



STATE OF HAWAII
BOARD OF EDUCATION
P.O. BOX 2360
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96804

June 26, 2020

VIA EMAIL

The Honorable President Ronald D.
Kouchi and Members of the Senate
Thirtieth State Legislature
State Capitol, Room 409
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

The Honorable Speaker Scott K. Saiki
and Members of the House of
Representatives
Thirtieth State Legislature
State Capitol, Room 431
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

Dear President Kouchi, Speaker Saiki, and Members of the Legislature:

This letter is in response to both the Legislature's State Coronavirus Relief Fund proposal and your joint letter requesting the Board of Education ("Board") to vet the Department of Education's ("Department") plan for financial implications and resource requirements as related to the reopening of public schools for the 2020-2021 school year. The Board is appreciative of your work to address the challenges we face in Hawaii as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect our health and economy. The Board shares your concerns regarding the Department's financial and resource needs necessary to support its school reopening plans currently in development.

I have been following your discussions, and I am aware of Superintendent Christina Kishimoto's presentation to the Senate Special Committee on COVID-19 that reflected the plans and priorities of the Board and the Department. The Department requested \$57.8 million from the State Coronavirus Relief Fund to address device, connectivity, training, and support needs of our most vulnerable students. When I read Senate Bill 126, SD1, HD1, CD1, I was surprised and dismayed to see that the Department's requests were not included.

As you are aware, on June 18, 2020, the Board adopted a resolution that directs the Superintendent to prioritize the needs of students who are most vulnerable to the negative effects of school closures and disruptions to learning—students with special needs, English learners, homeless students, and students without access to devices or

connectivity.¹ Many fall into more than one of these prioritized categories. I know that supporting their learning in this new era will be critical in ensuring the economic success of Hawaii. As our schools develop plans to pivot to remote learning should the need arise, a critical element to these plans is ensuring all students have a device that they are able to access and use.

Considering the Board's concern for our state's most vulnerable students, perhaps you can understand why your joint letter (dated June 24, 2020; received on June 26, 2020) further distresses me. My impression was that, through several meetings with Superintendent Kishimoto that she reported as positive, the Legislature received all the information it needed related to the Department's resource needs. The criticisms in your letter have blindsided Superintendent Kishimoto and me.

I understand that every neighborhood throughout Hawaii has critical needs that you must consider when deciding what government must do immediately to lessen the impact of this crisis on families and small businesses. I also think it is important to think of how we can invest in the future through support of our public school students. I am extremely worried about the loss of learning to many of our most marginalized students during the spring. The achievement gap could widen even more if we do not address the technology inequities to allow these students to fully participate in the new environments our schools are creating. The additional financial resources, whether from the State Coronavirus Relief Fund or elsewhere, would go a long way in supporting our efforts without taking even more resources from the reduced Department budget for Fiscal Year 2021.

I want to work with you, especially for the benefit our students and their families. Misunderstandings and miscommunication have clearly occurred. Because time is of the essence, it is important to understand some of the key deliverables the Board has already directed from the Superintendent. Among other things, the Board's resolution directs the Superintendent to: (1) issue clear protocols to Department schools by July 1, 2020; (2) issue clear and comprehensive guidance to all public schools, including charter schools by July 1, 2020; (3) deliver the protocols and guidance to Department school families and make them publicly available by July 8, 2020; and (4) provide the Board with a comprehensive plan for reopening schools by July 1, 2020 (see lines 379-385 of the reopening of schools resolution).

Superintendent Kishimoto explained to the Board that her intent is to have each of the aforementioned components ready for public release on July 2, 2020, and I have already been in discussions with her to present this information to the Board on July 9, 2020. Meanwhile, the Board's Finance and Infrastructure Committee Chairperson, Kenneth Uemura, has been in discussion with Department leadership and is planning to take a deep dive into the financial implications of the plan to reopen schools at the committee's July 23, 2020 meeting. The timing is deliberately after the Legislature

¹ The resolution is available here:

[http://boe.hawaii.gov/Documents/2020%20School%20Reopening%20Resolution%20\(executed\).pdf](http://boe.hawaii.gov/Documents/2020%20School%20Reopening%20Resolution%20(executed).pdf).

adjourns to ensure the Board receives reliable numbers based on the Legislature's decisions, rather than estimates and projections.

We certainly understand the Legislature's position and need for information earlier than described dates to be able to make hard decisions in these trying times. Because the plan for reopening schools will not be ready for public release until July 2, I do not think an emergency Board meeting on that same day, as requested in your letter, would be particularly productive because Board members would not have had time to review the plan. Further, because the roles of the Legislature and the Board are different, Board members would not necessarily ask for the same kind of information the Legislature needs for its own purposes. Instead, I respectfully request that the Legislature hold an informational briefing to get the information it needs directly from the Department.

As the Board's resolution stresses, we are in this together, and we want to work with the Legislature for the benefit of our communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Catherine Payne". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and a long, sweeping tail.

Catherine Payne
Chairperson, Board of Education
Chairperson, 2020 Legislative Ad Hoc Committee

cc: The Honorable David Y. Ige, Governor, State of Hawai'i (via email)
Members of the Board of Education (via email)
Christina M. Kishimoto, Superintendent, Department of Education (via email)