State of Hawaii  
Board of Education  

Testimony by the  
Hawaii Government Employees Association,  
AFSCME Local 152, AFL-CIO  

September 16, 2021  

Relating to the Department of Education’s Update on  
Opening Schools for the 2021-2022 School Year and  
Their Proposed Use of ESSER II and ESSER ARP Funds

The Hawaii Government Employees Association (HGEA) represents roughly 7,200 of the Department of Education’s employees in six bargaining units. The majority of these employees are based at the schools as administrators and classified staff. As the Board of Education seeks answers from the Department about how the school year is going so far, we urge Board members to ask questions about the sustainability of the Department’s “3-1-1” – its three priorities for students, one priority for staff, and one priority for the system. For “3-1-1” to work, the Department says it will also prioritize staff well-being and focus on supporting and caring for all employees (Supt. Hayashi’s 9/16/2021 Memo to the Student Achievement Committee). This prioritization needs to happen soon, or staff and their school communities will begin to suffer as a consequence.

Our school administrators planned, as much as possible, for a safe opening of the school year. As well as they prepared, they did not and could not have anticipated the increase in COVID-19 cases due to the delta variant to significantly impact their school operations. They and their staff are now in an “all hands-on deck” situation and there seems to be no relief in sight. For many of the positions we represent -- the principals, vice principals, SASAs, EAs, SHAs, SFSMs, office, security, custodial, athletic staff, and special services personnel -- the additional duties and hours placed on them are adversely impacting their working conditions.

The Department needs to provide school leaders and their staff immediate support as quickly as possible. If the purpose of the ESSER II and ESSER ARP funds were meant to safely reopen schools, sustain safe operations for in person learning, and address the impact of the pandemic on students, the Board and Department need to provide the necessary resources and support to the schools to maintain operations and provide additional capacity to ensure the continuity of services, which is what the federal funding was intended for.
Enclosed are examples from school level leaders and staff of their long and exhausting days, never-ending COVID-related tasks, and how everyone is pitching in, yet help is still needed. Our members are committed to keeping school open and making their school the safest learning environment possible. However, we fear that many of them are at capacity and nearing burnout.

We will continue to work with the Department as we advocate for supportive measures and ask that they place a priority on the mental and physical health and well-being of all employees. School personnel cannot effectively support students if they are stressed and nearly running on empty. We are only halfway through the first quarter of this school year but it feels like the third quarter for them. This is not sustainable without additional resources for the schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our testimony.

Sincerely,

Randy Perreira
Executive Director
I am getting overwhelmed by the increase in duties that I have that is happening on a daily basis. Because of the increased number of cases in our keiki, I now have to take an increasing number of calls regarding students that are in close-contact of a positive case and students that ARE positive. This starts first thing in the morning - before 7am. I also have to search through hundreds of emails to determine when a student can return to school because our admin decides the return date. I have to check if they are close contact or traveling or positive. When they return to school I have to check if they can return to class by viewing their covid test results. I get a tremendous amount of emails about parents wanting distance learning and I have to let them know that our classes are full - no space available. I have to get irate emails from parents because of COVID notification letters sent home letting them know when there is a positive student on campus. I have to now worry about when parents come in to the office - now I have to check their vaccination card/negative COVID test and/or time them how long they stay in the office - longer than 10 minutes etc. COVID issues take up half my day or more sometimes. On top of all this I have to do my normal duties daily and I can’t even catch up because of all the COVID related issues. ALL THE ABOVE IS DAILY ISSUES I HAVE. EVERY SINGLE DAY. No one even checks on us to see if we are ok mentally or physically and it’s kind of DEPRESSING. I love where I work and I love the people but I really wish people could see what we go through daily and at least share some care and compassion. People don’t realize that we are the frontline (I work in the front office), we see parents all day long, we get irate calls all day long, we are the first point of contact.

