

Honorable Chair and committee members,

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

My name is Debbie Anderson. I teach at Waiakea Intermediate School 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. One in six schools in Hawai'i is rural, and these small, rural schools serve over 8,500 students. Firsthand, I've seen the dramatic differences between what schools on Oahu take for granted, and what remote rural and smaller schools suffer without. Note that having the Big Island Community meeting here in North Hawaii makes access and participation difficult for our school communities in its polar opposite Ka'u. Our students in small and rural schools require more focused attention and policy-making because the students in these schools are generally more vulnerable with fewer social and economic supports.

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]

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]

Weighted Student Formula

In the past few years, with the support of federal funds, Hawai'i has embarked on a focused campaign to improve education for its most disadvantaged students. This includes the establishment of Zones of School Improvement and the creation of the Weighted Student Formula (WSF) under the Reinventing Education Act of 2004. WSF was intended to make funding for public education more equitable, transparent, and decentralized. However, the academic opportunities available to children in rural and small schools has been limited

dramatically by the unintended effects of this funding mechanism. A recent report commissioned by the Hawai'i Department of Education and completed by the American Institutes of Research (AIR) reveals that "small or isolated schools do not have adequate funding under the WSF and that WSF does not account adequately for diseconomies of scale associated with small schools or for additional costs due to geographic isolation." [7]

Lack of funding is a major challenge, especially for small schools that "need to support essential personnel" and those in small or in geographically remote locations were "especially lacking sufficient funding to cover much more than a minimally operating program." [8] Other factors that have cost implications for operating schools need to be taken into account, such as the inability of "necessarily small" schools to take advantage of the economies of scale associated with operating larger schools. More isolated communities lack wider and deeper alternative funding sources. Lack of opportunity is more pronounced in rural areas, due to distance from services; rural communities and families in poverty have less access to technology.

The American Institutes for Research suggest that "extra support" be provided for schools that are small or isolated. [9] This requires a reconsideration of the weighting factors that make up the WSF so that they more "accurately account for the differential costs of providing an equal opportunity for all students to achieve, regardless of their individual needs or circumstances (such as geographic location)." [10]

Teacher Staffing

A number of issues are connected to teacher staffing in rural schools. Rural schools in Hawai'i serve children with high needs who require additional resources, special programs, and expert teachers to be successful learners. Class size in Hawai'i's rural public schools is above average for rural schools nationally. [11] There are "geographic differences in resource prices, especially with respect to staff," so not all rural schools are able to attract and retain qualified staff. [12] Rural schools in Hawai'i are generally "hard-to-staff" with highly qualified teachers, tend to have high rates of teacher turnover and out-of-field teaching assignments, and frequently use substitutes to fill vacancies or assign out-of-field teachers thereby failing to place a qualified teacher in each classroom. There is a bonus for teaching at hard-to-staff schools, yet the authors of the AIR report question whether it "is large enough to fully adjust for this cost factor." [13]

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. [14] 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). [15] This type of deep disparity indicates that the implementation of Weighted Student Formula has not resulted in educational equity.

Compounding the issue of unfunded core positions, like certified librarians, counselors and elective teachers, is the absence of appropriate and useful professional development opportunities for teachers in rural schools aligned with teachers' professional needs. There is a mismatch between the perceived usefulness of professional development and the content of professional development that teachers in rural schools are offered. In addition, very few rural schools offer incentives to pursue professional development, such as stipends or re-certification credit.

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.[16] NAEP performance in Hawaii's rural areas for 2013-2014 is lower than in nearly all other states with the absolute lowest score in fourth grade reading.[17] Hawaii ranks in the lowest overall quartile, with the lowest rural NAEP scores, on all four NAEP indicators, both 4th and 8th grade in both reading and math.[18]

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 of our keiki deserve the very best education we can offer them. This principle will require that policymakers return to the mechanisms used to allocate resources and not only find additional funding for all 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.

Thank you for listening, and considering speaking out for legislative changes to Education.
Debbie Anderson, NBCT

[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.

[6] Iatarola, Patrice, Amy Ellen Schwartz, Leanne Steifel, and Colin Chellman. "Small Schools, Large Districts: Small-School Reform and New York City Students." TCRecord.com. Teachers College Record, 1 Dec. 2008. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.

[7] Levins, Jesse, Jay Chambers, Diane Epstein, Nick Mills, Mahala Archer, Antonia Wong, and Kevin Lane. Evaluation of Hawaii's Weighted Student Formula, p. 144. Rep. American Institutes for Research, June 2013. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.

[8] Ibid, 149.

[9] Ibid, 145.

[10] Ibid, 149.

[11] 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.

[12] Levins, Jesse, Jay Chambers, Diane Epstein, Nick Mills, Mahala Archer, Antonia Wong, and Kevin Lane. Evaluation of Hawaii's Weighted Student Formula, p. 154. Rep. American Institutes for Research, June 2013. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.

[13] Ibid.

[14] School Library Impact Studies Project. School Library & Information Technologies Graduate Program, 1 Dec. 2013. Web. 16 Jan. 2016.

[15] "Poverty Map." Poverty USA: A CCRD Initiative. PovertyUSA.org, 1 Dec. 2015. Web. 16 Jan. 2016.

[16] Jimerson, Lorna. "Teachers and Teaching Conditions in Rural New Mexico." Rural.edu. Rural School & Community Trust, 1 June 2004. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.

[17] Johnson, Jerry, Daniel Showalter, and Robert Klein. "The Facts About Rural Education in the 50 States." Why Rural Matters 2013-14 (May 2014): 1-94. Rural.edu. Rural School and Community Trust, May 2014. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.

[18] Ibid.