

Late Testimony

TESTIMONY for BOE Finance and Infrastructure Committee meeting Sept. 20, 2016, 11:00 am
Honorable Chair Chun and committee members:

We're asking the recently re-constituted Board of Education to advocate for change in the legislative Weighted Student Formula (WSF) to meet needs at remote and rural schools. Our DOE Strategic Plan should consider the differential needed to support success for all.

Equitable & adequate: "A key goal of education finance systems is to provide a quality public education program that produces a similar opportunity for all students to be academically successful regardless of their specific learning needs or other circumstances, such as where they attend school (p. 27)." Educational finance focuses on determining inputs necessary to achieve educational objectives, assuming that *equitable* access to *adequate* levels of resources is a key lever to student academic success.

My name is Debbie Anderson. I teach at Waiakea Intermediate on the island of Hawaii. As a teacher of over 25 years in Hawai'i, I taught in Windward O'ahu 7 years before moving to the Big Island. Firsthand, I've seen dramatic differences between what schools on Oahu take for granted, and what remote rural and smaller schools suffer without. One in six schools in Hawai'i is rural, and these small, rural schools serve over 8,500 students. Students in small and rural schools require more focused attention and policy-making because they're generally more vulnerable with fewer social and economic supports.

A recent report commissioned by the DOE and completed by the American Institutes of Research (AIR) reveals the WSF framework alone is insufficient. What types of services should be provided rather than pushed out to school discretion informs the level of funding allocation needed via WSF. After implementation of Hawaii's WSF, equity has not changed enough. (Chapter 6, p. 96) Challenge 1: Providing Sufficient Amounts of Funding Through the WSF. The level of funding distributed under the WSF was not sufficient to allow them to cover their minimum operational costs (p. 149). This challenge was emphasized especially for small and isolated schools.

WSF Weighting Factors need to reflect differential costs more accurately. Challenge: Rural remote schools will have certain "minimal administrative and support costs" similar to those of larger schools, which increase the per-pupil costs of operating. Especially for small schools that need to support essential personnel, lack of funding is a major challenge (p. 145).

Despite median household incomes close to the national median, persistent rural adult unemployment remains a concern in Hawaii.[1] Rural household mobility in Hawai'i is very high, at almost 15%, and national analysis reveals that children of all racial-ethnic groups are more likely to live in poverty if they live in a rural place than if they live in either an urban or suburban place.[2] In rural areas of Hawaii, over 40% of families with children from ages 0-5 are below the poverty line, and over 75% of single mother families with children from ages 0-5 are below the poverty line.[3] This is a critical issue for education policy in Hawai'i because research suggests that experiencing poverty before age 18 is particularly harmful and has implications for brain development as well as educational occupational, health, and family consequences.[4] While developing policies to reduce poverty rates is the more holistic approach, because it can reduce overall societal costs and improve outcomes for individuals and families, we can begin by buffering our children in rural areas from the most brutal effects of this poverty and lack of stability in multiple ways.[5]

Debbie Anderson, NBCT

testimony_boe@notes.k12.hi.us P.O. Box 2360, Honolulu, HI 96813 (808) 586-3433

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Basic Staffing: Policymakers first need to fund rural schools in ways that are at least sufficient to support basic educational goals. Our keiki in less populated rural areas deserve quality school opportunities, and to strengthen the educational institutions in rural areas, every school should be staffed adequately to provide a solid educational foundation with counselors, librarians, and elective teachers. To do this, we will need to **increase the differentials** for rural schools and decrease financial incentives designed to reward increases in school size, as a wide body of research shows the small schools generally yield better learning outcomes.[6]

Rural schools in Hawai'i serve children with high needs who require additional resources, special programs, and expert teachers to be successful learners. Using the Weighted School Formula mechanism, however, small rural schools are less likely to have counselors, librarians, and a wide choice of electives. Research has established that certified school librarians have a positive effect of literacy and achievement, particularly for poverty stricken areas.[7] In Windward Oahu, 98% of schools have at least one school librarian, while fewer than 30% of schools on the Big Island, the county with the highest poverty rate in the state, have a school librarian (and those are mostly in the urban areas).[8] This type of deep disparity indicates that the implementation of Weighted Student Formula has not resulted in educational equity.

The State of Hawaii's educational system is the most segregated in America by income, with 40% private school enrollment. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate is not equal. Educational decision makers may be influenced by personal schooling experiences and the choices they've made for their own children's interests. In Hawaii we need an attitude referred to by Lisa Delpit that "they" are all "our children."

Fairness, grounded in a strong sense of what is pono, requires that we provide, at the very least, equality of learning opportunities for all our children. Hawai'i is first in the nation in terms of the percent of students of color in rural schools.[9]

Conclusions: *Key Considerations* Moving Forward: The American Institutes for Research suggest "extra support" be provided for small or isolated schools (AIR 146). Policymakers need to fund rural schools under the WSF policy in ways that are at least sufficient to support basic operations. Establishing this basic level of funding support ensures that every school has sufficient funds to operate a basic program of services. "Adjustments for all cost factors should be set to reflect the differential cost of providing an **equal opportunity** for students to achieve at a given level, regardless of their needs or circumstances." p. 152

Many of these challenges of providing equal educational opportunities in rural and small schools in Hawai'i can be addressed if our first principle is that all our keiki deserve the best education we can offer. This principle requires that policymakers return to the mechanisms to allocate resources and find additional funding not only for public schools, but also use existing resources to more equitably support our small, rural schools, which could have a profound effect on stabilizing remote communities and contribute to a more sustainable Hawaii. Suggestions for WSF Implementation Improvement: "Extra support should be provided for schools that are small or isolated."

Thank you for listening, and considering speaking for legislative changes to Education.

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References

- [1] Johnson, Jerry, Daniel Showalter, and Robert Klein. "The Facts About Rural Education in the 50 States." *Why Rural Matters 2013-14* (May 2014): 55. Rural.edu. Rural School and Community Trust, May 2014. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] Jensen, Eric. "How Poverty Affects Behavior and Academic Performance." ASCD.org. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, n.d. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.
- [5] Biddle, Bruce J. *The Unacknowledged Disaster: Youth Poverty and Educational Failure in America*. Boston: Sense, 2014. Print.
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- [7] School Library Impact Studies Project. *School Library & Information Technologies Graduate Program*, 1 Dec. 2013. Web. 16 Jan. 2016.
- [8] "Poverty Map." *Poverty USA: A CCRD Initiative*. PovertyUSA.org, 1 Dec. 2015. Web. 16 Jan. 2016.
- [9] Jimerson, Lorna. "Teachers and Teaching Conditions in Rural New Mexico." *Rural.edu*. Rural School & Community Trust, 1 June 2004. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.

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