

**SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL**

**August 29, 2025**

**Minutes**

**PRESENT:** Dominique Anders, Kathie Awaya, Will Carlson, Annette Cooper, Nancy Gorman, Martha Guinan, Natalie Haggerty, Stacy Haitsuka, Mai Hall, Melissa Johnson, Amanda Kaahanui (staff), Helen “Kupu” Kaniho (liaison to the Superintendent), Dale Matsuura, Jessica McCullum, Trish Moniz, Wendy Nakasone-Kalani, Cherine Pai, , Toby Portner, Kiele Pennington, , Kauai Rezentes, Susan Rocco (staff), Rosie Rowe, Herbert Taitingfong, Steven Vannatta, Lisa Vegas, Jasmine Williams, Susan Wood

**EXCUSED:** Mark Disher, Cheryl Matthews,

**ABSENT:** Virginia Beringer, Tina King, Christopher Pelayo, Scott Shimabukuro

**GUESTS:** Grace Akau, Michelle Arakawa, Aleena Ashton, Willie Cadena, Laurie Chang, Verna Chinen, Patty Dong, Allison Eby, Linda Elento, Kinau Gardner, Jamia Green, Elizabeth Higashi, Jackie Jackson, Sandy Jessmon, Lori Morimoto, Drew Saranillio, Brikena White, Tina Williams, Jacy Yamamoto

**Welcome/Oli**

Helen “Kupu” Kaniho began the meeting by stressing the importance of anchoring to the Department’s and SEAC’s values of Nā Hopena A'o which is a strengthened sense of belonging, responsibility, excellence, aloha, total well-being and Hawai’i. She expressed her belief that SEAC is essential for our collective work, and aside from being part of policy, statute, regulation, it is really the best thing to do to engage and connect. Kupu then invited her daughter Pakalana and the students from Ke Kula Kaiapuni ‘o Kahuku Academy to open the meeting with an oli.

**Introductions and Expressions of “Why I Am Here Today at SEAC”**

Amanda Kaahanui asked members and guests attending online and in person to introduce themselves, say what area or group they are representing, and provide one or two words describing “why I am here today at SEAC.” Amanda will use these words to create a Word Cloud to commemorate the collective commitment to coalesce around issues and do the work together. Chair Martha Guinan thanked everyone for their presence and words and read a statement that members of the public may present comment or testimony during Council meetings on each agenda item prior to any deliberation by the Council. Members or the public are also welcome to provide verbal testimony and comments on any subject related to the delivery of special education services during the agenda item Input from the Public.

## **Input from the Public**

There was no input offered.

## **A Refresher on Leading by Convening (LbC)**

Susan Wood and Steven Vannatta revisited Leading by Convening (LbC) as the framework SEAC uses to focus our work and make the most of time available. The presentation included two video messages by Art Souza, a former Complex Area Superintendent for West Hawaii and leading pioneer in the Community of Practice and Leading by Convening process. (See transcripts of his remarks in Attachment A).

Susan described Leading by Convening as a leadership approach to solving complex problems. It brings together diverse stakeholders and shifts from a traditional top down to more collaborative model.

### Tools and Techniques for Leading by Convening

These include authentic engagement, coalescing around issues, ensuring relevant participation, doing the work together and measuring our own progress. Each tool has its own rubric.

### Coalescing around issues

When special topic areas are suggested, SEAC should ask four simple questions:

- Who cares about this issue and why?
- What work is already underway?
- What shared work can inform and unite us?
- How can we deepen our connections?

Rosie Rowe suggested that these questions be included at the bottom of each agenda to remind us to use them.

### Authentic engagement

Engaging everyone has always been an intent of SEAC--to have a big tent. The Council really wants to be able to value and tap into the experience of members, and then when looking out at the community, invite other people--the experts or those with lived experience--into the conversations. That's how SEAC is going to learn and grow, and from that members then can develop recommendations to the Department.

### Doing the work together

As members and invited guests work together on issues, it is important to have a rubric for measuring progress. One thing the SEAC leadership team started doing last year was capturing who was invited to present and what was discussed which helps the team balance its work.

### Next steps

Susan will post the [PowerPoint](#) and a link to a [digital version of the Leading by Convening handbook](#) on the [seac-hawaii.org](http://seac-hawaii.org) website.

### **Apology for the Zoombombing Incident**

Martha apologized for the unfortunate intrusion into the meeting during the presentation on Leading by Convening. At least two individuals unknown to members blared loud music, screen-shared pornographic videos in their zoom windows and posted racist and hateful speech in the chat. These individuals were muted, removed from the meeting, and reported to Zoom. Their hateful chat messages were erased.

