



S E A C
Special Education Advisory Council
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November 21, 2024

**Special Education
Advisory Council**

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Mr. Bill Arakaki, Chair
Student Achievement Committee
Board of Education
P. O. Box 2360
Honolulu, HI 96804

RE: Agenda Item III. Presentation on Strategic Plan Desired Outcome
1.2.1. All students desire to attend school regularly

Dear Chair Arakaki and members of the Committee,

The Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) fully supports the Department and the Board in your efforts to increase regular student attendance as a proven strategy to boost academic performance and graduation rates. Improving regular attendance is one of SEAC's priorities for the school year given that students with disabilities have consistently experienced attendance rates that are 10 percentage points behind that for all students and 20 percentage points lower than students with low needs (i.e. without disabilities, English Learner status or economic disadvantage). We believe these missed days of instruction contribute significantly to the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

In the spirit of working together to find solutions to complex issues, SEAC offers the following comments for your consideration regarding a number of root causes of chronic absenteeism in students with disabilities that were discussed at our November 8th SEAC meeting:

Root cause: Out of School-Suspensions

Students with disabilities are suspended at a rate twice that of students without disabilities. The National Association of School Psychologists in their 2022 position statement on safe schools stressed that "overly punitive discipline, like suspensions and expulsions, should only be utilized as an absolute last resort as those measures only contribute to opportunity and achievement gaps and make schools less safe."

Potential solution: Professional development for all school personnel in positive behavioral supports and de-escalation strategies.



Root cause: Bullying and Cyberbullying

Students with disabilities are targeted by bullies at 2-3 times the rate of other students with the exception of transgender youth. In addition, the documented rates of bullying are dramatically less than self-reports such as those captured by the Hawaii Youth Risk Behavior Survey, indicating that many instances of bullying may be unaddressed and lead to absences related to students feeling unsafe at school.

Potential solutions: Bullying prevention programs; outside agency partners to help provide resources and out-of-the-box problem solving.

Root cause: Ongoing Staffing Shortages

Staffing shortages among special education teachers, related services personnel and educational assistants lead to inconsistent instruction and IEP supports. Students with complex needs may be most impacted by staff turnover and altered routines which can result in less motivation to attend school, and in some instances, school refusal.

Potential solutions: Higher pay for educational assistants; mentoring of special education teachers.


Root cause: Lack of transportation

Only a fraction of students with disabilities have guaranteed transportation as a related service in their IEPs. Most students receiving special education services have the same limited options as their non-disabled peers. One SEAC member reported students in his district sometimes having to take 3 different buses to get to school. For many students in rural areas, transportation is an all or nothing proposition--either they are at the bus stop early enough or they miss out on a day of instruction.

Potential solutions: Community engagement to develop more options for transportation--both formal and informal; online instructional options that count toward attendance for students who have no transportation get to school.

Other root causes offered by SEAC's membership included inadequate mental health supports for students with anxiety and depression, and a lack of belonging due to placement outside the general education classroom. SEAC is eager to partner with the Department and the Board to find solutions to these long-standing factors leading to absenteeism. Please let us know how we may be of assistance.

Respectfully,


Martha Guinan
Chair