

September 1, 2020

Hawai'i Board of Education
BOE.Hawaii@boe.hawaii.gov

re: The Hawai'i Board of Education Has Systematized Racism

Aloha Board of Education Members,

I'm continuing my efforts to end the systemic racism and classism in the Hawai'i Department of Education that is very real, and hurting our keiki. This problem will not disappear until the BOE enacts Policies and Hawai'i Administrative rules ensuring equitable family engagement opportunities for students whose parents are uneducated and/or non-English-proficient.

One story: "Ms. H" is a single mother raising a son with a learning disability. She has brothers and sisters living in her native Pacific Island and in California, but no close family support in Hawai'i. Through a twist of fate and admirable sense of loyalty, she is living in Honolulu to help an elderly, childless Japanese woman age until passing. Ms. H and her son live with Mama-san in her 2-bedroom condo, and have a fairly isolated existence. They live below the poverty level. Ms. H is not fluent in English. She dropped out of high school when she was sixteen, and immigrated to the USA decades ago before she turned twenty-one. Getting a decent education for her son from the Hawai'i Department of Education has been a struggle. By the time the boy was 10 years old, he couldn't read "the cat is black" or add 6+8. It wasn't because he was incapable. He simply had been educationally neglected. Ms. H didn't know this, and she used to cry all the time thinking her son had a dismal future ahead.

Three years ago, a community volunteer began tutoring this young man, and advocating for his right to an appropriate education. The volunteer homeschooled the student full-time for a year, and has continued part-time ever since in order to compensate for various DOE deficiencies. It's been a tremendous amount of work, but this boy's life has turned around. An noticeable consequence is that Ms. H isn't crying anymore. The greatest hurdles in this transformation have not been about overcoming the boy's learning disability. The most time-consuming obstacles in the path of success have been unnecessary erections birthed from narrow, regressive attitudes held firmly in place by the DOE state bureaucracy.

Ms. H now faces a barrier that is impossible to overcome without a change in BOE policy and DOE rules, a change in the blind-folded bureaucracy that blocks beneficial cooperative community effort. Ms. H wants the school to treat her family friend (the community volunteer who has served as her interpreter, advocate, and son's tutor for more than three years) as a co-guardian in her son's education. This does not mean some extreme measure like signing away her parental rights by transferring power of attorney. This does mean allowing a volunteer to be involved in home-to-school communications like a parent and with the parent if the parent wants this help. What this type of assistant *is* has never been defined. Therefore, it doesn't exist, and is not allowed to exist. The DOE has no provision for making this possible, but such opportunities should exist. *If a parent wants a family assistant to be involved in academic parenting, and the child will benefit from this involvement, then BOE policies and DOE rules **must** enable this to happen!*

Last year, Ms. H's son transitioned to middle school. This new Principal has refused to respect the mother's wishes regarding the volunteer. No amount of appeals, even to the highest levels of the Hawai'i Department of Education, have been able to overcome this systemic racism. This racism takes the form of academic and linguistic bullying when LEAs do a shoddy job of making sure non-English-proficient parents understand the barrage of announcements and notices written in English. This racism is further compounded when friends of the parents' choosing are not allowed to speak for and assist these parents in performing the same types of duties and tasks that educated, English-proficient parents are able to perform.

This is one family's drama. There are, no doubt, many others like it lurking in the cracks into which many of our marginalized populations have fallen.

Family Engagement. Community Engagement. Equal Opportunity. Equity. Collaboration. Teamwork. It takes a village to raise a child. Openness & transparency. Buzzwords and clichés have no meaning when not practiced. These well-meaning terms are a far cry from describing Ms. H's and her son's current situation. The result? His earlier academic progress in home school and Grade 5 took a sharp downturn his first year in this uncooperative middle school last year. Another crack has opened and there is no crawling out of this one until the BOE changes the status quo.

Does the BOE really think it is ethically acceptable to deny a parent's request that an English-speaking family friend be allowed to communicate with and for the parent(s), and to assist in a child's education like any parent would? Perhaps no one other than me has ever brought this serious problem to your attention. I did, earlier this year. Now that the COVID crisis has a management plan, please pay attention to this issue and do the right thing.

I ask that the BOE abolish these racist barriers throughout the DOE. This is not Ms. H's personal issue. This is a systemic problem in need of a remedy for *all* struggling parents who could benefit from a helpful friend, and *must* have the right for the DOE to accept such family arrangements.

The *only* way to change the current DOE culture of linguistically, academically, and institutionally bullying uneducated, non-English-proficient parents is to enact clear policies and rules that open the door for volunteers to help our marginalized populations. Open the door and let volunteers walk in to help our children learn better. Such policies would *prohibit the DOE from excluding someone from being involved in home-to-school communications if that is what the parent wants*. Please fix this.

Mahalo,



Vanessa Ott