### **2025 Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Part B Determination**

Before launching into information regarding the 2025 determination, Brikena White and Kupu began the discussion by showing a short video celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act originally called the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act. They also thanked families and schools across the state for boosting the response rate to the Parent Involvement Survey (now at 12%) and the percentage of families that report that their school is engaging them in the education of their children (now at 88%). Brikena credited this progress to the work of SEAC members and others in creating a new and improved parent survey, making the survey available online in a number of languages, and working with schools to ensure that they provide parents with an opportunity to partake in the survey at the annual IEP meeting. Other recent system improvements noted were: more family-friendly dispute resolution forms, training of parents and school staff on conflict resolution and mediation with a commitment to train all school staff and parents in 25-26, a boot camp in June for school administrators on IDEA led by Deusdedi Merced, and plans to present a parent boot camp on IDEA on October 13, 2025. Steven Vannatta added that a one-hour Conflict Resolution Training was offered virtually to parents and the community with 52 individuals attending that session.

### State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR)

The SPP/APR is comprised of 18 indicators divided into compliance indicators and results indicators. SEAC members and other stakeholders are hosted every December by the Monitoring and Compliance Branch and the Exceptional Support Branch to discuss progress on those indicators and what needs to be done to move forward. The Department submits the SPP/APR for the previous school year in February and receives a determination letter from the Office of Special Education Programs based on Hawaii's compliance on certain key indicators in June. ([Link to the 2025 determination letter](#)).

### Results-driven Accountability Matrix

The [matrix](#) is composed of key elements of the 18 indicators, some which are compliance indicators and others which measure results. States who score 80% and above are considered *meeting the requirements* of IDEA, and those scoring from 60% - 79% fall into a

*needs assistance* category. That is where Hawaii scores have fallen in the last ten years and where Hawaii is currently sharing this determination with thirty-three other states and territories.

How the determination was scored

Brik explained that of the 20 points available for **results** in the matrix, Hawaii scored only 7, losing points for the following:

- 8<sup>th</sup> grade participation in the statewide assessment in reading and math,
- 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading and math,
- The percentage of children with disabilities who dropped out, and
- The percentage of disabilities who graduated with a regular high school diploma.

Fortunately, Hawaii has improved in both the dropout rate and graduation rate in data from SY 23-24 that will be submitted in February 2026.

Of the 22 points available for **compliance** in the matrix, Hawaii scored 19, losing points for the following:

- Indicator 12 – having an IEP developed and implemented by the 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday, and
- Indicator 13 – meeting all 8 components of secondary transition planning.

OSEP requirements connected to meeting assistance for two more years

There are three options that OSEP can take when a state is in needs of assistance for more than two consecutive years:

1. They advise states to receive technical assistance and work with appropriate entities and then report back in the SPP/APR document what the state did based on the technical assistance received.
2. They can direct a state to use their state level funds in the areas on which they are not making progress.
3. They can identify the state at risk on the IDEA grant that is submitted to the federal government.

Right now, the only thing OSEP is asking states to do is option one. The Monitoring and Compliance Branch and the Exceptional Support Branch, along with SEAC and district educational specialists try to figure out where federal funds are put and how to move forward.

Questions/comments of members and guests

Q. Does your training on conflict resolution include charter school staff and vice principals? A. Yes.

C. You held 10 workshops for school administrators who facilitate IEP meetings, handle conflicts and work with parents, and 91 administrators attended. That means a lot of schools were not represented. A. These 10 sessions were done between June and July, and we plan to track all who attend in this school year to make sure everyone has an opportunity to attend.

Q. Have you gotten to the point of providing joint training on conflict resolution? A. We will be working with the Director of the Mediation Center of the Pacific to determine how to

offer joint sessions depending on the skill set needed by those being trained. The goal is for everyone to hear the same message.

Q. Do you collect evaluative information at the trainings? A. Yes. We can analyze that information and get it to you.

Q. In your analysis of things, can you look back at least five years to see trends?

C. Indicator 17 has been gathering data on specific eligibility categories and not including kids with autism. A. The RDA matrix is not measuring how our students are performing in statewide assessments. It only looks at participation in the Smarter Balance Assessment, and the Grade 4 participation rate includes all students--not just the three categories in Indicator 17.

C. If you are looking more at performance, and this is the goal going forward, measuring the performance of fourth graders would potentially lower the overall matrix score to 56%, which would change the category to *needs intervention*. A. OSEP would be making the decision, but hypothetically that could happen.

