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College of Hawaiian Language

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To Legislators To Whom It May Concern

Alaska State Capitol  
Juneau, AK 99801

Aloha Members of the Alaska Legislature,

I write in support of legislation to facilitate Alaska Native language immersion programs such as House Bill 24.

My name is Dr. William H. Wilson. I am the senior faculty member of the Hawai'i State Hawaiian Language College, which is located on the Hilo campus of the University of Hawai'i. Our college is somewhat similar to the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, but was established quite a few years after the ANLC.

My academic background is in historical and applied linguistics, language revitalization, and indigenous languages in education. My wife, Dr. Kauanoe Kamanā, and I raised our two children totally in Hawaiian at home and educated them totally through Hawaiian immersion from preschool to grade 12. Upon high school graduation, they both went on to college and graduated – one from our own University of Hawai'i and one from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Both today have successful careers in business and both continue to use Hawaiian as their regular language of conversation with each other and with us.

I begin with the above details to provide some personal evidence that education through endangered indigenous languages can be highly successful both in terms of maintaining a precious indigenous heritage of a state and in terms of academic and economic outcomes. Furthermore, those successes can be accomplished – indeed in my experience are best accomplished – through innovative mobilization of community resources in the manner called for in House Bill 24.

My own children are atypical in that their parents are university professors. Approximately 70 percent of the other Native Hawaiian children educated with them were from “free and reduced lunch” backgrounds. Over 95 percent were Native Hawaiian, generally a particularly low-performing population in state schools. Nearly 100 percent of the teachers in our children's school were themselves Native Hawaiian, and many were either uncertified or teaching at a grade level or in a subject level for which they had not been certified. We were working together, however, as a community in educating the children. First graduating students in 1999, the school they attended, Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u,

(Nāwahī), has never had a dropout; and through the years over 85 percent of graduates have gone directly on to college.

While we are very proud of our children's school, similar results are being produced in the eight other Hawaiian immersion sites (or sets of classes in an English-medium school) that have reached through to the senior-high-school level. A portion of those sites teach partially through English beginning in middle school, and other like Nāwahī are taught totally through Hawaiian right through to the senior year. All sites are similar to Nāwahī, however, in the high proportion of students from lower economic backgrounds and in their enrollments being close to 100 percent Native Hawaiian. Recently the state published information that 20 percent of the teachers in schools teaching through Hawaiian statewide are uncertified compared to four percent uncertified teachers in the schools taught through English. Yet, outcomes relative to high school graduation and college attendance directly out of high school are higher in the schools taught through Hawaiian than in schools taught through English.

The statistics are as follows: Relative to “On Time High-School Graduation,” students in Hawaiian Immersion Schools currently graduate at a rate eight percentage points higher than Native Hawaiians in English-medium schools (86 percent vs. 78 percent) and also three-percentage-points higher than the rate for non-Native Hawaiian students in English-medium schools (86 percent vs. 83 percent). Relative to “Immediate Enrollment Into College,” students from Hawaiian Immersion Schools currently enroll directly into college at a rate 15 percentage points higher than other Native Hawaiians who have graduated from high school (61 percent vs. 46 percent) and at a rate 21 percent higher than lower-income Native Hawaiian graduates as a whole (61 percent vs. 40 percent).

While I do not have official statistics, it is a widespread observation that students in Hawaiian Immersion have special strengths in overall “wellness.” That is, they are well adjusted, polite, in better health, are contributors to society, and are statistically less likely to engage in risky behaviors. To give an example from the 2017 senior class at Nāwahī, both the division-one offensive and defensive football players of the year for our county of 190,800 people were from Nāwahī.

The Hawaiian-language-revitalization movement that produced these results began small, with handfuls of students in private-language-nest preschools. These preschools were taught by second-language learners and by fluent speakers, none of whom had state licensure. What the teachers had was knowledge of the language, knowledge of the culture, ability to connect with students, and a passion to share what they knew from a values base that had assured survival and success among Native Hawaiians for countless generations before.

From these roots, our Hawaiian-language education system slowly grew. We moved first into kindergarten and then added a grade year through elementary school. We then moved on to middle school and through high school. We relied on the teachers that we were able to find – some licensed many not. But we parents persisted in pursuing Hawaiian-language education for their children, and we saw good educational results. The movement spread from our community to others statewide, and new sites continue to open.

Our preschools began first as community initiatives that were modeled in part on Hawai'i immigrant-language schools and partly on New Zealand Māori language nests. During the development of our schools, we discovered that legal provisions allowing immigrant language schools to hire teachers without certification did not apply to the non-foreign Hawaiian language. Indeed, we also discovered that an earlier system of government education through the Hawaiian language was closed down by law in 1896. That legislation barring use of Hawaiian as a medium of education was still on the books when we began our efforts in the early 1980s.

We decided to go to the legislature for relief. The state education establishment was opposed to our request; but after three years of lobbying, the legislature produced two bills. One bill completely exempted preschools taught through Hawaiian from any required licensures of teachers, a regulation parallel to what already existed for foreign-language schools. Through the second bill, passed that same year in 1986, the state legislature lifted the legal barrier to use of Hawaiian as a medium of education in the public schools. As a result, in 1987 we were able to matriculate our older children from the language-nest preschool into the state school system as a special class – or stream – in a mainstream English school. We added the next grade in 1989 and grew grade by grade from there, graduating the first seniors in 1999. Our son was in the first graduating class. Eventually enrollment became large enough to establish Nāwahī as a separate school site.

The Hawai'i State Legislature has been a strong supporter since those initial bills. Legislative support has paved the way for further development of education through Hawaiian. Our teacher licensing law includes a variety of provisions accounting for the unique status of Hawaiian language immersion teachers. We have a special set of certifications for Hawaiian immersion that allow teachers to teach K-12 because the immersion sites are small and teachers need to teach at multiple levels. The law includes a provision for special support for teachers who teach in Hawaiian immersion programs and for those who teach on Ni'ihau (an isolated island where everyone speaks Hawaiian), allowing extra time as they work toward certification.

We have been very fortunate in Hawai'i to have a supportive legislature. The mainstream educational establishment of our state including the State Department of Education, while highly concerned for the academic progress for Native Hawaiians, was actually initially opposed to Hawaiian immersion. Even today the educational mainstream in our state continues a tendency to follow practices and models that emanate from large national educational organizations based in the contiguous forty-eight states. This is why our legislators, grounded in the distinctiveness of our state and its communities, have been the ones providing leadership in opening up this Hawaiian immersion pathway. The legislature did not support Hawaiian immersion without us providing evidence that other countries had successfully implemented what we were advocating, but they did open up opportunities that would not have existed for us if the legislature had listened primarily to those from the educational mainstream who opposed Hawaiian immersion initiatives based on there being no such model within standard national educational practice in the contiguous forty-eight states.

In providing a legal pathway for Hawaiian immersion, our state legislature has greatly benefited Native Hawaiian communities and the state as a whole. I am very grateful for their groundbreaking support and the outcomes for my own family as well as for the larger population

of our state. I see many parallels in what the Alaska State Legislature is doing with House Bill 24. I commend your work in supporting Alaska Native communities that are seeking to grow Alaska Native language immersion education. I wish you all the success in your endeavors and would be happy to help in any way where our experiences here and some of the research of our College might be useful.

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