April 27, 2020

Via Email and USPS

Dr. Christina Kishimoto
Superintendent
P.O. Box 2360
Honolulu, HI 96804

RE: Six Questions, Six Specific Proposed Actions

Dear Dr. Kishimoto,

For the last several weeks HE’E Coalition and educational equity community advocates have dialogued with Hawai‘i Department of Education (HIDOE) staff to gain clarity on education issues related to the COVID-19 crisis. We have repeatedly posed reasonable, logical questions that focus on documenting what is happening in all our public schools, communications with students and families, and holding our system accountable. This is basic information that the HIDOE should have to address the current situation and plans for the next school sessions.

1. When will the HIDOE collect and share data on whether or not students are emotionally and physically safe, have access to devices and the internet, and are educationally engaged?
2. When will the HIDOE collect and share data examining what students are accessing the Meal-to-Go program and going forward, a plan to distribute food at all schools?
3. There is widespread misunderstanding and concern among parents and community members about what is happening in the HIDOE. Can you provide us with a written approved mechanism for interactive communication so that community members can be heard and get answers to their questions?
4. How will HIDOE determine which students are meeting academic standards without the Smarter Balanced and KAEO assessments and class grades? What is the plan for those students (including special education students) that are behind grade level?
5. Why isn’t there an expectation or written policy that schools check in with all students (using mail, phones, computers, etc.) and set a daily schedule for subjects and assignments?
6. What is the plan for utilizing the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund ($43.4mm) and the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund? ($9.7mm)?
The answers we have received from HIDOE staff are not coming with any clarity or detail. We are left with the strong impression that the HIDOE and Hawai‘i Board of Education (BOE) do not have in place a clear policy approach to the spring semester. There are no systemwide expectations for what schools or teachers are supposed to be doing during this period of online learning and engagement. There are vague terms such as “enrichment.” There have been open declarations that HIDOE is not going to be specific in requirements or even guidelines for every school or teacher or student.

As for the fall semester, you have stated publicly that the HIDOE is only focusing on summer school, and that detailed contingency policies and plans for the fall are not a high priority. We have seen no proposed budget or plans for bulk purchases of computers or tablets to connect students to their learning centers. We have seen no detailed scheduling of professional development for on-line or other distance learning instruction, especially social emotional learning (SEL) instruction for students who are in traumatic environments. We have seen no attempt to convert safer spaces for student to gather in, such as the convention center, where the environment can be more strictly controlled, with larger spaces between students and teachers. We have seen no attempts to convert buses or vans into travelling “hot spots” for students to download assignments, or even park nearby and do their work online.

The perception of lack of clarity and specific planning appears to be shared by our Congressional Delegation.

We offer a list of suggested actions that could assist in getting clarity of the current situation and written transparent plans for the summer school and the fall semester.

1. With nearly half of all HIDOE employees working outside of the classroom, create and post a written plan to repurpose these staff for ongoing communication, technology and health assessments of public-school students.

2. Survey each school to understand what each school and each teacher within each school has done during this semester to communicate daily with each student. This will tell us if there are gaps, especially in terms of regions or communities.

3. Determine, in time for legislative action, which students do not have internet connectivity and devices to learn online, and the budget that will be needed to accomplish this. If there are methods of delivering education other than internet connectivity and devices, clearly explain why and the budget needed to accomplish this.

4. Open libraries with internet access (using safe spacing) and convert buses and other vehicles into mobile “hot spots” to facilitate access for students whose homes do not have adequate connectivity.

5. Survey and collect data this month to document how each complex, school and student is operating with the maximum quality learning experiences for all
students. Create separate elementary, middle and high school charts and graphs to illustrate the patterns of academic strategies.

6. Incorporate best practices from other public and private education systems, determine the need for elementary, middle and high school professional development in a transition to hybrid or online learning to address academic and social emotional learning needs and plan the budget that will be requested for this.

As an education community, we are asking these questions and giving these suggestions out of a collective concern for our education system now and as we recover from this crisis. We look forward to receiving answers to our questions.

Sincerely,

Cheri Nakamura
HE'E Coalition Director

Encl: Letter from Congressional Delegation dated April, 18, 2020

cc: Via Email and USPS
Hawai‘i Board of Education
Brian Schatz, United States Senator
Mazie K. Hirono, United States Senator
Tulsi Gabbard, Member of Congress
Ed Case, Member of Congress
HE‘E Coalition Members and Participants

