

Date of Hearing: January 24, 2008

Committee: House Human
Services & Housing

Department: Education

Person Testifying: Patricia Hamamoto, Superintendent

Title: H.B. 2051, Relating to Education for Foster Children

Purpose: To establish rules for school placement and transportation for foster children.

Department's Position: The Department of Education (Department) supports the intent of this bill to allow foster children to remain in their "school of origin" until the end of the school year. This provision should be applied equitably to high school students.

Under the best circumstances, the decision to remain at the "school of origin" should be a collective agreement among those individuals who are vested in meeting the educational needs of the child. This would include, but not be limited to, social worker, teacher(s), administrator, parent(s) or guardian, and as appropriate the child. It should also be acknowledged that the decision should be made on a case-by-case basis with consideration of the educational, social, emotional, and physical needs of the child.

With respect to the provision of transportation for the foster child, the Department would recommend that young children, under the age of 10, not be subjected to rides longer than

30 minutes, from home to school. Additionally, special requests for transportation beyond the regular morning and afternoon pick-ups are more costly and challenging to arrange, as it is not feasible to have a separate school bus for a single child or a few children.

The Department remains committed to working with other state agencies—the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Family Court—to ensure that the needs of foster children are appropriately addressed.

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF
HB2051 - RELATING TO EDUCATION OF FOSTER CHILDREN

January 24, 2008

The Legal Aid Society of Hawaii hereby provides testimony to the House Committee on Human Services and Housing on HB2051 – Relating to Education of Foster Children, in strong support of the bill.

The Legal Aid Society of Hawaii is the largest non-profit provider for direct civil legal services in the State. Further, since 1996, we have assisted over 2,000 children as guardian ad litem on Oahu, Maui, Hawai'i, Moloka'i and Lāna'i, a significant number of whom have aged out in foster custody.

Based on our experience, we believe that this bill is important for ensuring foster children receive a meaningful education. When foster children are removed from their homes, they frequently lose all stability in their life. They are removed from the adults that they know and trust and taken out of their community. This Bill reduces that instability in a crucial area for future success: education.

This bill will provide increased stability for foster children by maintaining them in their schools. Education is a building process. Teachers build on concepts taught throughout the year and those building blocks are different from classroom to classroom. When a child changes schools, they spend a period being the new kid and adjusting to the new rules and new peers. Then, they must try and catch on to the teacher's style and pick up any new concepts that other children already learned in the new classroom. Studies show that this process causes children to fall approximately four to six (4-6) months behind every time they change schools. U.S. Dept of Education, *Report to the President and Congress On the Implementation of the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* at 15 (2006). For foster children who sometimes change placement two or more times in a year, they spend all their time being the new kid and none actually learning.

Further, instability of school placement hurts the schools. Frequent turnover in student body makes it difficult for teachers to follow a curriculum and harder for administrators to set high standards as they are always dealing with an influx of new students.

Enacting this bill will reduce stress to foster children from moves, keep them from being cut-off from their community, and provide a modicum of stability in an otherwise unstable life.

For these reasons, we support HB2051. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Nalani Fujimori
Deputy Director



HAWAII FAMILY SUPPORT INSTITUTE

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January 24, 2008

Representative Maile Shimabukuro, Chair
Members of the House Human Services Committee
State Capitol, Room 406
Honolulu, Hi 96813

Re: HB 2051 Re: Foster Children School Placement and Transportation

Dear Representative Shimabukuro:

The Hawaii Family Support Institute is testifying in support of HB 2051, which would ensure that foster children have stability in their school placement by allowing them to remain in the same school, in the event their home placement changes to another district and providing for transportation from the new home back to school. It also guarantees that the child, when residing out of the school district, will continue to receive comparable services to those living in the district, including tutoring, counseling, and extracurricular activities.

The purpose of the Hawaii Family Support Institute is to promote best practice in prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. The bill outlines all of the good reasons for this measure. These changes should improve the stability of the child's life overall, and enhance the child's likelihood of school success.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify on this positive policy measure.

Sincerely,

Linda Coble, Board member
Hawaii Family Support Institute

To: Chair Representative Maile S. L. Shimabukuro, Vice-Chair Representative Karl Rhoads, and all of the members of the committee on Human Services and Housing.

From: Cynthia White, Project Director, Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition.

Re: Bill HB 2051 Relating to Education for Foster Children

Date: January 24, 2008 at 8:30 am in conference room 329. Three (3) copies including an original required.