There is no such thing as typical anymore. We have lost so many staff members we’re all doing everything. Our account clerk left, our part time office asst. left and our SASA is on leave. That leaves one girl covering the former account clerk’s position and two of us doing everything else. We were already busy and this has just added to the chaos. Now our temporary account clerk is considering leaving (has already located a part time position and could go full time) and the remaining two of us are ready for retirement and considering doing it sooner than we’d planned. What then - no office staff at all?

With this position being my very first school year, I am in the isolation room while trying to treat students with injuries, bloody noses, and I also have a student that has daily medication taken in the Health Room. I am constantly going back and fourth from the Health Room from Isolation Room to assist students. All the while, trying to learn all of the deadlines for paper work and trying to get students to compliance with their immunizations. I find it impossible to do all the documenting and paperwork needed while sometimes being stuck in the isolation room. I truly feel that I would find it a lot easier to learn what I need to get done; guidelines, filing, and documenting without extra covid-related phone calls, sending students home for covid-related symptoms, and constantly trying to reach unhappy parents to pick them up.
Sign in our book at 7am by the front office, make my way to my classroom to do a few little things before heading to the cafe to do morning duties. Cafe duties consist of writing the names of each student who eats lunch for contact tracing purposes. Advisory comes next where me and my assigned teacher have a class of 10 students but no classroom so we use the cafe during that time. My placement this year is in an inclusion setting because our school no longer offers resource. During lunch, I also do the same as breakfast time. After school if there is study hall. I'm in there assisting students. Other than that my last duty of the day is watching the bus line and collecting passes while they board.

In the morning we do a covid tracking. If any student was absent they need a doctor's note or negative covid test. We input them into our covid tracking spreadsheet and make sure we receive Doctor’s note, negative covid test or stay home for 10 days. If someone is positive we need to get names of all contacts in school, call the parents and explain to them the situation. Now the close contacts have to quarantine for 10 days, miss school, miss learning time and their not even sick. Even with a negative covid test we have to explain to the parents they still have to quarantine for 10 days. We had to shut down classes and make phone calls to each parent. We feel like we are not DOE but we are DOH. We need help. We are all mentally and physically drained. Its affecting friendships at work, we are stressed. Parents yelling at is. Faculty and Staff who are not vaccinated and is a close contact have to quarantine so now we are short workers. WE NEED HELP!!

I work in special education assisting teachers, educational assistants, and administration with IEPs, behavioral protocol, and other related duties. Our schools are burnt out already and it is only the beginning of the school year. Several reasons account for such burnout. Schools are hiring emergency hires as special education teachers. Many of the schools are placing the emergency hire teachers into Fully Self Contained (FSC) classrooms where some of our most difficult and high-need students are. Not only does this add stress to the educational assistants, but those such as myself are burdened with unnecessary duties of behavioral problems simply because we do not have qualified teachers in these classrooms. Additionally, the emergency hire teachers do not know how to provide appropriate programming, and they don’t aren’t trained to write IEPs. Next, we have Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) where we have a shortage of Behavior Analysts and Registered Behavior Technicians (RBTs). Due to this shortage, we have students without services and this puts us out of compliance on the students’ IEPs. Additionally, this adds stress to the school personnel because we have such a high shortage of qualified providers. We need help! We need to pay special education workers what they deserve! We have a shortage because these jobs are difficult and demanding with low pay.

Typical week includes daily covering classes throughout the week for absent teachers (due to lack of subs). Missing 1/2 recess and lunch due the PPE cleaning and setting up for the next class. Weekly COVID cases on Campus and Admin forgetting to notify EA because they forgot we are in the classroom. Finally EA are used daily as security instead of in the classroom and occasionally as person who scans lunch (monitor).

