

February 7, 2011

Aloha Chair Tokuda, Vice Chair Kidani and members of the Senate Committee on Education,

Today I would like to speak to the issue of bullying in our public schools and my strong support for SB 919. In is time that the Hawaii State Legislature takes a public and strong action to address bullying of any and all public school students.

In speaking to the issue of bullying, I encourage the members of the education committee to review a story reported by KITV news regarding a school bullying complaint that was filed with the Federal Department of Education due to inaction on the part of the Hawaii Department of Education (<http://www.kitv.com/news/25312007/detail.html>). The report shared the story of a Waianae High School student who was – and perhaps still is – being bullied because of her race. After the school and the district were non-responsive, the parents of the student filed a complaint with the federal government. A review of the complaint led to an agreement with the Hawaii DOE in which the school’s administration and staff will begin sexual and racial harassment training in January. Hawai’i School Superintendent Kathy Matayoshi reportedly said, “The training and notice are intended to make sure the department of education policy is no sexual harassment, no racial harassment. It is not acceptable and we are taking this seriously.”

I have three concerns about the response to this bullying incident. First, it is unacceptable that the local and state school officials took no action and that the student and her family had to bring their complaint to the federal government before something was done.

Second, the resolution in this case seems to assume that bulling is only taking place at this particular school. We know that bullying and the need for training is a statewide issue.

Last, the news report and the resolution seem to suggest that sexual and racial harassment are wrong but other forms of harassment are either acceptable or simply the DOE does not plan to address them. In light of the many recent suicides as a result of students being bullied due to their perceived or actual sexual orientation, I would encourage you to take a public, productive and proactive stance to support and encourage multiple anti-bullying efforts in all of our public schools that address the multiple forms of bullying that take place.

In my role mentoring student teachers and current in-service teachers at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, I spend several days a week in public middle and high schools around the state. During my school visits I frequently hear students call each other “fags” when they are displeased with their friends action or describing an event they do not like as “so gay”. For example, when a tenth grade biology student was asked to move his seat during class, he expressed his frustration by commenting to the teacher “that’s so gay”.

The teacher, who has several years teaching experience, said nothing. When these phrases are ignored by authority figures and are allowed to become part of our everyday language, negative stereotypes and perceptions of the target group are reinforced. Students internalize this hurtful and harmful language, and these incidents foster an environment that tolerates more direct bullying.

As an educator, I understand that we cannot control the actions of all people all of the time but we can educate our students, teachers and administrators on the impact of our actions and our non-actions. One of our primary goals for public education must be to ensure that all students feel safe and valued in their schools. The problem of bullying is invasive in our schools and must be addressed.

Sincerely,

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February 4, 2011

Testimony in Support of S.B. 919, The Safe Schools Act

I am a private citizen in strong support of SB 919 for Safe Schools. As one of only six states without anti-bullying laws, I would be horrified if a case like that of Megan Meier were to occur here in Hawai'i without strong possibility of prosecution. In short, in *United States vs. Drew* (2008) Mrs. Drew impersonated a young man and bullied 13-year old Miss Meier on MySpace. Miss Meier committed suicide, but Mrs. Drew was acquitted of all charges related to impersonation and violation of MySpace terms of agreement.

I was raised in Hawaii and attended public schools as well as the University of Hawaii for my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I feel that along with clear definitions and the need for monitoring bullying and cyberbullying cases, more positive guidance and citizenship efforts need to be made in the schools so that we empower the children to be more understanding of differences (S.B. 919 section 4 p.7 lines 4-10) in actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, religion, physical appearance and characteristic, or socioeconomic status; or a student's association with a person or group with one or more of these actual or perceived characteristics. We need to prevent bullying and cyberbullying from happening, not just report the numbers when it does occur. Education is key.

In working with teachers, many of whom are personal friends, I believe that our Hawaii DOE school faculty are ready and very willing to learn the skills and techniques to help nurture a more understanding school culture and environment against bullying. The clear definitions and expectations laid out in S.B. 919 will help towards building that environment so that our keiki understand the negative behaviors that are not tolerated.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thanh Truc T. Nguyen', written in a cursive style.

Thanh Truc T. Nguyen