

LATE TESTIMONY

January 30, 2008 at 1:15pm

Testimony to the
Senate Committee on Education
Conference Room 225

**SB 2112 MAKING AN APPROPRIATION TO HIRE TEACHERS THROUGH THE
TEACH FOR AMERICA PROGRAM**

Dear Chair Sakamoto, Vice-Chair Tokuda, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Jill Murakami Baldemor, Executive Director of Teach For America • Hawaii. I appreciate the introduction of Senate Bill 2112 and testify in support of this Bill.

Teach For America is a corps of outstanding recent college graduates of all academic majors who commit two years to teach in underserved urban and rural schools and become lifelong advocates working for systemic educational reform from all sectors. Our mission is to build the movement to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting our most promising future leaders in the effort. Nationally, Teach For America has a corps of approximately 5,000 teachers currently teaching in 26 regions across the country. Additionally, we have approximately 12,000 alumni working toward educational reform from all sectors of the community.

Here in Hawaii, we are in our second year of our program. We currently have 97 teachers working relentlessly in 22 schools, primarily in the Leeward and Central districts of Oahu. We estimate that they are impacting the lives of approximately 8,300 PreK-12 students. All of our teachers are placed in shortage or "hard-to-fill" teacher positions.

In addition to the hard work that our teachers (and all teachers) do in their classes everyday, the majority of our teachers have initiated and/or actively participate in after school and extra-curricular activities. Many have started "Saturday school" classes to assist with remediation and provide additional one-on-one instructional time with students. Some have already taken on leadership positions within their schools, such as Grade Level Chair.

We understand the principals are pleased with our teachers. Dr. Gail Awakuni, principal of Campbell High School and National Principal of the Year (2005), presently has eight Teach For America teachers at Campbell High School. She endorses our program and teachers, and her letter of recommendation is attached for your review and reference.

The issue of "Highly Qualified" teachers (as defined under NCLB) was recently in our press. 52 of our teachers have already passed their Praxis content area exams and meet the Federal definition of "Highly Qualified" under NCLB. We have added the Praxis exams to our entry requirements and therefore expect most of our incoming teachers in our 2008 class to be Highly Qualified upon the start of the school year.

As our second year teachers "graduate" from our program, we hope to retain many of our teachers in our community and grow our alumni base and leadership pipeline. Already, we have Teach For America alumni working toward educational change in Hawaii. Stephen Schatz, a 1994 Teach For America alumnus, is presently the principal of Pohakea Elementary in Ewa Beach. Patricia Halagao, a 1992 Teach For America alumna, is a Professor in the Education Department at the University of Hawaii. These alums came to Hawaii before we even had a Teach For America • Hawaii site. Now, with a Hawaii region established, it is exciting to imagine the possibilities as our alumni base grows. In Washington D.C., for instance, where Teach For America has had a presence for a number of years, the Schools Chancellor and Deputy Chancellor are Teach For America alumnae, in addition to 20 principals and a member of the D.C. State Board of Education. While some may ask what about those alums that will leave Hawaii after their commitment, those alums that do leave will take with them a deep understanding and appreciation of Hawaii to share with their colleagues wherever they go and in whatever leadership path they take.

We presently have a staff of six employees at our Teach For America • Hawaii office. Four of our staff work on our "program" team to provide direct training, professional development, and on-going support and assistance to our 97 corps members (teachers). Our office manager provides critical support to our entire team, with a focus on managing our operations including, technology, budget, communications, and special projects. In the Executive Director role I oversee our programmatic efforts, work with our Board of Advisors to build our financial support base, and work with our many partners, including the Department of Education, Hawaii State Teachers Association, University of Hawaii, Chaminade University, and the local business community among others. All six of us on staff are former Teach For America corps members.

My Teach For America experience was as a second grade teacher in Washington Heights, New York City. Most of my children did not know the letters of the alphabet when I met them on my first day as a teacher. Many left reading at or near grade level. While certainly there were veteran teachers of higher quality than me, I worked relentlessly and passionately for my students and do believe I had an impact on them. I know that they had a profound impact upon me. While I left teaching and took a 10 year path into the legal profession, I returned to Teach For America this year to help establish this organization in Hawaii – my home – because I do believe the teachers our program can bring will help to make a difference in the education of our keiki and in our Hawaii community. I urge you to support and pass Senate Bill 2112, which will help us to bring Teach For America teachers to Hawaii.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.



STATE OF HAWAII
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
JAMES CAMPBELL HIGH SCHOOL
91-980 North Road
Ewa Beach, Hawaii 96706

Teach for America
Attn: Jill Baldemor
January 24, 2008

Dear Jill,

I am writing to express my gratitude for Teach for America. In this era of what appears to be a waning interest in education, it is gratifying to know that there are those "out there" who still value education and want to contribute. Our young people benefit in many ways from having caring, committed teachers.

The teachers who have come to us bring with them a new and different viewpoint which they share with the students. Their wealth of experience and knowledge adds a new perspective to the lives of the people they touch. For example, some have experienced being in schools with programs such as the International Baccalaureate Program and that experience helped us to gain support among faculty, students and parents for the program here.

In addition, Teach for America participants have a chance to find out more about the world they live in. Coming, as they do, from varied backgrounds, they must adjust to a new environment, and many of them have done it well. What they experience as people new to various cultures, they are able to pass on to the students, and they are better able to understand how the teens feel when adjusting to new subjects and situations.

The Teach for America teachers are friendly, curious, hard-working people who seem to enjoy working with our students and working with their colleagues to help our school become better and better each year. They care for the students and their peers and willingly participate in extra-curricular activities which enhance the students' lives.

Because many of the teachers are young, they have a fresh outlook and a plethora of ideas to add to the melting pot which makes up our school, and often share their opinions and ideas during our staff development sessions. They also have a great deal of energy which enables them to keep pace with the sometimes rowdy teens who always seem to be in motion.

I have found the Teach for America teachers to be very receptive to new ideas and suggestions and they are able to use constructive criticism to their advantage by taking the opportunity to reflect on their own practices and make adjustments as necessary. They share their struggles, doubts, successes, failures, hopes, and dreams with their colleagues and in doing this, become part of the school's culture.

In a school as large as ours, it is easy to get lost, but these teachers have made an effort to reach out and find others who will come to their aid, and, working with them, help them to overcome obstacles and solve problems in ways that benefit and teach teachers and students alike.

Having new teachers come to us from the mainland has added vitality to our faculty and has provided what I hope is an interesting and informative experience for all of us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gail Awakuni".

Gail Awakuni, PhD., Principal