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To: State of Hawai'i Board of Education

re: A Policy to Improve Conditions for Parents with Communication Difficulties

Dear Board of Education Members,

I am writing to the Board of Education to ask that you make a policy to give me the right to have a **PARENT ASSISTANT** help me with my son's journey through Hawai'i public schools. Since a "Parent Assistant" designation doesn't exist yet, I will define it. Then, I will explain why the Board of Education needs to make a policy giving parents who have communication or education difficulties the right to have a Parent Assistant who will be treated with the same respect afforded parents by the DOE.

DEFINITION

Parent Assistant One individual authorized by the student's legal guardian to assist in all matters involving a child's education. The DOE will include the Parent Assistant in all communications with the parent, and will afford communication from the Parent Assistant the same treatment as communication from a parent. The Parent Assistant is not authorized to make legal decisions for the student; those rights remain with the parent(s).

INTERPRETERS VS. TRANSLATORS

I do not speak English very well. I am raising my son by myself. I don't have any close family in Hawai'i, but I have a good friend who helps me write my thoughts in English. She is helping me write this letter to you. She helps me understand emails, letters, and notices I get from the school and other DOE departments. Sometimes these communications are very complicated because my son has special needs, and my P/Assistant helps me understand what all the words mean. For example, I was given a copy of the HIDOE IDEA *Procedural Safeguards* in Tongan (my language). This is a document about U.S. legal procedures. I withdrew from school in Tonga when I was sixteen years old, so I don't understand this document in Tongan. I even asked at the last IEP to have the DOE help me understand it, but that was brushed aside.

My P/Assistant does not speak Tongan, but she helps me understand the English communications I receive because I know enough English, and she is a patient teacher of English Language Learners. Even though I tell the DOE I have an interpreter, they keep documenting that I am denying the request to have an interpreter because *my* chosen interpreter does not speak Tongan. What they keep writing is not true, even though I keep asking them to change it.

The “interpreters” that the State keeps trying to force on me are not interpreters. They are just translators.¹ No one from the DOE has ever patiently explained anything to me. DOE so-called “interpreters” only make translations of statements, questions, and answers, but they don’t elucidate. If I don’t know the questions to ask, I’m at big disadvantage, and so is my son. My P/Assistant is the best interpreter I’ve ever had because she helps me truly understand what is going on. She has been helping me and my son for three and a half years, but the DOE just keep giving her a hard time because she’s not legally a “parent.”

HARD TIMES

Last year, my son did horribly at Robert Louis Stevenson Middle school. His Math and Reading diagnostic scores were lower at the end of Grade 6 (Mar 2020) than they were at the end of Grade 5 (May 2019). One of the biggest reasons this happened is because I had A LOT of communication and collaboration problems with the Principal (Balatico). She was extremely uncooperative with me and my P/Assistant (who is also my son’s home tutor and a former DOE elementary school teacher). The Principal told all the teachers to ignore emails from my P/A, and said we could communicate only through her. I complained to the Complex Area Superintendent who told me to work it out with the Principal, and also directed me to Monitoring & Compliance Branch of the Deputy Superintendent’s Office which handles IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) issues – not this issue.

Last December, the M&CB specialist refused to include my P/A in email communications with me, and when we explained that my P/A was helping me write my emails, the specialist accused “someone” of committing fraud and forgery, and refused to communicate with me via email anymore. My P/A filed a Fraud & Ethics complaint. No apology, no acknowledgement of wrongdoing. At least the MC&B Specialist is being nicer now. That was a stressful drama.

Another drama was the mediation we went through about the Principal’s communications decisions. Because that’s a secret process, I can’t tell you anything other than that there was no resolution, and I wasn’t favorably impressed with the mediation process. It was a big waste of time, and I’m not even allowed to tell you why it was so frustrating and stressful.

This school year, the Principal has refused to put my P/Assistant on the Parent Notification email list. The teachers send email to me, not my P/A. I get so much email and I don’t know what to forward to my P/A and what not to send. This state of confusion is allowed to exist because the BOE is not setting any policies to change the status quo. The Principal can do whatever she wants, and excluding my P/A is what she wants. Since no policy against this exist, there’s *nothing* I can do.

This doesn’t help my son. It hurts him.

¹ interpret - to give or provide the meaning of; explain; explicate; elucidate.
[Origin: Middle English. stem of *interpretas*: explainer]

translate - to turn from one language into another or from a foreign language into one’s own.
[Origin: Middle English. past participle of *trānsferre*: to transfer]

Believe it or not, that's not the worst of it. Someone at the school filed an unsubstantiated claim of child abuse against my P/Assistant. That was very stressful because I didn't understand how anyone could call Child Welfare Services about me or my P/Assistant. By the end of that ordeal, the investigator was impressed enough with my P/Assistant that the Social Worker was encouraging my P/Assistant to become a volunteer Surrogate Parent for the Department of Health (someone who helps foster children and guardians the way my P/A helps my son and me).

The Principal also reprimanded my P/Assistant for assisting my son with his distance learning even though he *never* would have been able to do it without her. Today, I received a letter from the Principal, filled with lies, claiming that my P/Assistant has been interrupting distance learning classes and yelling at the teachers. This is outrageous, but I know why she writes these things. The Principal uses these lies as an excuse to justify this:

Because Ms. Ott remains so difficult, and based on all of the above, I am changing our agreement from the summer and will be ceasing all communication with Ms. Ott. As of today, September 16, 2020, and I will only be communicating directly with you, as you are Tevita's parent.

Truth is, Ms. Ott is a tireless advocate for my rights and my son's rights. She helps my son like any parent/aunty would. She helps him with his schoolwork. She goes to the doctor with us. She feeds him when I am sick. She takes him to Boy Scouts and Yoga. She's on his IEP Team. She hasn't done *anything* inappropriate.

I can't work this out with the Principal when the Board has given her permission behave like this. Everyone in the DOE is complicit. Everyone turns a blind eye. No one will help. No one is holding an open hearing so we can expose the Principal's lies. The BOE has not answered Ms. Ott's and my pleas for help by making a policy to prevent this kind of harassment against the one person who's helping me and my son. Please, answer my pleas now.

A POSITIVE POLICY CHANGE

If the Board of Education will enact a policy that creates a designation of, and respect for, Parent Assistants, then I could get what I need to help my son with his education.

If the BOE won't create such a policy, then the DOE will continue to make my life very difficult. Why? What purpose does this serve? PLEASE, make it mandatory that if I designate a Parent Assistant, then that person is included in all the correspondence a parent would receive, and is given the right to communicate on my behalf with DOE employees (including teachers) just like a co-parent, and is allowed to assist with his education just like any other parent.

My son's future, and probably many others like him depend on a different, better way. PLEASE HELP! MAKE BETTER POLICY.

Thank you,



Feketi Huahulu