

**SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL
February 13, 2026 Meeting
Minutes**

PRESENT: Dominique Anders, Kathie Awaya, Will Carlson, Annette Cooper, Martha Guinan, Natalie Haggerty, Stacy Haitzuka, Melissa Johnson, Amanda Kaahanui (staff), Helen “Kupu” Kaniho (liaison to the Superintendent), Tina King, Cheryl Matthews, Jessica McCullum, Trish Moniz, Cherine Pai, Kiele Pennington, Kau’i Rezentes, Susan Rocco (staff), Steven Vannatta, Lisa Vegas, Jasmine Williams, Susan Wood

EXCUSED: Mai Hall, Dale Matsuura, Christopher Pelayo

ABSENT: Virginia Beringer, Mark Disher, Wendy Nakasone-Kalani, , Rosie Rowe, Scott Shimabukuro, Herbert Taitingfong

GUESTS: Laurie Chang, Linda Elento, Kinau Gardner, Wing Hui, Jackie Jackson, Sandy Jessmon, Ken Kakesako, Stan Kubota, Michael McGushin, Lori Morimoto, Wendy Sekiya, Brikena White, Jennifer Wolfsheimer

Welcome and Introductions

Chair Martha Guinan opened the meeting at 9:05 a.m. and asked Amanda Kaahanui to call roll call asking members and guests to introduce themselves and the office or stakeholder group they are representing.

Department of Education Legislative Priorities

Ken Kakesako from the Policy, Innovation, Planning and Evaluation Branch shared a one-page flyer listing the Department’s legislative package of 11 bills vetted by Governor Green. He elaborated on several bills that might be of interest to SEAC included the following:

- **HB 2296** relates to school meals and allows the department to keep meal prices steady despite rising food costs by reducing the required percentage of the cost of a school meal charged to the public from 50% to 25%.
- **HB 2301** moves the function of licensing private vocational or technical schools to another department, as it falls out of the scope of HIDOE’s K-12 mandate.
- **HB 2303** brings back the Presidential Fitness Test for physical education in public schools. It had been phased out about 15 years ago due to its potential effect on student esteem; however, it is now a requirement in a large rural health grant recently received by the state.

Questions/comments from members and guests

Q. The SEAC Legislative Committee has listed other bills on the agenda. Is the Department only supporting the bills listed on your flyer? A. While we will be supporting our bills strongly, there may be others bills where we weigh in to support, comment or oppose. One of the bills we would be supportive of is Natalie’s Law which would raise the assault of an educational worker from a Class C felony to a Class B felony.

Q. Is there something in HB 2303, the physical education assessment, for special education students or physically disabled students? A. It is general right now, because there has not been any guidance from the federal level on what the test is going to look like. We are recommending that it

goes through our existing wellness guide, but right now it is supposed to be a curriculum requirement.

Q. What is the rationale for HB 2293? A. This bill is about protecting students from harm caused by anyone working at a public or private school, including contractors and volunteers. However, we wanted to exclude contractors and volunteers who are not interacting directly with students from being run through the harm registry to relieve the administrative burden on school staff.

Q. Would they still pose a danger, though, being in close proximity? A. They could, yes, but listing all individuals coming through campuses with different projects is becoming an administrative burden, as we don't always interact with those contractors.

Department of Education Budget

Stan Kubota, with support from Wendy Sekiya, briefed members and guests on the current supplemental budget request for the second year of the biennium budget which totals about \$25.8 million and is built on the budget allocation from the previous year.

Special Education related budget requests

The two requests for additional funds for EDN 150 include 1) 3 positions and funds for the visual impaired learner program, and 2) one position and funds for deaf education.

Challenges ahead

These include recruiting and retaining qualified staff, changes in student enrollment, uncertainty on the federal level for funding public education, and inflation. Despite the challenges, the Department is hoping to sustain momentum for positive student outcomes.

Timelines for budget events

March 18th is the date the House releases its budget bill, followed by a Senate draft on April 16th. The two budget bills must be reconciled by the end of the legislative session on May 8th.

Questions and comments from members and guests

Q. Are there any changes to report for EDN 150? A. No, the base operating amount was authorized last year.

Q. If SEAC were to advocate for the three positions that were not included in the Governor's package, would legislators just push it back on the Department to find the monies within the existing budget? A. It would be helpful for SEAC to advocate for these positions and explain why they are needed; however, it may be a difficult ask due to reduced tax revenues.

Q. May we get a little more detail about the rationale around adding the positions? A. (Stan) Yes, we can send you more information. (Kupu) I can also help provide that information.

Q. Are the lost special education positions due to maintenance costs? Did the Governor include these positions in his budget? A. Those are new positions that the Department is requesting. We petitioned these positions to the Governor, but he did not include them.

Q. There was a discrepancy for some of the pay differentials going to classroom teachers but not awarded to people working at the district level. Does this consider that gap in support? A. (Kupu) This particular budget item would not address that. The shortage differential was intended for school level classroom educators.

C. We have had extensive discussions about providing adequate training for existing staff, and that happens at the district and complex area level. How does that happen numbers-wise in an efficient and feasible way? A. (Kupu) We have an ongoing conversation between the Exceptional Support Branch and the Office of Talent Management as to who will get that specific differential, but there are other incentives being considered, because we understand the importance of effective

professional development from the complex area. We appreciate your support and advocacy for those complex area staff.

Q. How does the Governor determine what he will and will not include in his budget? A. The Governor has his own team. There is an initial review done by the Department of Budget and Finance taking into consideration the needs of the entire state. The Governor's policy team take into account B & F's recommendation and decide what they want to emphasize.

SEAC Legislative Committee Report

Susan Rocco reported on the bills the Committee members are aware of that impact students with disabilities. Some bills, like Natalie's Law, which raises the penalties for assaults on educational workers, were not prioritized due to strong support from other groups, and other bills were no doubt missed due to the sheer volume of legislation. One of the bills chosen for a vote by members has already died. The remaining six bills offered for discussion and voting are the following.

- **HB 1888** is related to the safety of educational workers. It asks the Department to act when an employee is harassed by someone in relation to their job by providing a safety plan, time off from work to attend court hearings, etc. The bill was amended to include raising the penalty for harassment of an educational worker to a misdemeanor and including in the definition of harassment "disruption or interference with the administration or functions of any school, school administration office or school board." SB 3179, the companion bill, does not contain the language of the House amendment.

Questions/comments from members and guests

Q. Since the bill is not clear about who is committing the act of harassment, could it also include our students who might be physically aggressive with the staff? A. It hasn't been interpreted that way yet. It appears to be referring to non-employees.

C. I feel SEAC should oppose this bill. It is too broad and not clear, so it can be misused and misinterpreted. I would like SEAC to propose some alternatives for parents who are frustrated from working with the system—some information or training on how to appropriately make one's voice heard—as well as training of employees on de-escalation techniques.

C. There are already laws in place for harassment, so instead of introducing a new bill, DOE employees should be supported in accessing those laws. A big concern is that when a version of this bill was introduced four years ago it was targeted toward special education parents which creates a real climate of fear. I agree we need to strongly oppose this bill.

C. I read the Senate version and thought it addressed the concerns from the teachers of having their employer provide support and intervention, so it is moving in the right direction to keep staff safe.

C. We just had a behavioral team work with my daughter who claimed that she was creating a hostile environment in the classroom, because she was reacting and squeezing their arms. The IEP team helped transition her to a different form of care, but I worry that this team could have sued my family by claiming my daughter was aggressive or harassing their staff.

- **HB 1784** is a structured literacy bill introduced by HawaiiKidsCAN to address struggling readers, many of whom have undiagnosed dyslexia. SEAC supported a similar bill last session that also called for a dyslexia sensitive screener and pre-service and in-service training of all elementary teachers, special education teachers and literacy coaches.

Questions/comments from members and guests

Q. What eligibility category would dyslexia fit under? A. Specific learning disability.

C. Hawaii is one of only two states who do not have a law specifically addressing dyslexia.

C. I love the fact that this bill is focused on early intervention to identify and provide the appropriate support and mitigate future loss of esteem and academic failure.

Q. Does this bill include what kind of services are provided if a student is identified? A. Yes it requires that students receive evidence-based instruction delivered by teachers trained in structured literacy.

