

November 16, 2020

State of Hawai'i Board of Education
boe.hawaii@boe.hawaii.gov

re: **World Class Education Systems Practice**
Authentic Family & Community Engagement

Let's Make Hawai'i Education World Class!



Aloha Board of Education Members,

I want Hawai'i to have a world class public education system. That is not going to happen until the culture of the DOE changes to one of openness, transparency, and collaboration with families and community members. To change that culture requires new rules and functioning systems of accountability. The Board has written policies that you might think cover these issues, but they are merely words on paper. The reality is that bullying goes on all the time behind closed doors, and nobody does anything about it. *That* is the Hawai'i DOE culture that needs to change. Bullying.

I'm not talking about kids bullying kids. I'm talking about institutional, bureaucratic, linguistic, academic, and workplace bullying by DOE administrators (with power) against other adult stakeholders with less power (parents, community members, teachers). HIDOE bullying is endemic. It *can* be cured, but not without conscious, concentrated effort by those with the power to change it: you, the State of Hawai'i Board of Education.

I've been standing up to the DOE bullies for thirteen years now, and very little has improved. That is because nothing substantial ever changes. It's like the DOE keeps popping pills to treat symptoms, yet never tries to heal the root cause of the disease. Over 13 years, I've seen a lot of bullying in all different forms, and I don't have the time to write about them all right now. So, I'm going to focus on how parents who are uneducated and/or don't speak English well are bullied by the system. My prior letters to the BOE are posted here: freespeech4us.com/dear-boe

For the past three and a half years, I have volunteered thousands of hours to help a Tongan mother, Feketi Huahulu, and her son, Tevita Ahomana, who has a learning disability. I home schooled Tevita for an entire year (SY 2017-18), and have served on his IEP team since he returned to Grade 5 in 2018. This child was failing in the HIDOE system. I've managed the process of his education over the years, and because of my involvement, and in spite of DOE considerable efforts to the contrary, he is becoming successful. I tell you this not to toot my own horn, but to explain that there are probably hundreds of former HIDOE teachers who would be willing to tutor children for free, but *not* if they have to deal with the Hawai'i DOE to do it. Many times in the past two years I've wanted to give up because it can be very depressing, but my ethics won't let me abandon Tevita to the DOE bullies just to save myself. I've been standing up to bullies since I was in elementary school, with words and logic, and at 61 years of age, I'm still going.

This past year's DOE bullying exemplifies several recurring systemic problems. Even though Feketi wants me to be her parent assistant, help her understand what is happening to her son, and collaborate with his teachers to further his education, the DOE is having none of that. The school Principal refuses to include me in home-to-school communication. From Day 1 of last school year when Tevita entered Grade 6 at Robert Louis Stevenson Middle School, the Principal has refused to allow the teachers to collaborate and openly communicate with me, Tevita's home tutor, because I'm not his biological parent or legal guardian, in spite of Ms. Huahulu's pleas to the contrary. This year, the Principal has waged a campaign of defamation as a pretext to justify her ruling to forbid me to communicate with Tevita's teachers.

Principal Balatico falsely accused me of screaming at teachers during distance learning. She reprimanded me for helping Tevita during his distance learning classes because it's school policy that parents can't help their children during distance learning classes. I asked Complex Area Superintendent Linell Dilwith to talk to everyone who was here at the home during these alleged screaming incidents: Tevita, his mother, my husband, and me. The CAS didn't talk to any of the witness, and issued her own libelous letter accusing me of things I didn't do. I appealed to Deputy Superintendent Phyllis Unebasami on November 3rd. No response. November 12th, I appealed to Superintendent Kishimoto. No response. You can read every libelous word published by DOE employees against me, and my witness statements refuting the lies online: freespeech4us.com/defamation

Today, I write to the BOE once more and say: This isn't right. YOU have to do something to stop DOE bullying. YOU have the power. If you do nothing, you are letting the bullying continue.

There is obviously a complete disregard for BOE Policies 304-1¹, 304², and 304-5³, to name a few rules, and a violation of anti-libel laws, but so what? Bureaucratic bullies have the power to just do as they please and ignore complaints.

Is the BOE going to put an end to DOE bullying? Are you ever going to open up the conversation about this? Are you going to continue to allow small-minded Principals to shut out community volunteers and interpreters against parent wishes? How can you *ever* hope to build a world-class education system under such third-world conditions of corruption, lying, and lack of accountability?

Mahalo for your consideration,



Vanessa Ott

¹ POLICY 304-1 E KOMO MAI: Board and Department employees shall endeavor to treat members of the public with respect and in a courteous and responsive manner.

² POLICY E-304 COMMUNICATIONS (FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT): ...The Department shall have and enforce procedures that, within the bounds of Department policy, both encourage and manage the presence and involvement of parents, community members and the public in the schools.

³ 304-5 PUBLIC COMPLAINTS: ... As the matter is studied, all parties involved may be requested by the CAS to attend meetings for the purposes of presenting facts and evidence, making further explanations, clarifying issues and dispensing with hearsay and rumor...At each level of review, the parties shall make reasonable efforts to facilitate communication.