such a BOE committee is needed for the second step: adopting a framework for building community schools. The IEL/CCS framework is a good place to start. Why not build on work previously done and simply adopt this framework?

Then, take the third step. Fix policies and rules that are not aligned with a community schools framework and present barriers to building community schools. Only through BOE mandate will the DOE be motivated to provide effective training for all employees in how to build community schools from bottom to top and back down. Only with policies and rules that are aligned with a research-based framework for family and community engagement can we set expectations for local administrators to build authentic community schools.

The change in attitude has to start with the Board of Education. The Board is the captain at the helm. Changing culture requires changing the rules. It is the Board's responsibility to establish the framework and revise policies so that we even have a smidgen of a chance to build community schools. The BOE has paid little to no attention to this responsibility. I ask that you change the current state of affairs.

Is this letter going to induce the Board to address this gaping hole in the fabric of democracy throughout our public schools? I doubt it. Why should today be any different from the past. I've spent countless hours in the last five years asking the Board to fix the problems with School Community Councils, accessibility to DOE information, lack of administrative accountability, and no reasonable expectations for community engagement from local schools all the way up the chain of authority to the BOE. Nothing I've tried has worked. Am I the failure or the system?

What I expect to happen next with this correspondence is that I'm thanked for my testimony (maybe), figuratively pat on the head, and sent on my way (best case scenario) or simply ignored (more likely). I predict that what qualifies as community and family engagement in DOE schools will continue to be little more than monthly one-hour SCC meetings where nothing is accomplished by a handful of people selected by farcical charades that have no resemblance to free and fair democratic elections, who rubber-stamp whatever document the Principal places before them, and then post minutes to prove they had a meeting. Based on years of hard-earned experience, I expect that the Board will not adopt a framework for Community Engagement, and the status quo will continue.

I ask that the Board prove me wrong.

Mahalo,



Vanessa Ott

[1] For a description of research see: "Why Community Engagement Matters in School Turnaround"
<http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/36/why-community-engagement-matters-school-turnaround>