I support bill HB 2051 with my whole heart and soul. This bill creates stability of school placement and includes transportation services for foster children and youth. I believe this bill will have a major positive impact on foster children.

Here are a few common stories repeated again and again in the lives of foster youth.

Youth in therapeutic foster care seem most vulnerable. A high school senior youth who moved into a therapeutic group home attended a meeting at her new school in late September 2007, which was the third school she had been in during the year of 2007. She learned they considered her a sophomore because the school had not received nor requested records from her other schools that could verify her credits. Their reason for not having these records was that they were too busy. The teachers and counselors expressed concern about her poor attendance and academic performance. She wanted to be a cheerleader and was told that if she improved, she could try out for the team. She made it and competed with her team in November. Two weeks before her eighteenth birthday, she was discharged from DHS and placed with DOH without knowing why; that meant she lost all higher education benefits through DHS. She planned to go live with her biological mother after graduation. Then, her mother suddenly died in late November. Devastated, she began missing school and her academic performance quickly declined. Two days before Christmas Eve, she was given one day to move out of the therapeutic home. They evicted her because she was not doing well in school. She was told to go to the homeless shelter. Fortunately, she called her sister, a single parent young mother on welfare, who invited her to live in her home. She had to change schools again and drop out of cheerleading.

A high school senior in a wheel chair was moved from a long term placement against his wishes and placed in a therapeutic group home that was not handicap accessible. He had to crawl up the stairs. He turned eighteen a few months before his graduation. Two months from graduation, the staff of the home confiscated all of his belongings, locking them away because he had not done his laundry promptly. Infuriated, the youth discharged himself, dropped out of school, and moved to Hana where he had family.

A brother and a sister were attending the same high school. They were moved to a different home out of that school's district. They asked if they could continue at the same school. The sister was allowed to continue because she made good grades. The brother was denied because he had a low academic record. That was the schools decision.

A young man was one month away from graduating. He had been at this foster home and school for nearly three years, had excellent grades, and close friendships. In the last month, he had to move to a different foster home and change schools. After this move, he rebelled and was arrested for stealing. He ended up in the detention home and did not graduate, finishing high school later with a GED while on probation.

These are common stories. Youth repeatedly talk about having been in nine schools, twelve schools, five schools in two years, and so on. It is easy to see why foster youth drop out, fail, and rebel. So much is taken from them. This bill would not allow schools to discriminate against foster youth. It would protect

youth with therapeutic needs, keeping their support systems intact so there are more people to advocate for their. It would encourage foster home stability, which is one of the main areas needing improvement. Most importantly, HB 2051 would dramatically improve the academic performance and quality of life for foster youth. It would be an act of mercy to let them keep their schools, giving them something consistent to hold on to that will shape the course of their futures in a positive way. I implore you to vote in favor of HB 2051.

Mahalo,
Cynthia White, M.A.Ed.

To: Chair Representative Maile S. L. Shimabukuro, Vice-Chair Representative Karl Rhoads, and all of the members of the committee on Human Services and Housing.

From: Blake Lanoza, 20, Youth Outreach Coordinator and President of the Board, Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition

Re: Bill HB 2051 relating to education for foster youth foster youth being heard by the Human Services & Housing on January 24, 2008 at 8:30 am in House conference room 329; 3 copies plus one original required.

Aloha my name is Blake Lanoza and I am a former foster youth. I grew up with a drug-addicted mother who couldn't hold on to a house or a job. My mother was constantly getting evicted from the apartments and houses that we rented out, so I always had to switch school. When I went to foster care, it was the same thing because I was never in the same school for more than a year. I got used to this lifestyle, but being in the state's custody was supposed to bring stability to my life. I was losing the connections that I had. I had to work hard to make it in school. I am not only talking about friends, but teachers, counselors, and anyone else in my support system.

When I was in my second year of high school, I was taken out of my high school and sent to another school because of my placement. I was taken from the people that I had known for five whole years. Friends, counselors, and teachers were taken out of my life and they were replaced with people that I didn't know and I didn't want to know. I was traumatized because the family I was with didn't care about me and I was separated from my support system. I think that Bill HB 2051 would help foster youth to keep and preserve their permanent connections and come out of care with friends that they can talk to and lean on like everyone else does.

I urge you to help and pass this Bill, HB 2051, because I believe that it can ensure the survival of lifelong relationships for the people that need it most, the ones without families.

