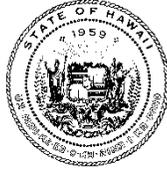


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BOARD OF EDUCATION
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October 15, 2020

TO: Board of Education

FROM: Catherine Payne
Chairperson, Board of Education

AGENDA ITEM: Board Action on Acellus Learning Accelerator distance learning program ("Acellus"): program review, phase out in all schools by the end of 2020-2021 school year, and other learning options for families

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Department of Education's ("Department") selection of the Acellus Learning Accelerator distance learning program ("Acellus") was not properly vetted for alignment to Board of Education ("Board") policies and to Hawaii grade-level standards.
- Acellus will be discontinued. Schools may phase out the program by the end of the 2020-2021 school year.
- Families wanting to stop using Acellus will be allowed to switch to another learning option immediately. Students in secondary credit recovery courses may need to complete the courses they are in during the current school year.

II. BACKGROUND

On June 18, 2020, the Board adopted a resolution providing the Department with big picture guidance on preparing to reopen schools amid the COVID-19 global pandemic ("Reopening Resolution").¹ The Reopening Resolution contains provisions

¹ The Board Resolution Directing the Department of Education to Prepare for the Reopening of Schools for the 2020-2021 School Year Amid the Global Covid-19 Pandemic; Urging School Communities to Give

that require “all Department schools to have plans for in-person learning, hybrid learning, and distance learning”² and direct the Department to “provide instructional models and clear guidance to families that allow parents or guardians who do not feel comfortable sending their children to a school campus to keep their children at home.”³

Since the start of the 2020-2021 school year, many schools have been using Acellus as part of their distance learning models and/or as an alternative for families who do not feel comfortable with in-person learning.

The Board became aware of concerns over Acellus through written and oral public testimony for its August 20, 2020 general business meeting. At the meeting, Superintendent Christina Kishimoto explained that the impetus for selecting Acellus was feedback from staff who requested no “new distance learning approaches,” and prior to this school year, the Department had been using Acellus for ten years, primarily for credit recovery.⁴

At its September 17, 2020 meeting, the Board received more information about Acellus through a memorandum from Superintendent Kishimoto⁵ and a presentation from Deputy Superintendent Phyllis Unebasami. Superintendent Kishimoto’s memorandum explains that the Department’s Office of Curriculum and Instructional Design (“OCID”) conducted a “cursory review” of the Acellus elementary-level modules for “potential alignment to existing state and national standards.” OCID conducted its review “within a span of ten days,” and the “process was expedited following the July 2, 2020 Return to Learn announcement to allow schools time to select a full distance learning option for parents who wanted an alternative to school models that included face-to-face instruction.” Superintendent Kishimoto’s memorandum noted that the Department would “conduct a comprehensive review” of Acellus.

Hope, Act with Kindness, and Work toward Togetherness; and Authorizing Board Members to Represent the Board Of Education in Mid-Term Bargaining of Collective Bargaining Agreements is available here: <http://boe.hawaii.gov/Documents/2020%20School%20Reopening%20Resolution%20%28executed%29.pdf>.

² Reopening Resolution, lines 160-164.

³ Reopening Resolution, lines 174-177.

⁴ August 20, 2020 Board General Business Meeting minutes, available here:

<https://alala1.k12.hi.us/STATE/BOE/Minutes.nsf/ebb43af14ca5cdb30a2565cb006622a8/d1e5ff9f2a767d470a2585e0007ade35?OpenDocument>.

⁵ Superintendent Kishimoto’s memorandum dated September 17, 2020 is available here:

http://boe.hawaii.gov/Meetings/Notices/Meeting%20Material%20Library/GBM_09172020_Presentation%20on%20Acellus%20Learning%20Accelerator%20Distance%20Learning%20Program.pdf.

At the meeting, when asked why the Department did not conduct a comprehensive review between May and August and instead opted for a ten-day review, Deputy Superintendent Unebasami explained that the Department “had to act quickly” in May and had never undergone a comprehensive review process but that it now planned to “conduct a thorough and comprehensive review.” Deputy Superintendent Unebasami noted that the “Department would complete its review, report its findings to the Board, and provide final recommendations and next steps by the start of the second quarter.”⁶

III. DISCUSSION

The Department completed its comprehensive review of Acellus, and I have discussed the draft report with Deputy Superintendent Unebasami. I have based my recommendations on the previous information the Board has received and my discussion on the Department’s draft report.

It was clear at the Board’s September 17, 2020 meeting that several Board members had already made up their minds that the Department’s use of Acellus as a distance learning platform was a mistake. While I understand the Department’s unwillingness to admit that the selection of Acellus was a mistake until it completes a comprehensive review of the program, I believe the sheer number of negative experiences expressed to the Board through testimony and other means is evidence enough. Concerns about Acellus from the public include racist and culturally insensitive content and lack of rigor, and the fact that the Department needed to set up a webpage dedicated to Acellus with a link to a “Controversial Content Concern Form” is telling. Further, the Department’s draft findings indicate that the reviews from OCID and the Department’s Civil Rights Compliance Branch support my conclusion.

The unforeseen benefit of this controversy is that the Department is now finalizing a comprehensive review process for curriculum and instructional materials that it recommends to schools. Focusing on this positive outcome, I would like the Department to move forward with its improved vetting process and move on from Acellus and all of the problems it has caused for families and schools. To do this, it behooves Superintendent Kishimoto to acknowledge what many Board members have already come to accept: that the selection of Acellus was a mistake made in the midst of chaos brought on by the pandemic but a mistake nonetheless. It is a

⁶ September 17, 2020 draft minutes, available here: <https://alala1.k12.hi.us/STATE/BOE/Minutes.nsf/ebb43af14ca5cdb30a2565cb006622a8/9a95605142c1d25a0a2585fb00797b13?OpenDocument>.

mistake that the Department has learned from, and a mistake that it should now remedy.

That remedy should include a plan to phase out Acellus in all schools while still ensuring schools are able to provide distance learning to their students. It should also include the ability for families to immediately stop using Acellus and select another option.

IV. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the forgoing, I am recommending that the Board direct the Superintendent to (1) issue a letter to families using Acellus that acknowledges that the Department's selection of the program as a platform for distance learning was done in haste without appropriate vetting, (2) phase out Acellus in all schools by the end of the 2020-2021 school year, and (3) allow any family who wants to stop using Acellus to switch to another learning option at any time.

Proposed motion: "Moved to direct the Superintendent to (1) issue a letter to families using Acellus that acknowledges that the Department's selection of the program as a platform for distance learning was done in haste without appropriate vetting, (2) phase out Acellus in all schools by the end of the 2020-2021 school year, and (3) allow any family who wants to stop using Acellus to switch to another learning option at any time."