



**STATE OF HAWAII
BOARD OF EDUCATION**
P.O. BOX 2360
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96804

House Committee on Finance

Thursday, March 30, 2023
2:00 p.m.
Via Videoconference
Hawaii State Capitol, Room 308

Senate Bill 156, Senate Draft 1, House Draft 1, Relating to the Board of Education

Dear Chair Yamashita, Vice Chair Kitagawa, and Members of the Committee:

The Board of Education (“Board”) respectfully provides **comments** on SB 156 SD1 HD1, which would: (1) rename “community meetings” to “community forums” and require the Board hold at least six community forums each year, with at least one in each county, to discuss and receive public input on public education and public library issues; (2) establish these forums as permitted interaction groups under Hawaii Revised Statutes (“HRS”) Section 92-2.5 with certain conditions; (3) require an open forum at the end of each public Board meeting to afford attendees an opportunity to testify on matters not on the agenda; and (4) require the Board to report to the 2024 Legislature on its efforts to amend its policies to include an open forum at the end of its meeting agenda.

Please note that our testimony uses “community meeting” and “community forum” interchangeably. The Board does not have a preference on either term, although we note that it is common for people to confuse a general business meeting the Board holds at sites outside of its offices as a community meeting under HRS Section 302A-1106.5 and vice versa.

Comments on requirement of at least six community forums each year

The Board supports measures that 1) support informed decision-making and priority setting through thoughtful and intentional engagement with stakeholders, and 2) improve transparency and access to information to encourage an informed and engaged community of citizens.

The Board believes community meetings improve the public's access to the Board and provide the Board with more information from the community to help in its decision-making and priority setting. The Board has codified this belief in its bylaws,¹ which require it to hold no less than six community meetings annually, including at least one in each county.

This measure seeks to legislate what the Board has already codified in its own policies. Also codifying this policy in statute seems duplicative, and the rationale for doing so is not clear to the Board. Still, if the Legislature feels it is necessary, the Board does not oppose.

Comments on making community forums permitted interactions under Sunshine Law

The Board appreciates that this bill's introducers clearly reviewed comments in testimony from the Board, the Office of Information Practices, and open government advocates on similar bills from previous legislative sessions to propose a permitted interaction approach to community forums. We believe this will address the concerns raised by all parties on similar iterations of this measure.

The Board, however, requests one important amendment. **We ask that the committee remove the amendment to limit community forums to “less than a quorum of board members” (page 1, lines 10-11).**

The Board does not believe limiting the number of Board members who can attend a community forum provides any benefit; rather, it hampers the Board's ability to meet the purposes of community forums in some instances. Current law already prohibits the Board from formulating policy at community meetings, and this measure adds an additional safeguard by prohibiting Board members attending community forums from making commitments relating to votes on matters. In short, community forums allow the public to engage in a conversation with the Board, and often communities want to engage with more than just a segment of the Board. A regular Sunshine Law meeting is not effective for this purpose (which is why the Board does not believe the open forums that this bill contemplates would fulfill their intent, as explained later in this testimony).

Comments on requiring an open forum at the end of each Board meeting

¹ See Section 6.4 of the Board's bylaws, available here: [https://boe.hawaii.gov/Documents/Bylaws%20\(amended%202022-07-14\).pdf](https://boe.hawaii.gov/Documents/Bylaws%20(amended%202022-07-14).pdf).

The Board piloted the open forum concept at a couple of its meetings in 2019. The Board held a “community open forum” at the end of its March 7 and May 2, 2019, general business meetings and received comments from five individuals in total. **The Board found that open forums at the end of Board meetings do not result in thoughtful and intentional engagement with stakeholders or improved transparency and access.**

Open forums alone do not appear to increase access to or engagement with the Board because while members of the public can provide their concerns or comments to the Board, the Board is not able to engage or respond to testifiers. Sunshine Law prevents Board members from discussing any concerns or issues members of the public bring up during open forums until such concerns or issues appear on a properly noticed Board agenda. In the Board’s pilot, this surprised some members of the public who attended the open forum with the assumption that they could have a conversation with the Board.

Currently, the Board invites members of the public to provide any comments or concerns in writing at any time. This allows for direct communication with Board members, which essentially has the same effect as delivering those same concerns or comments in person at an open forum but without requiring members of the public to attend a public meeting or track the Board’s meeting notices.

Further, at the end of every community meeting, Board members ask attendees if they have any issues or concerns to discuss (other than the specific topic of the community meeting) and invite them to share. Community meetings tend to be more productive for members of the public because they can have a conversation with Board members, unlike Board meetings.

While the Board does not necessarily oppose mandatory open forums at the end of Board meetings, **the Board has significant doubts about these open forums producing the results this bill intends based on its experience.** The Board believes continuously improving the execution of community meetings/forums and exploring other ways to engage members of the public better serve of intentions of this bill.

For example, in the 2019-2020 school year, the Board took a different approach to its community meetings by making a concerted effort to invite community stakeholders to partner with the Board in developing these meetings. The community stakeholders selected the topic that they wanted to discuss and the location and time of the meeting. The Board worked with them to tailor the meeting format to meet their needs and meeting goals. Communities responded positively to these meetings with more people

attending than ever before. Moreover, the attendees actively participated in the discussions and engaged with Board members rather than simply observe.

More recently, the Board held community meetings in each of the 15 complex areas in October and November 2022 to gather feedback on the public's education priorities to inform the new public education strategic plan. Turnout and participation was immense. The Board finds this kind public engagement to be far more effective than an open forum. The Board looks forward to working with more community stakeholders and figuring out how to hold more of these types of community meetings.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Board.

Sincerely,

Bill Arakaki
Chairperson, Board of Education 2023 Legislative Ad Hoc Committee