

May 6, 2020

Hawai'i Board of Education
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re: Community Forum 5/7/2020 -- Who's the biggest bully at the school? It's the DOE.

Aloha,

Who's the biggest bully at the school? Turns out, it's the DOE. True, the Department of Education and its minions aren't stuffing ELL parents in a locker that requires a responsible adult with a bolt cutter for extrication. They're not shoving ELL parents up against a wall and taking their lunch money, or punching them senseless just because they can. They're not spreading malicious gossip, forming cliques and perpetrating cruel acts of social exclusion and relational aggression on a vulnerable kid. But it's not much different. Don't believe it? Please, keep an open mind, and hear me out. Let's start with the Merriam-Webster first online definition of what bullying is.

Bullying (n): abuse and mistreatment of someone vulnerable by someone stronger, more powerful, etc.

When it comes to a child's education in the Hawai'i, the DOE has *all* the power. ELL parents have none unless they can get an attorney to represent them. This still means they have no power. Only the attorney does. The most vulnerable parents are those who do not speak English very well (if at all), do not understand the Hawai'i public education system, and have limited education often from someplace outside U.S. borders. Even if these parents have an educated volunteer to help them, the DOE is having none of that.

The DOE has the power to exclude parents from participating in their children's education (which it does), effectively stuffing them in a locker, and throwing away the key. It has the power to prevent volunteers from helping parents (social ostracism). It has the power to totally destroy a child's educational future (which it does), knocking them senseless and causing brain damage. It has the power to take our "lunch money" tax dollars to fund their salaries and maintain schools, and then turn around and protect "their" turf by keeping parents and community volunteers out of the schools, a form of relational aggression. As I said. Bullying.

For the past three years I have volunteered thousands of hours of my life helping a struggling ELL/SpEd student and his mother. School year 2019-2020 was the worst nightmare yet. It was the child's first year at Robert Louis Stevenson Middle School (Grade 6). Early in the first quarter, the mother and I noticed that he was regressing academically, and he wasn't bringing home anything from school. Nothing. No papers. No homework. No book. Nada. What happened next is inexcusable, as measured by moderate standards of professional educators, but apparently completely acceptable to the DOE. Until the BOE finally does something effective to deal with the lack of accountability throughout the DOE, I want you to realize that the Board is complicit in all of this.

In August, the mother and I began requesting the opportunity to meet with teachers in their classrooms. Over the months we begged the school to collaborate with the parent and the home tutor (me). All we ever got was a one-hour meeting in mid-September with a whole bunch of teachers and administrators, a one-hour IEP revision meeting in November where they refused to take the parent's and home tutor's valid concerns into consideration, and a 40-minute meeting with the Math teacher that had no follow-up. All school year, we were only allowed to communicate via email with the teachers, which I tried to do, but then the Principal said I sent too many emails, and cut me out of communications even though the mother requested many times that I be included as her interpreter and assistant. Then, Principal Balatico started sending long missives in English to the mother,

excluding me. She also instructed all the teachers to ignore any email I sent. All of this is true, but no one seems to believe me which is astonishing because I have all the evidence to prove otherwise. Doesn't matter if no one reads it. I've already provided the BOE with links to a place on the internet where you could read everything I wrote to anyone in the school in Semester 1 of this last school year. Still, I have absolutely *no* reason to believe that anyone in the BOE or the DOE has bothered to look at any of the evidence. Either that, or no one in power gives a hoot about how parents and volunteers are routinely shut out of our schools.

All throughout the school year, the Principal refused to have the novice (Math) and emergency hire SpEd (Language Arts) teachers use the school-selected, structured curricula. Instead, these unseasoned professionals invented their own. Now, with "local control" teachers don't have to teach the school-selected curriculum. They can make it up as they go along. What's the result? The student's final i-Ready Diagnostic scores at the end of Grade 5 (May 2019) scores compared to the end of Grade 6 (March 2020), show that his Reading is 7 points lower and Math is 42 points lower. An entire year of the brilliant RLSMS methodology of shutting out the family and giving him a shoddy education, and the poor kid is doing worse than he was last year! I've been trying to tell the DOE that this is the wrong direction. His scores are supposed to go up after a year of instruction. Uh, is anyone else going to tell them?

Now, please don't tell me to file a complaint. Been there; done that. With the DOE, it's an exercise in futility. First, complaint went to the Complex Area Superintendent Linell Dilwith. I asked for the district plan for Family and Community Engagement. Never got one. CAS told us to solve our problems with the Principal by talking it out with the Principal. Well, dummy, I wouldn't be going to the CAS if that had worked. Then, the CAS does nothing but shunt us off to outside mediation and the Monitoring and Compliance Branch of the Superintendent's Office where they proceed to try and force a DOE appointed translator on the mother even though she keeps saying she wants me to help her. A translator wouldn't be much help anyway, because the parent needs help understanding the education system – not something a translator does. M&CB sends us a bunch of links about our rights and that's it. Jeez, that's an easy job. Don't know what they're monitoring over there and compliance is pretty thin, but hey, never can figure out what these DOE admins are getting paid to do.

Mediation was a joke. It took four months to get a meeting scheduled, and it was a complete waste of time. No results. No agreement on anything, and we can't even tell you what happened. It's confidentiality that protects the DOE, not the parent, which is why we didn't want to do it anyway. Turns out we were right. A waste of time with nothing to show for it.

I filed a complaint with the Deputy Superintendent Unebasami about the Principal shutting the mother's interpreter and the kid's tutor out of the education process, and the complete lack of family and community engagement. She tells me to file an IDEA complaint. I tell her the IDEA doesn't cover issues regarding ELL parents and their assistants. No response. I tell the Superintendent Kishimoto we've gotten no response to the issues in our complaint. No response.

So, I try to help the mother by filing an impartial due process hearing request. Guess what? That's the same as going to court, I find out, and the court won't let me speak for the parent because the courts won't let me "represent" the parent. Guess what? In hearings before the Labor Board, a Petitioner can have non-attorneys assist them in a hearing because *those* HARs have a provision for this. The BOE HARs have nothing. If the BOE had done something about this when I suggested a policy revision back in February, the mother would have her due process hearing with my assistance.

Conclusion: ELL public school parents are screwed by the system. I want to know that the BOE is going to do about accountability, fostering *true, authentic family engagement*, and giving ELL parents the right to have an assistant help them.

Thank you,



Vanessa Ott