

Testimony of Dr. Kauanoē Kamanā
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Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
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Aloha Committee Chair Senator Schatz, Vice Chair Senator Murkowski and members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

Mahalo for this opportunity to testify before you on COVID-19 impacts on Native Education Systems.

My name is Dr. Kauanoē Kamanā. I am an Associate Professor at the state Hawaiian language college. My position there is Director of Laboratory School Programs and I also serve as Principal of the largest of the college’s four P-12 laboratory schools – Ke Kula ‘O Nāwahīokalani‘ōpu‘u, also known as Nāwahī School.

My testimony will focus on Nāwahī. However, it will have some relevance for Native Hawaiian education as a whole. In addition, because Nāwahī is the largest Native language medium school in the United States, the challenges of Nāwahī are relevant for Native language medium education on a national level.

We at Nāwahī school remember your visit to us, Senator Schatz, as one of your first outreach efforts after joining the Senate. We also remember your visits to our community to assess hurricane and lava flow damage. COVID-19 is but the latest emergency that we at Nāwahī have faced.

Nāwahī shares many of the challenges found among other schools with a Native majority enrollment. We are located in a large rural area with spotty wi-fi connectivity and high

poverty. Our distinctive native related issues are often poorly addressed or even understood by state government education authorities. I will submit details in a more complete testimony later.

Many of our families initially lacked the necessary technology for distance education. When we began bringing groups of students back to campus, our infrastructure, already insufficient for our expanding enrollment, was not able to provide social distancing without making adjustments to the overall program management and delivery.

However, as a Native language medium school Nāwahī has relied on its cultural strengths to navigate through these challenging times. Those unique strengths come from our Native identity and our shared purpose rooted in the revitalization of our Native language. Researchers of dual language education describe cognitive advantages of students such as ours. Nāwahī is proud of our student outcomes including high school graduation and college attendance rates. Our statistics in those areas exceed state public school averages.

Nāwahī was quicker to respond to the COVID-19 crisis than the State Department of Education. We used our own aloha to provide COVID-19 focused parent learning, student learning, physical and mental health services, technological assistance and food distribution. We have since implemented a safe and timely return to on-campus learning for vulnerable populations of students, including the youngest students, special education students, students without internet access and other students with academic challenges.

Nāwahī faces distinct challenges as a Native language school delivering distance learning and hybrid scheduling. Many parents speak Hawai‘i Creole English rather than Hawaiian. Their homes cannot provide their children with the Hawaiian language medium environment that exists on campus. This language gap impacts the maintenance and further development of our students’ Hawaiian language proficiency. It also affects their

access to academics through Hawaiian, and mastery of Standard English as taught formally at Nāwahī.

Nāwahī continues to struggle with a lack of learning materials through Hawaiian. Distance learning has increased an already difficult situation. Nāwahī teachers must create all on-line lessons on their own. On-line lessons are widely available through English for English medium schools.

Lower funding of charter schools compared to standard public schools in our state reduces Nāwahī's ability to address challenges in general. Nāwahī's language nest preschool component provided through the non-profit 'Aha Pūnana Leo has been especially impacted by COVID-19. Its private school delivery is extremely vulnerable to economic challenges.

COVID-19 has negatively impacted our already existing teacher and staff shortage. Hawai'i faces a 4.9% shortage of certified teachers compared to the national average of 2.6%. For Hawaiian language medium schools, the shortage of certified teachers is 45%. A major contributor to this problem is the lack of scholarship support addressing the distinctive features necessary to develop certified Native language medium teachers.

Mahalo again Senators for this opportunity to testify today. I will be happy to answer any questions that you might have.