My typical day in school starts when the first school bus drop off students at cafeteria to eat breakfast where I am assigned to escort and monitor students eating. Then after the morning school bell rings I attend to my FSC classroom and work closely to special need students in close approximates less then 3 feet and face to face more than 15 minutes exposure throughout the day, lunchtime monitoring included. At the end of school I have to escort special need students to the bus for pickup. After I’m done with my students I have to assist and help fellow EAs with general education students on there bus pickup which we have to check in students boarding the bus as if attending island tour to go home. Sometimes I have to help assist or guide parents for there child pickup and traffic directing because not enough people to help. Finally, I go back to my classroom to prep and clean student areas for the next day of learning and more exposures by students who might have parents who have Covid positive results or who are not vaccinated who don’t think there children are sick and send them to school. Sooner not later I will probably get sick and that gets me worried, tired and stress out....
From School Administrators (Principals and Vice Principals, Bargaining Unit 6)

About 75% of the day is spent on supervising to ensure all students and staff are complying to the mitigation strategies (masking, socially distancing, etc.), monitoring absences, and an increase in paperwork (e.g. doctor's notes, attestation forms).

I'm being pulled from my duties to ensure health and safety on campus, supervise the cafeteria and the field/playground during morning and student lunch breaks.

It is impossible to account for every minute of interaction between students, let alone trying to implement bubbles to limit exposure. The guidance is not clear enough to make decisions leaving schools open to criticism without the backing of the department.

It has been challenging to follow up on every absence and monitor for appropriate return to school/work documentation, especially at a larger school. Another challenge is if an employee has to quarantine, we lose that employee for 10 days.

This week, the School Health Assistant (SHA) is currently tracking 60 students who have been sick in general, a close contact, or are covid positive. It doesn't help that parents are sending kids to school sick.
Contract tracing has become 80% of our job and we are unable to do instructional/operational duties. This takes a lot of stuff to support.

Hours and days are spent on being proactive, contact tracing even though we were told principals would not be contact tracers. Per the handbook, we are close contact identifiers. What's the difference?

The hours spent are immense and the turnaround time required by DOH without their help cannot be sustained throughout the school year.

Our lunch groups need to be smaller so we need more adult supervisors. To have cohorts, we need more adults than before and we can't even get substitute teachers. With one person absent, and no subs, it becomes tricky to be in compliance with the guidance.

The guidance says to be reactive, not proactive. If a student or employee is a close contact, they get sent home. Nothing is done unless they report they are positive. If they don't say anything, we don't identify others who many have been impacted. We many not hear from them until 3-5 days later and in that period, there may have been a lot of close contacts identified, including siblings at other schools, which is not part of the guidance.
One case took the entire day to contact trace, contact parents, sent students home, prepare communication and complete documentation.

Need more school level support to contact trace! Overwhelmed with this task daily and can't get to our REAL job of education and supporting our students, teachers, and staff.

I am unable to be that instructional leader and visit classrooms because I am tied down contact tracing, calling parents, supervising students. We do not have a facility to house students that are identified as a close contact.

With the help of our non-classroom teachers, we were able to get all close contacts (about 100) notified and picked up by the end of the school day. This came from just 5 cases which we were notified about at the beginning of the day and it took us all day to do this, forcing us to sweep aside meetings and any other responsibilities that needed to be addressed.

Identifying close contacts is exhausting but necessary. I would like to be properly trained as I am unsure if I am doing things correctly. Bottom line...we are doing the contact tracing and we were never meant to. This is the role of DOH.
We have no training. Each school is left on their own to "decide what is safe" – it's outrageous. We are not medical experts.

I wish all schools could be send one consistent message. We get different updates/flyers and flowcharts from different sources on how to handle sick students, close contacts, positive cases. In addition, our familiar are often told different things from DOH case workers which contradict the guidance we are told to follow. What occurs is different schools are doing different things and that puts parents/community against the schools when they compare the schools and their COVID response. It's frustrating and exhausting taking the brunt of the anger from parents/community members.

Teachers and EAs are out, no one to supervise with no subs available. A vaccinated teacher who doesn't have to quarantine can't be reassigned due to contract. Two teachers sitting in a classroom while other classrooms have no subs.

SASAs helps with tracking and distributing of PPE supplies with other COVID related duties now added to her. Office staff help because of the surveys and reports for the State/Complex level. Number of phone calls from parents tripled.
Schools should not be expected to do DOH job. It's hard enough trying to convince families to come to school in the face of rising numbers. The mandated testing has also created a divide between staff who are vaccinated and not vaccinated. We are not the VAX and MASK police.