C. Out of the whole alphabet soup of all the different things my son had, dyslexia was the hardest one to get support for, and the most impactful, because it led to a lot of other things getting worse. I had to go outside the school system to get him specialized instruction which helped him go from zero comprehension to winning a statewide essay contest two years ago.

Q. This bill targets K-3 for dyslexia screening, but might it be appropriate to focus on grades 1-3 when you are closer to the age of diagnosis? A. (Natalie Haggerty) There is a lot of research to support early identifiers for students with reading difficulties as early as preschool. For instance, weak phonological awareness can be a significant early predictor of reading difficulties and dyslexia, and the earlier we can get some data on literacy skills the faster we can help the student.

C. I would like to thank Kupu, because the University of Hawaii's reading intervention specialist program could not have happened without HIDOE special education support. Those in the program take a knowledge and practice exam for effective reading instruction and then they can apply for certification through the International Dyslexia Association.

- **HB 1780** is about student transportation and establishes free bus passes for kids who are eligible for free school lunches. A lot of the issues with attendance for students has to do with transportation issues. If we want kids to come to school and be fed, we want to be able to get them there.

Questions/comments from members and guests

Q. If a student applies for a geographic exception, generally that student would not be eligible for any transportation assistance. Would this bill provide transportation to that student if they met the income criteria? A. (Susan) It's unlikely, because the rule with geographic exceptions is if a parent chooses voluntarily to have their child attend somewhere other than the placement offered by the IEP team, they must provide their own transportation. (Brik) The law regarding transportation and geographic exceptions changed about five years ago, so that if a student with an IEP needs transportation as a related service, the new school would have to provide it.

- **HB 1577** is one of the bills sponsored by the State Council on Developmental Disabilities which aims to expand the service that allows folks to fill out a form to indicate to emergency responders that someone in the household has health needs that must be addressed in an emergency.

Questions/comments from members and guests

C. I really support this bill, because in times of emergency, it is hard to get all the details together. With the advance notification of needs, we are leveraging technology that adds value in a crisis.

- **HB 2296** is the bill Ken Kakesako mentioned about keeping school meal prices from going up by reducing the percentage of the actual cost of the meal that DOE must charge students.
- **HB1562** is sponsored by the Keiki Caucus, allowing the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Division to contract out for an app for children and youth with mental health challenges.

Other bills of interest

Kupu suggested looking at **SB 2337** which requires the Department of Education to provide numeracy coaches in certain elementary schools, middle schools, and intermediate schools to support teachers, improve instruction, and ensure that students develop a strong foundation in mathematics.

Action: Members were given the link to a poll that asked them for each of the above legislative measures whether the member favored supporting, opposing or monitoring the bill. The Legislative Committee will use poll results to guide their testimonies. Susan will add the numeracy bill (SB 2337) to the poll for consideration.

National Perspective on Special Education Issues

Jennifer Wolfsheimer, a consultant from WestEd who provides technical assistance to Hawaii on IDEA monitoring and dispute resolution, described her work in the field of special education as both professional and personal—she has a disability and attended school with an IEP, and her daughter has an IEP as well. She shared her perspective on how current actions by the federal government may affect students and families in Hawaii.

Federal Budget Bill

The bill maintained funding for IDEA and its technical assistance infrastructure. Grant applications that will be coming out soon also seem to be following the regular schedule, so these are all positive signs related to the fiscal budget.

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

Next year's submission of the SPP/APR in February will be the last year of the current 6-year cycle. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is currently drafting a new SPP for the next cycle that will probably be published in the Federal Register in February where it will be up for comment for 60 days. SEAC may want to consider providing comments about whether the current focus is leading to desired student outcomes

Interagency agreements

There is conversation in various news sources that the administration will move the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) to the Departments of Health and Human Services or Labor. An interagency agreement last year moved the general education folks to Labor, but there hasn't been a physical move yet. Regardless of a move, IDEA is still intact and strong. Its regulations give authority to the U.S. Department of Education. As for other issues, we continue to hear about teacher shortages for special education and related services providers.

Questions/comments from members and guests

Q. Do you have an idea of what the SPP/APR changes might be? A. No. At a recent OSEP Leadership Conference all they mentioned was efficiency and less burdensome.