Academy 21
After-School All-Stars Hawai‘i
Alliance for Place Based Learning
American Civil Liberties Union
*Castle Complex Community Council
*Castle-Kahuku Principal and CAS
*Education Institute of Hawai‘i
*Faith Action for Community Equity
Fresh Leadership LLC
Girl Scouts Hawa‘i
Harold K.L. Castle Foundation
*HawaiiKidsCAN
*Hawai‘i Afterschool Alliance
*Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice
*Hawai‘i Association of School Psychologists
Hawai‘i Athletic League of Scholars
*Hawai‘i Children’s Action Network
Hawai‘i Education Association
Hawai‘i Nutrition and Physical Activity Coalition
* Hawai‘i State PTSA
Hawai‘i State Student Council
Hawai‘i State Teachers Association
Hawai‘i P-20
Hawai‘i 3Rs
Head Start Collaboration Office
It’s All About Kids
*INPEACE
Joint Venture Education Forum
Junior Achievement of Hawaii
Kamehameha Schools
Kanu Hawai‘i
*Kaua‘i Ho‘okele Council
Keiki to Career Kaua‘i
Kupu A‘e
*Leaders for the Next Generation
Learning First
McREL’s Pacific Center for Changing the Odds
Native Hawaiian Education Council
Our Public School
*Pacific Resources for Education and Learning
*Parents and Children Together
*Parents for Public Schools Hawai‘i
Punahou School PUEO Program
*Teach for America
The Learning Coalition
US PACOM
University of Hawai‘i College of Education
YMCA of Honolulu

Voting Members (*) Voting member organizations vote on action items while individual and non-voting participants may collaborate on all efforts within the coalition.

Individual Support
William “Pila” Wilson
April 18, 2020

Dr. Christina M. Kishimoto
Superintendent
Hawaii Department of Education
P.O. Box 2360
Honolulu, HI 96804

Dear Dr. Kishimoto,

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has upended the school year for thousands of students across the state. However, even as we take the necessary steps to mitigate the spread of the virus, educating Hawaii’s children remains a top priority during this public health crisis. We are committed to supporting Hawaii’s children and the Hawaii Department of Education (HIDOE) during this pandemic, and to working closely with HIDOE to make sure federal assistance supports the needs of those who have been affected. As Congress works on new legislation, we request your assistance by providing us with information about the HIDOE’s ability to continue providing education to our students and recommendations for how we can support the Department’s continued efforts to provide communities with educational and related services.

As part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Congress appropriated over $30 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund (ESF), with over $13 billion specifically for elementary and secondary schools. The HIDOE is expected to receive over $43 million from the ESF. These funds are available to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by providing each school with the necessary resources to implement effective distance learning, including through the purchase of education technology and training teachers to adapt to nontraditional classrooms.

As the Congress works on the next bill to assist elementary and secondary schools in responding to this public health crisis, additional data from HIDOE would help to direct resources or ensure flexibilities in federal law. For that purpose, please provide answers to the following questions:

1) Across the state, how many public elementary and secondary students are receiving some kind of consistent education every day? How many students are not receiving this level of education?

2) How are public schools collecting information about the needs of students and their families and the ability to engage in distance learning? How many students (and their families) lack consistent internet access? How are schools providing educational material to those students (including laptop computers, instructional packets, and other materials), and what federal resources and flexibilities do you think would be helpful to improve the distance learning experience for students?
3) How many public schools are providing some kind of education? For schools that may not be able to provide distance learning, if any, how is HIDOE directing resources and guidance to those schools?

4) What is your expectation for how often a student connects with an educator? Are there data systems where you are logging these interactions, and, if not, then what federal resources would be helpful to make sure students are connecting with educators? How are non-classroom teachers being used to promote learning?

5) How many public schools are going beyond enrichment to provide some kind of education? For schools that may not be able to provide distance learning, if any, how is HIDOE directing resources and guidance to those schools?

6) Are there any other school districts across the country that offer effective models and best practices?

7) What offices within HIDOE are developing and implementing COVID-19 related guidance? What can we do to support HIDOE and these offices moving forward?

On April 17, 2020, HIDOE announced that it will maintain continuity of learning—providing distance learning and educational packets for public and charter school students—through May 28, 2020, which is the end of the 2019-2020 academic year. Planning for summer learning programs and the 2020-2021 academic year is of paramount importance for families across the state. However, the COVID-19 pandemic does not have a clear endpoint and cases could reemerge even with preventative measures. For that reason, HIDOE should be prepared for a disrupted 2020-2021 academic year.

It is imperative that we serve the students of Hawaii well by continuing to provide the best education possible while we mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Please provide regular updates on HIDOE’s efforts to develop and execute plans for educating students through the summer and 2020-2021 academic year if the pandemic continues or resurges and specifically how you are using the additional flexibilities in U.S. Department of Education federal title funds to support students farthest from opportunity. We are committed to working with you to ensure that this pandemic does not result in lower educational outcomes for Hawaii’s youth.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

BRIAN SCHATZ
United States Senator

MAZIE K. HIRONO
United States Senator

TULSI GABBARD
Member of Congress

ED CASE
Member of Congress