

February 3, 2010 at 1:15pm
Oral Testimony
to the Senate Committee on Education

SB 2435 TEACH FOR AMERICA; DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION;
 APPROPRIATION

Chairman Sakamoto, Vice-Chair Kidani, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to testify.

You may have heard that one of our teachers, Mike Anderson, passed away over the weekend. He was one of our charter corps members who came to Hawai'i in 2006, and has stayed in Waianae to continue teaching despite previous plans to go to law school because, as he once said to me, "there is still work to be done in Waianae." Mike created the first Mock trial team at Waianae High School and led the team to a victorious win over Punahou School (my alma mater) their first year. In the words of one of Mike's students: "Mock Trial showed us that we weren't inferior to anyone". Mike started the first AP calculus class at Waianae High because he believed that all students – even students in Waianae - "can". Mike cared greatly about his students as well as the Waianae community. Last year he was elected to serve on the Waianae Neighborhood Board.

Mike was an exceptional individual who will be missed dearly by our TFA 'ohana and the Waianae community. But his legacy continues. Because, we have 120 teachers, like Mike, who are working passionately and relentlessly to increase student outcomes in our most underserved communities and ensure they have every opportunity available to them.

Some say that our teachers don't stay, and our teachers are mainland teachers who don't care about our community. Mike came to Hawai'i from Maryland. Mike stayed. And Mike cared. Last night and this morning, I had the privilege of spending time with Mike's family, and I am confident that they will return to Maryland as ambassadors of our state and our students. Our teachers who leave, do the same.

Ethan Lin, for example, taught Math for two years at James Campbell High School in Ewa Beach. A parent of one of his students wrote to Dr. Awakuni and Superintendent Hamamoto:

I would like to take a moment and thank you for providing great leadership and standards for your teachers to follow. Your support is very evident in the care and concern Mr. Lin has given my son.

Mr. Lin always maintained high standards for Scott and would not settle for less. This confidence from Mr. Lin has been a great source of help for Scott to press

forward and get his work completed. Mr. Lin has provided me with many after many hour e-mails to report progress or problems. His efforts have provided a joint school/parent partnership with my son and for that, I am grateful! I do attribute Scott graduating directly to the staff at your school.

Mr. Lin is the type of teacher that Scott will remember for the rest of his life and you cannot place a price tag on that. Mr. Lin has set the standard for our household and brings great credit to the James Campbell High School team. Mr. Lin is a model teacher who is motivated, enthusiastic, cares and did provide strong support and standards for my son Scott.

Though Ethan did leave after his two year commitment, like Mike, he made a difference on the lives of kids during the time that he was here in Hawai'i. Ethan is now a Financial Analyst for the Office of the State Superintendent of Education of the District of Columbia, on a team of two in charge of managing almost \$100 million dollars worth of grants designated to serving children with disabilities. Not bad for a 25 year old. When he, or one of our other teachers goes on to be President of the United States one day, it will be wonderful to have another ambassador for the State of Hawai'i in DC.

In addition to the Mike's and Ethan's that make their way to Hawai'i as part of the Teach For America program, we also have 13 Kama'āina corps members currently in our corps, who came back to Hawai'i through Teach For America to give back to their community. Among them is Meilan Akaka, a Native Hawaiian and graduate of Punahou School, who is now a special educator at Campbell High School. When asked why she Teach For America, she explained:

Understanding the great privilege of the quality education I received at Punahou School makes me ask, "why shouldn't all students in Hawai'i get the best education possible?" I am inspired to create a space in my classroom that provides my students with the best education possible to promote and facilitate their academic growth. I work hard for my students to realize that their efforts can lead to academic gains. I desire to foster in them a sense of confidence in math and in themselves.

This year in Teach For America, we have received 50,000 applications for a class of about 4500 next year. The quality of applications is unsurpassed and, what is exciting for us here in Hawai'i, is that so far, just halfway through our admissions cycle, we already have 11 Kama'āina confirmed to join Teach For America Hawai'i next year and we are on track to an incoming corps that is comprised of about 25% of our Kama'āina leaders choosing to return home to be leaders in our community.

Our teachers work passionately and relentlessly and give everything they have to ensuring they are helping to move the needle on student outcomes here in Hawai'i. And we are proud of the success we are seeing. In the words of Dr. Awakuni:

“Being that we have a large enrollment of 2700 it is a miracle that our students have achieved AYP on the Hawai'i State Test, administer the most Advanced Placement tests, and earn one of the highest amounts of scholarships. Recently, I have been informed that our special education students collectively have the highest test cores in the Department of Education on the Hawai'i State Test . . . All of this is possible because of the highly effective teachers at our school and the TFA teachers have been instrumental in our transformation – in academic and social literacy. They have contributed positively in changing our school culture to one of high achievement, high expectations and standards, and high moral responsibility.”

Principals are not the only ones who have recognized our success. Last year we raised over \$1M of private funding from community supporters who believe in our program and our track record of success. This is funding from the community that is now going to kids and education.

My vision is to double the number of Teach For America teachers here in Hawai'i. Senate Bill 2435 will help us to reach this goal much sooner. While I know that this is an incredibly challenging economy, one silver lining of this recession is the outpouring of interest and talent of people we are seeing who want to give back to students and education. State funding will enable us to capitalize on this talent pool, use this as a lever to secure private matching funds, and as a community really continue to prioritize education. To the extent it is possible for the funds to be additional funding appropriated to the Department, we agree this would be preferable.

I want to end by making clear that I am not here to say that our teachers are the *only* great teachers, as there are many, many great educators in our Hawai'i public schools today, trained by many great institutions. But, we provide an alternative route into education for many incredible and highly talented individuals, like Mike, Ethan, and Meilan, who would not otherwise have pursued education, and who are now making a positive difference on the lives of our keiki, and I believe our kids and our community are the better for them.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify.