



**STATE OF HAWAII  
BOARD OF EDUCATION**

P. O. BOX 2360  
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96804

Committee on Judiciary and Government Operations  
Hearing on Tuesday, February 24, 2009  
9:00 a.m. in the Auditorium

Testimony in STRONG SUPPORT of HB444 hd1 (Civil Unions)

Dear Chair Taniguchi, Vice-Chair Takamine and Members of the Committee:

I submit testimony in my capacity as a Member of the Hawai'i State Board of Education because the legislation of equality, or discrimination, is a public policy issue that directly impacts our students, employees and their families.

The Board of Education has a Vision Statement for our Public Schools. One crucial element of this Vision Statement is that *all students become contributing members of society*. To this end, the Board has promulgated Administrative Rules and Policies that mandate the equal treatment of all students. One such policy, titled Philosophy of Education, explains the connection between education, equality and a democratic society:

The Board of Education believes that a democratic society is dependent upon the free, full growth of individuals who will participate in the creation and development of the institutions in that society. The institution of government in *this society is founded on a secular base*, which allows and encourages the development of a pluralistic society that contains many cultures within that society. . . . Students shall have an equal educational opportunity to enroll in programs regardless of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, disabilities, or national origin. (Emphasis added.)

Let me illustrate the impact of discrimination on the school community using another set of factors. Imagine if the Board came up with a policy like: "Japanese are not allowed to participate in any athletic program. No matter how fast you run, or how hard you are willing to practice, if you are Japanese - you cannot play a sport."

We could imagine the devastating impact this exclusionary policy would have on Japanese students who dream of playing football, basketball, or baseball. However, this policy would be equally demoralizing to *all* Japanese students, Japanese employees, their families and friends. Regardless of the intent behind such a policy, no one would deny that it would send a clear message to the entire school community that something is "wrong" with Japanese people.

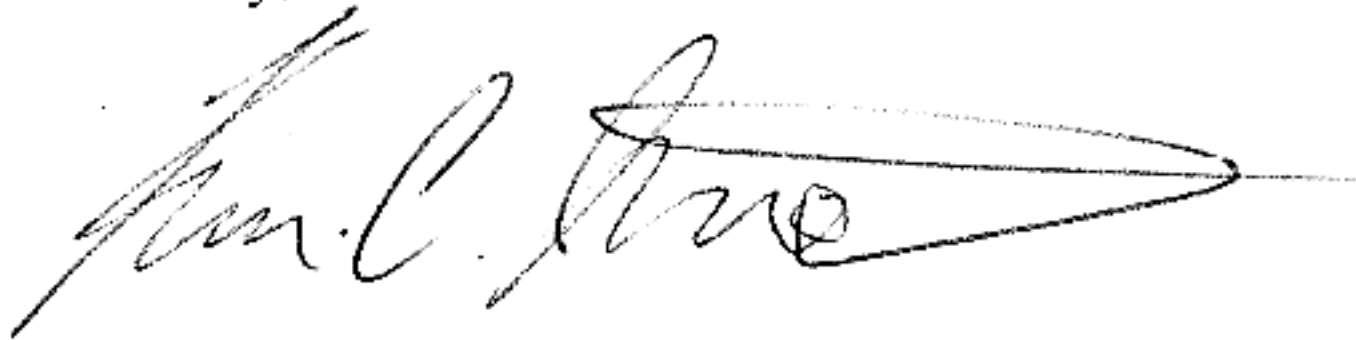
Likewise our state laws excluding gays and lesbians from civil marriage, is sending a similar message that there is something "wrong" with gay and lesbian people. This message is infiltrating our school community and hurting our students. Despite the Board's persistent prohibition against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, **13.3% of our high school students continue to report that they have been harassed because someone thought they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual.**

To put this in context, **18.5% of our high school students seriously considered committing suicide.** (This is the highest rate in the nation.) It is undeniable that **the message that our discriminatory laws are promoting is taking a toll on our students' wellbeing.**

I am not only advocating for the safety and self-esteem of gay and lesbian students; we also need to recognize our heterosexual students, who may have gay parents or family members: What message have we been giving these students about their own families? Furthermore, we need to acknowledge the gay and lesbian employees of the Department and Public Library System: How do we expect our students to treat them with equal respect if our own State laws do not?

What are we, as elected officials, saying to our students, employees and their families when we perpetuate discriminatory laws out of passive ignorance or aggressive intolerance. In order for the Board to fully actualize its Vision Statement, that *all students become contributing members of society*, it is all of our responsibility to ensure that our society will value the contributions of *all* of its members.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kim C. Iwamoto", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kim Coco Iwamoto, Esq.  
Hawai'i State Board of Education Member