Thank You,

Blake Lanoza

TO: Committee on Human Services & Housing
Representative Maile Shimabukuro, Chair
Representative Karl Rhoads, Vice Chair

FROM: Hawaii Foster Parent Association
Judith Wilhoite, Executive Director

RE: HB 2051, Relating to Education for Foster Children

HEARING: Thursday, January 24, 2008
8:30 a.m.
Conference Room 329

The Hawaii Foster Parent Association strongly supports bill HB 2051.

Often times when children and youth who are brought into foster care they must give up everything they hold dear in life including family, friends, home, pets, clothing, neighborhood, church, toys, food, as well as their school. We believe that, in most cases, *it would be extremely beneficial* for children and youth to be able to remain in their school of origin, as it would allow the child to maintain some degree of normalcy in his or her life while helping them stay on track educationally.

We believe that a very important factor for foster children to achieve success in the future is for them to obtain a quality education to the highest degree possible. This bill gives the child a better chance to realize that goal.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of this bill.

Lisa Ann M. Letoto-Ohata
1485 Haku Street, Honolulu, HI 96819
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January 23, 2008

Representative Maile Shimabukuro
Chair, House of Representatives, Committee on Human Services and Housing
Hawaii State Capitol, Room 406
Honolulu, HI 96813

Dear Representative Shimabukuro,

I am writing in support of HB 2051. As a current DHS foster parent I have personally experienced these issues regarding the stability of school placement.

I have transported my foster children to and from school in Honolulu to Kapolei and Ewa while they were in my care. I had felt at that time that the change in homes was enough for a child to deal with, and until the time was right, school stability and contacts were important to their transition.

As a foster parent who believes in doing everything I can in the best interest of the child, I am willing to do this on my own, however, it does become difficult at times. I believe that more foster parents would be supportive of maintaining school placement, activities, and services if they were offered help with transportation services, worked with knowledgeable school and ancillary staff, and received recognition of their role as a foster parent by school and other personnel.

I applaud our leaders in taking the steps that are needed to continue helping our foster children. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Lisa Ann M. Letoto-Ohata

cc: Senator Norman Sakamoto, Senate District 15
Representative Lynn Finnegan, House District 32

January 23, 2008

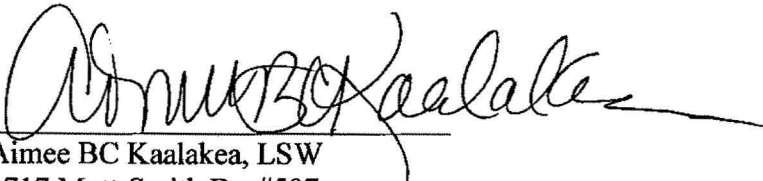
Representative Maile S. L. Shimabukuro, Chair
Representative Karl Rhoads, Vice Chair
Committee on Human Services and Housing
Aimee BC Kaalakea, LSW
Thursday, January 24, 2008

Written testimony in support of HB2051 Relating to Education for Foster Children

I am a Licensed Social Worker in Hawaii, and have worked both for the Department of Human Services, Child Welfare Services, and for private agencies. Over the past 10 years I have worked with foster children, foster families, and biological families in a variety of different settings. I strongly support HB2051, Relating to Education for Foster Children, which would establish rules for school placement and transportation for foster children.

The passage of this bill would allow foster children to remain in the same school despite the being moved to a foster or group home in a different school district. Having worked directly with foster children and teenagers, I have seen firsthand the detrimental effects that happen with repeated environmental change. Foster children undergo many transitions, changing schools should not have to be one of them. As a former Child Welfare Services Permanency Social Worker I have had to re-register children at different schools, sometimes several times a year. Although removing a child from a harmful family means keeping them safe from abuse and neglect, the child is still removed from a familiar home environment. This is a traumatic event for that child. Then, to have to attend a different school, means that they are taken away from their friends, teachers, and community, impounding the trauma they have already experienced. In addition, foster children often have special needs which are almost impossible to accurately identify and accommodate when the child's school continuously changes. There was a young teen in particular who we felt needed Special Educational accommodations and therapeutic intervention, but because her school changed each time her placement changed, it took much longer to get her the appropriate treatment and intervention she required. Each new school we enrolled her in required another observation period. If her home school had been permitted to maintain her enrollment, she would have got the help she needed much sooner, and large teams of professionals (DOE staff, DHS staff, GAL, private providers, etc.) would have been able to spend their time helping other children also.

The passage of this bill would only serve to give foster children an opportunity to reduce the trauma they experience. In consideration of the welfare and education of foster children, I strongly urge the committee to pass HB2051. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.



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