Guidance is unclear and confusing and is different from what we hear from our nurse and in admin meetings. I thought it was a safe decision to send the entire class home but got criticized for sending too many children home. Hard to determine close contacts. Kids don't remember who they were around.

SHA is busy all day sending kids home and having to explain to families the symptoms of COVID and why they need to stay home if they are sick. Many cannot access free testing sites as they are now in high demand. I don't know how to advise families and staff how to get faster access.

Guidance came out very late by DOH which hampered school procedural planning at the beginning of the school year. Top leadership needs to be more proactive and communication from State/Complex level continues to be an issue as we continue to find out important announcements in the news or on social media.

Parents are not doing wellness checks at home before sending students to school. Several students are sent home daily with COVID symptoms.
From School Administrators (Principals and Vice Principals, Bargaining Unit 6)

So far, I have quarantined over 100 students. Contact tracing is taking up hours each day and now I have to also verify vaccinations and test results. I spent 3 full days working on this and sending out letters. It's getting ridiculous and DOH doesn't call me back.

Many times we get notification of a positive case or close contact late in the day. In order to head off any potential close contacts or actual COVID infected students coming to campus, we have to identify all of them BEFORE school the next day. This has resulted in many nights until 8 pm or later. The current procedures for handling a case require no less than several administrators working on the case a minimum of 4 hours to handle it properly. Our other work does not stop while we are doing this, by the way.

Tough to get anything else done. I sure hope they can take things off of our plates somehow. Administrators having to work late hours an on weekends creating undue stress. Additionally, the vaccination verification program thrust on us to verify is ridiculous. Where is OTM?

I am close to working 24/7 following up with parents, staff and other stakeholders. I hired PPEs but there is a delay due to a backlog in fingerprinting.

DOH and Hawaii Keiki Nurse give different info. We need one communication source. Please figure out the mask exemption issue. Guidance between CDC, DOH, and DOE is often inconsistent.
Cafeteria service is extremely hard with staggered lunch from 10 am to 1 pm.

DOE should have done a press release to inform all parents of certain non-negotiable items such as the need for an additional test when returning from travel and the procedures to return to school when a child is ill.

Also the bus...what the heck. No social distancing there. If the bus comes at all...

Difficulty with monitoring students as they congregate. Hard to keep them socially distanced in a high school. We become the police. They want to talk close, shake hands, hug...It’s a nightmare.

Still awaiting guidance for athletics. Still no guidance for extra curricular and co-curricular activities. Like everything else, information is piecemeal or last minute. The start of Fall sports is right around the corner.

Cafeteria staff cannot prepare and serve meals on time for our students. Other staff members assist on a daily basis.
There is not enough staffing to service all of the students now coming for the free breakfast so we have long lines and parental complaints. This free meals decision was done at the last second making it harder for line workers.

School food service manager is having trouble ordering food from vendors so menu continues to change based on food availability. Can't order trays, milk, protein...

We need adult supervision in the morning outside and inside the cafeteria. We are stuck with TA bakers and cooks who are new to the school or DOE. There's little to no substitutes for cafeteria staff and schools are expected to find them on their own. No help from School Food Services branch. We are serving more meals this year than any other year but school does not get more funding for staffing.

Administration help to serve lunch on a daily basis because we are reluctant to have students work in the cafeteria due to COVID. Some staff help but some are reluctant and have contacted the union.

More personnel to provide needed services to appropriately implement distance learning appropriately. More support for technology. Having to answer numerous phone calls and emails from parents requesting distance learning.
Contact tracing has taken my weekends 3 weeks in a row. This is beyond unbearable. A truly thorough contact tracing takes time and cannot be rushed. I’ve considered walking away because of this. This is just too much for administrators in addition to everything else.

We are never notified by DOH of positive cases. We are thankful for parents who report positive cases to the school. Imagine those not reporting it to the school.