Q. In August of last year, SEAC talked about how OSEP was only monitoring student participation in the Smarter Balance Assessment, and not the actual performance of the students. Is the SPP/APR comment period an opportunity to advocate for that? A. Yes. If you don't see something that you would like to change in the U.S. DOE SPP/APR draft, you can advocate for that.

Q. Is changing Indicator 17 still relevant? A. (Brikena White) Yes. It is left up to each state to determine what our focus, our SiMR, is and we may want to change it to meet the needs of our community. This year we added the category of autism to Indicator 17.

Q. Regarding employment opportunities for students with disabilities, with all the DEI [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion] issues and ICE attacks, what is the consensus on employment for these

students. A. As far as the inclusion of our students, I haven't heard any changes, but the attitudes of some Americans have become less welcoming of our students. I am in the community, in meetings, as a person with an obvious disability, and I have started traveling with my able-bodied husband, because there has been an increase in ableism in public places.

Q. Do you have any suggestions to change that mindset? A. This comes from me. I believe we all must remain vigilant that people with disabilities are included in any policy and planning meeting to offer their perspective. We also need to make sure services are implemented and students who are graduating are receiving what they need.

Q. Would you offer information about how to make a comment during the comment period? A. Once the U.S. Department of Education sends out the package, the Federal Register will include all the information about how to respond. That should be around the middle or end of March.

C. We have really benefited from your assistance, Jen. Is there any concern that technical assistance from WestEd will be negatively affected by this administration? A. We have been worried, but, so far, WestEd is in Part D of IDEA, and the level funding just passed did not move or combine technical assistance or block grant it. Congress knows that they need the national perspective that these TA centers provide.

Announcements

Amanda made the following announcements:

- The 40th SPIN Conference is coming on March 28th. We are happy to sponsor any member. Currently, Jasmine and Martha have volunteered to man the SEAC table, and we are looking for more SEAC members to join them.
- The Maui Footsteps to Transition Fair will hold in person at Maui High School on March 10th from 5:00 – 6:30 p.m.
- South Hawaii and East Hawaii are having their Footsteps to Transition event on March 25th from 1:00 to 6:00 p.m. at Art of Hilo.
- The Oahu Footsteps to Transition Fair is happening virtually on February 21st from 9:00 a.m. to noon. Island Life Live is offering media coverage for a Kailua student, teacher and Amanda to talk about the Fair on its February 18th broadcast.

Tina King added that Nanakuli High, Waianae High, and Kamaile Academy are joining hands to put on a transition fair later this afternoon at Kamaile Academy.

Discussion regarding School Resource Officers (SROs)

Jasmine Williams recently read about a pilot program that is bringing two School Resource Officers (SRO) to Kaimuki High. She wants to know if the Department is involved in this pilot program and if future plans may include SROs on school campuses with younger students, because she has raised concerns in the past about how students with disabilities may be treated when SROs are on campus. These concerns include whether:

- the SROs receive training in IDEA and Chapter 19 as it relates to students with disabilities;
- the SROs are on campus in plain clothes or openly wearing uniforms, guns and cuffs;
- the SRO is allowed to see a student's confidential file and IEP;
- the SROs are given information about what might trigger a behavior for a student with a disability;
- the position description for the SRO varies from school to school and whether they are on campus primarily to mentor students; and

- the SROs also communicate with parents.

Kupu shared that the Exceptional Support Branch, along with the Student Services Branch, had an opportunity got some facetime with the SROs at Kaimuku High at the start of the pilot and anticipates being engaged and involved along the way.

Positive experiences with SROs on Campus

Trisha Lukzen from Hawaii, Will Carlson from Molokai, Wing Hui from Leeward District and Jessica McCullum all reported having positive outcomes resulting from having SROs on school campuses including the following:

- providing extra support to self-contained classrooms so that the students are comfortable being around a police officer;
- befriending special education students;
- educating them about police procedures and equipment;
- stressing the importance of gun safety;
- reinforcing the CTE pathway for law enforcement at Waianae High;
- helping to provide a positive learning environment;
- helping to erase existing stereotypes that having a police officer around means the student is going to get into trouble;
- building powerful relationships with students over time;
- being able to bring in help quickly if there is a big emergency at school;
- dressing to be more approachable when the SRO visits families in the community about attendance or other issues;
- greeting parents when they drop their children off at school;
- attending various school activities like bingo nights and literacy nights; and
- attending community events put on by Autism Moms of Kona.