Q. What are the tertile brackets for graduation, since you mentioned that Hawaii missed falling in the second tertile by one point? A. The document "[How the U.S. Department of Education Made Determinations](#)" is linked on our website and explains the brackets.

Q. Can you make an assumption of why kids with disabilities are not graduating with a diploma? A. When we meet for the SPP/APR in December we can dive deeper into the root cause of why this is happening.

Q. In the determination letter, OSEP indicates that it responds to data on all 18 indicators and specifies what, if any, actions Hawaii is required to take. Where is this information found? A. OSEP responds to each indicator that is not in compliance or fails to meet targets in comments in the Annual Performance Report. It is generally a generic statement to report in the next SPP/APR cycle on the technical assistance the state has received related to an indicator and what the state has done as a result.

Q. Are you looking at the entities that have been providing you technical assistance (TA) since 2014 to see whether they have been helpful? A. That's a good point. I did look for new TA for dispute resolution and brought in Jennifer Wolfsheimer and Cesar D'Agord who have made a huge difference for our state. Now we need to look at all of our TA providers, most of whom are funded by OSEP.

Q. In your analysis of technical assistance providers, can you look for trends, who provided the assistance, and what were the results, so that we can see where we need to change what we are doing to get better results? A. Yes, we can.

Q. I am concerned about the numbers for the dropout rate not reflecting the entire picture, because we have a lot of families that by 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade opt for homeschooling and their children are not of age yet to drop out. Can we get a more realistic look at that to include

those numbers, because while it is not an official dropout, it is still the system failing those kids. A. OSEP requires certain specifications and a formula for calculating dropout rates.

Q. For your conflict resolution training for principals, is that a choice, or is it a mandate from higher up and included in the principal performance evaluation? A. We were supported and directed by leadership to make the training happen, because it aligns with our 2023-29 Strategic Plan of engaging and working with our families.

C. I think there could be broader coverage within the conflict resolution curriculum starting with procedural safeguards, the PWN and the PLEP and ending full circle with due process.

A. Our Strategic Plan commitment is to train everyone on procedural safeguards and the PWN.

C. I think you are on a good track starting with administrators, and you have to include families, because it goes both ways. When I attend an IEP meeting, I leave my ego at the door, because I'm there to make sure my child benefits. I don't believe in due process, because it gets nobody anywhere, but everyone can benefit from a training that deescalates any situation in life—teachers, students and households, too.

### **HIDOE Priorities of the Exceptional Support Branch (ESB) and Monitoring and Compliance (MAC) Branch for SY 25-26**

Kupu and Brik identified the following four priorities for the Department in SY 25-26:

- Preschool – Least Restrictive Environment and outcomes
- High quality IEPs – programmed to meet individualized needs
- Dispute resolution – continue with the Dispute Strategic Plan (Year 5), IEP facilitation through an RFP, pro se guidance to families, mediation and conflict resolution trainings, and IDEA training for school administrators and parents.
- Secondary Transition - work-based learning, and continue training and support for Indicator 13

Brik reminded members that implementation science tells us it takes 3-5 years of implementation in order to see significant change. Kupu added that regulation and law is the floor. How we do business requires alignment with our values. Rosie Rowe stressed that we have a choice to make it high quality based on our culture, our state, our families, and who the professionals are in each school.

### **Review of SEAC Priorities for SY 24-25 and Priority Setting (“Buckets”) for SY 25-26**

Susan Wood and Steven Vannatta led the discussion with a quote from the National Association of State Directors of Special Education: “Convening is more than a meeting, and more than facilitation. It is the beginning of a relationship focused on practice change.”

Review of buckets for SY 24-25

In August 2024 members selected six priorities or buckets:

- Secondary transition
- Discipline
- Chronic Absenteeism
- Dropout Rates
- Staffing & Personnel Barriers
- Family Co-Training

Data was collected on what was discussed at subsequent SEAC meetings. Two of the priority areas—staffing & personnel barriers and family co-training--were not addressed at all. Susan and Steven encouraged members going forward to consider having only 4 buckets given that there are other responsibilities that SEAC routinely engages in, including the SPP/APR, legislation, due process report and membership issues, as well as special requests from the department to weigh in on a timely issue.

Discussions around new priority areas

Members and guests broke into small groups in person and online to come up with current priority suggestions.