COVID consumes are workday. I am not able to do any of my other job duties as most of my time is spent on responding to COVID issues. All of the my other job duties are worked on at night, at home, as this work still needs to get done.

Disaster! Schools are crippled with staff shortages and a lack of substitutes. Staff call in sick out of fear of exposure regardless of whether they are a close contact or not. No training and support.

We are educators not health and safety experts. Administrators can be notified at any time of day or night. It has impacted our families as we have had to drop everything to attend to these situations. There is no recognition of the countless extra hours that we have given.
A nightmare. We need help. We are trying to run a school. Not receiving any support from DOH. Need nurses on campus. This job is turning into a 24/7 position with no end in site.

There are already teacher shortages. With the mandated testing, increase in cases, and staff burnout, we fear there will be more shortages.

The shortages and lack of resources and personnel from OTM continues. It does not seem there is an urgency to support the needs of schools. We need help with recruitment, the fingerprinting backlog, finding substitutes, EA lists, and the fragile spirit of all our employees.

CASs need to provide consistent messaging. State level seems they don’t talk to each other so there are a bunch of people asking for things at the same time and asking for stuff they already have access to. Not to mention the short deadlines they give.

Why can’t the State/Complex people come down to help those at the school? We are the ones who have to risk our lives every day and we have never worked from home.
From School Administrators (Principals and Vice Principals, Bargaining Unit 6)

WASC can wait. Title I, SpED SDI, all of these are important but we can’t thoroughly focus on them right now. We need the State to take some things off our plate.

I could do without all the State surveys asking me how much PPE I have on campus. And too many memos. Decisions need to come out sooner.

If you are not a school administrator, you have no clue what the demands are of us in the 21-22 SY. There is very little support and recognition of the day to day struggles we face and the burden we carry.

Over worked and burned out staff with severe morale concerns. It’s difficult to put students and staff in the line of fire daily with the uptick in cases. It’s taking a toll on my health, wellness and the ability to be an effective leader.

I have gone from 50 hour weeks to closer to 65-70 hours a week and it hasn’t gotten easier. The admin team, office staff, café/custodial staff and teachers at every school I have seen or heard are stretched thin. The DOE has to come up with a retention plan or we are going to be in big trouble soon.
Very little to do with education. Most of my day is spent with COVID related issues like enforcing safety guidelines, approving weekly test results, finding coverage for teachers who are quarantining or are sick, now enforcing Governor executive order for visitors, contact tracing, and soon to be doing weekly COVID testing at our school. Not much time to be an instructional leader.

I have been used as a substitute teacher for 20 of 28 school days to an extreme shortage of subs! In one week this meant I was a close contact to two different positive COVID cases. While I know I am vaccinated and diligently wear my mask, I was extremely anxious. Additionally, subbing means I am unable to attend to other important priorities that are about supporting students and teachers. Lack of support to them leads to teacher burnout. On the days when I have not subbed, I facilitate morning drop off and afternoon pick up, which I would consider regular VP duties. Outside of that my time is taken up with supervision of all recesses and lunches due to staff members being in quarantine and a shortage and needing more spaces for mitigation strategies. Outside of this we are communicating with families and teachers for COVID cases and close contacts. Today is the only day of 28 that I have fully focused on instruction; I spent the entire day meeting with teachers on PD. The most egregious offense to my time was when the IA Superintendent and CAS visited our school last week and at 7:20am I was told I had to be an emergency sub.

I work seven days a week, M-F from 7am to 8-9pm depending on what I was or was not able to get to during the day. On weekends, I’m also playing catch up. Why am I always catching up? It’s because I’m frequently contact tracing, checking on attestations for COVID testing, and trying to find substitute coverage for teachers who are out for various reasons. And now I have ensure that visitors, contractors and anyone else who comes to my campus for more than 10 minutes has been tested within 72 hours or has a valid vaccination. This is too much! I rarely have the time to work with teachers as an instructional leader to improve and increase student achievement. It’s just too much.