Kiele Pennington spoke to Crisis Intervention Team training offered by the Honolulu Police Department which includes foundational training on disabilities, as well as mental health, homelessness and drug abuse. In an emergency, individuals in the community can request that a CIT trained offer responds to the 911 call. She suggested that SROs may have access to this established training program that has been vetted by many community groups.

Action: Kupu will get more detail regarding the training received by SROs.

Review of the Minutes for the January 9th Meeting

No corrections or additions were offered to the draft minutes

Action: Members voted to approve the minutes as distributed.

Agenda Setting for the March 13th Meeting

The following items were suggested for inclusion in the March agenda:

- Legislative Update
- SRO Update
- Transitions of all ages and stages
 - How framed? What comes after
 - Defining what we mean about transitions
 - Part C to Part B
 - Kindergarten to Grade 1
 - Middle to High

Cheryl Matthews offered to share a link to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) unified state plan public comment period that ends the early part of March in case anyone from SEAC wishes to comment.

Input from the Public

Linda Elento, mother to a 25-year-old son who has transitioned out of school, commented on issues discussed during the meeting.

Transition planning. When her family was planning her son's transition to adult services and housing, they were missing the involvement of the Medicaid Waiver and the I/DD level of care. He is now in an Arc home and not a Medicaid level group home, and she is wondering if SEAC can help in building parent confidence through transition planning about housing choices.

Student transportation. If student transportation is included in the IEP, it applies to charter schools as well as public schools. Parents need to know that to give them more confidence to seek out other school options when their child's home school isn't providing what he or she needs.

SB 2852. This bill has to do with access to technology. Education has an overlap, and it can be referenced with H.R.S. 368. She asked if SEAC is interested in looking at that bill.

Developing Microlearning and Video Tools for Families and Options on Resolving Conflicts

The discussion centered around a top recommendation from the Dispute Resolution Committee that SEAC develop video or other learning tools related to conflict resolution that families can access to learn more about the options available to them, as well as the terminology used.

Amanda reminded the group that not all families are able to access written materials because of a language barrier or lower reading level, and many younger families rely on Instagram or a 30-second Tik Tok video to get information. Members and guests were divided into small groups to suggest useful topics and platforms for presenting information on conflict resolution in small bite-sized pieces. A compilation of the feedback from the small groups is included in Attachment A.

Attachment A – Input Gathered from Small Group Discussions regarding the Development by SEAC of Microlearning and Video Tools for Families on Conflict Resolution

Communication Platforms Under Consideration for Microlearning

- Tik Tok
- Instagram
- YouTube – create a SEAC YouTube Channel
- Infographics
- Community events where DOE staff are embedded as volunteers or partners
- Workshops co-presented by parents and professionals

Types of Communication Under Consideration

- Short videos utilizing actual stakeholders (parents, administrators, etc.)
- Short videos utilizing animated stakeholders
- Podcasts
 - Mini interviews with multicultural families
 - Use Notebook LM to create podcast from SEAC discussions (i.e. early mediation presentation)
 - Have veteran parents and administrators host the podcast together

Topics for Microlearning

- Communication
- Roadmap for families after early intervention
- Public and private resources
- Timelines for assessments
- What assessments showcase
- Definition of conflict resolution
- Conflict as a natural offshoot of the special education process
- Early mediation
- The effectiveness of parent support groups
- How to advocate successfully
- Teaching how to use a T chart to summarize assessment results
- Parent-to-parent tips on what was effective for them

Other Input

- Provide links to more in-depth information.
- Utilize student video clubs to assist with production.
- Use Google to access links to websites on conflict resolution.
- Use motivated and informed parents to help spread the message.
- Have schools list links to all products (videos, infographics, podcasts) on a special education web page for parents to access.
- Be aware of the trend to avoid social media due to negativity and information overload.