Small group feedback regarding priority areas

Suggestions included:

- Having family co-training as a component of (a pitcher pouring into) all buckets chosen;
- Adopting the Departments' priority areas—preschool, secondary transition, dispute resolution and high quality IEPs;
- Collaborative training between parents and IEP teams aimed at pre-empting discipline referrals by being mindful of the sensory environment and what behavior is communicating;
- Addressing discipline challenges through school personnel who can intervene early to deescalate potential behavior outbursts and avoiding having school resource officers with police backgrounds who administer punitive discipline;
- Co-trainings with personnel from other state departments alongside educators to ensure shared accountability;
- Taking a more in-depth look at the transition section and including a focus on transitions from other grades—pre-K to kindergarten, elementary to middle, middle to high school.
- Providing more transition supports for medically fragile young adults exiting high school;

- Adopting a community school model where parents are invited to utilize tangible resources at the school to promote feelings of inclusion and safety and better communication of transition resources;
- Creating a better system of checks and balances to prevent persons in positions of power from abusing their position within a district;
- Adding staffing and personnel issues as another “pitcher” pouring into any priorities selected;
- Under staffing and personnel barriers, adding training for staff on how to utilize special education specialists at the state and district levels and how to use affirming language with students.

**Final selection of priorities**

Members reached preliminary consensus on the following buckets with family co-training and personnel and staffing barriers reflected in each bucket.

- Preschool
- High quality IEPs
- Dispute resolution
- Transition for all age groups

Members who have more suggestions are asked to contact Susan Rocco ([susan.rocco@doh.hawaii.gov](mailto:susan.rocco@doh.hawaii.gov)). The SEAC Leadership team will work with the four priority areas to develop an agenda for the September 19<sup>th</sup> meeting.

Attachment A – A Message from Art Souza  
Shared at the September 29, 2025 SEAC Meeting

*“Our Journey through Time”– Part 1*

*Aloha from North Hawai'i. I am Art Souza. I'm the Complex Area Superintendent for schools in West Hawai'i, a complex that encompasses 20 schools in markedly expansive and different rural geographical areas. At the heart of what we do in West Hawai'i in term of our efforts to improve schools in how we develop positive relationships. And I've always felt that there are 3 critical elements that must be in place for relationship to work: 1) It has to be grounded first and foremost in trust, in expressive and believable trust in one another. 2) The second piece that goes along with this is the notion of mutual respect. That's respecting perspective, respecting ideas, and respecting value. 3) And then most importantly, I believe it's the idea of capturing that notion of 100% responsibility. Responsibility for our own personal actions and for the actions of a collective community.*

*In Hawai'i, we value greatly the art of ho'oponopono. It's an ancient Hawaiian art of making right. And for the ancients, it was a vehicle for resolving conflict, for mediation and for problem solving. But it starts internally with the individual accepting responsibility for his or her part in the process. Accepting responsibility for the problems that may exist. And it's only by way of accepting that personal responsibility can you then begin to understand and accept responsibility for the larger whole and the larger community. And I think what grounds the work that we're doing in our schools and our communities is our belief that we are responsible, that we are accountable, and that we will work collaboratively in building relationships that foster understanding.*

*“Our Journey through Time” – Part 2*

*You know, it strikes me that the Disney animated movie that came out a number of years ago—**Lilo and Stitch**—serves as a really very appropriate metaphor for what a Community of Practice should be. It is a study in community building and building of community partnership in support of kids. Indeed, **Lilo and Stitch** really was a deeply intimate look at valuing perspective. The idea that people bring different values, different understandings, different ethical considerations, different moral thoughts to the table. All of these are to be valued and part of a larger body of decision making. And it was never in **Lilo and Stitch** about making a decision that something was right and something was wrong but rather creating a collaborative way of looking at the perspective.*

*The second part for me that I learned in watching **Lilo and Stitch** was the appreciation of this notion of cultural diversity. And perhaps in no state anywhere else in the nation is that more important than in the state of Hawai'i and especially in North Hawai'i. But it's that valuing of different ideas and different cultural and ancestral beliefs that make the Community of Practice work very well, I think, for us.*

*And of course, the central theme in **Lilo and Stitch** was the notion of valuing family. In Hawaii it's the notion of 'ohana. And the family is not from that simple dynamic of that household family but it's a family of larger proportion, it's a family of community. And it's extending this family belief and this interaction that we have at that family level that we have to be dealing with, if we're going to be changing schools and changing communities the way we want to.*

*So, I see in large measure that it's a 3 corner stool. A corner stool that involves culture, community and school. If we can build process and programs and supports with the interactive understanding of these 3 components, we can devise and build a system that's much different and much more effective in supporting kids and community.*