Dear Chair Payne and Members of the Board,

The coronavirus pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to our schools, our economy, and our families. In these challenging times, our educators have gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure some continuity of education for all students, and to support students who depend on schools as a source of stability in uncertain times.

The overnight transition to distance learning placed additional challenges upon our schools and educators to meet students’ needs, especially students who were impacted by the digital divide, lacking computers, internet access, and/or with parents and guardians who could not support their technological and other learning needs.

COVID-19 has further magnified factors external to the classroom, such as racial and economic disparities, which significantly impede teachers’ effectiveness and student achievement. Despite the challenges, Hawaii State Teachers Association (HSTA) members remain fully committed to meeting student needs during COVID-19 ensuring our colleagues and students are healthy, safe, and thriving in their teaching and learning environment.

The relationship between the HSTA and HIDOE is critical to a successful 2020–21 school year. As Superintendent Christina Kishimoto indicated at the previous Board of Education (BOE) meeting, I have been meeting on a weekly basis with Deputy Superintendent Phyllis Unebasami, Assistant Superintendent Cindy Covell, and others to engage in continuous problem solving, consultation, and bargaining related to Hawaii State Department of Education’s (HIDOE) COVID-19 response.

For the last month, HSTA has submitted to the HIDOE robust lists of questions around reopening with little-to-no specific or formal response. We have also repeatedly requested bargaining and can report that we will meet for the first time to discuss reopening of schools next Monday, June 22.

Our work over the next couple of weeks is critical. Teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions and we must engage in impact bargaining related to schools reopening. This is especially important as the BOE resolution directs the superintendent to issue information and comprehensive guidance on numerous items by July 1. Many if not all of the items listed in the resolution have collective bargaining implications. They will likely require significant changes or modifications to the
working conditions and the HSTA Collective Bargaining Agreement. We need to reach an agreement on necessary changes prior to the superintendent making any announcement.

HSTA fully supports a focus on the three principles: “Give Hope, Act with Kindness, and Working Toward Togetherness.” While all are important, none will occur if confusion, anxiety, and worry continue to permeate the education community. Teachers have felt left out throughout this pandemic, and internal communication, new policies and information from the superintendent to front-line employees continue to be a struggle. The official release of information frequently goes through multiple layers of leadership (assistant superintendents, complex area superintendents, principals, department heads), causing misunderstanding and further confusion. We encourage the BOE and HIDOE to continue to improve internal communication so information is clear and unambiguous. Interactive webinars, like the joint HSTA-HIDOE webinar on special education that took place in April, are well-received and helpful for all employees. More of that type of communication needs to be done.

HSTA also applauds the BOE’s priorities of (1) health and safety of our students and staff, (2) students most vulnerable to school closures and disruptions to learning, (3) in-person instruction, and (4) student access to devices and connectivity.

Specific to priority 1, we agree that the HIDOE and BOE must rely on a designated expert source of information on COVID-19. HSTA also recognizes that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Hawaii Department of Health (DOH) are reliable sources, and that the HIDOE should look to the DOH for “timely, accurate, and up-to-date advice and guidance.” However, the HIDOE’s one-page guidance on reopening of schools is inadequate and vague. Other state departments of education have already issued 50 pages or more of guidance on schools reopening.

The statement related to physical distancing is confusing at best. The guidance says to “maintain a distance of at least 3 feet between seats, including group tables. At least 6 feet of distance should be maintained if students are seated facing each other.” Further, the current guidance for summer programming requires “6 ft apart.” Over the last two weeks, HSTA has repeatedly requested clarity on the new three-foot standard for physical distancing. To date, we have been told nothing in writing has been provided by DOH. We also searched the CDC and DOH websites and found nothing that would indicate that three feet is a safe physical distancing practice.

Specific to priorities 2 and 3, we absolutely support efforts to address students who are most vulnerable and seeking opportunities for in-person instruction. However, Hawaii’s public schools do not have enough classroom space to allow for the necessary and proper physical distancing needed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Without clarity of procedures, protocols, and instructional models, parents and employees will not feel safe returning to work and school. A recent nationwide poll by USA Today shows that one in five teachers is unlikely to return to the classroom next school year and 30 percent of parents are “very likely” to seek at-home learning options for school year 2020–21.

HSTA strongly supports the BOE’s directive that the Department of Education “provide instructional models and clear guidance to families that allow parents or guardians who do not feel comfortable sending their children to a school campus to keep their children at home”. This is in line with similar statements by the superintendent and will help to reduce the total number of students on a physical
campus this fall. It is also very important we provide 100 percent distance learning options for students who have health conditions that place them at high risk.

Specific to priority 4, HSTA urges the BOE to consider that difficulties with device access and connectivity are not limited to students. Multiple teachers said outdated and broken equipment prevented them from performing their best work during the recent school closures. Teachers reported that the computers they were issued did not meet the standards needed to properly run Webex or Google Meet without video and/or audio lags. In some cases, teachers reported their computers did not have webcams at all. Multiple teachers said they had to resort to using their own personal equipment to supplement what the HIDOE issued, and/or purchase equipment such as additional monitors, keyboards, and web cameras.

HSTA appreciates the BOE’s directive that pertinent professional development is provided to teachers and staff. However, we fear the current number of days without students prior to the start of the school year may not be enough to provide the necessary training for health and safety protocols and changes in the delivery of instruction.

Related to training, the HSTA asks that the BOE consider the significant time needed for planning and collaboration to address curriculum changes and student-learning loss. Teachers who are care coordinators of students with special needs also need time to facilitate assessments and lead conversations on possible compensatory services for students.

In closing, HSTA remains committed to taking these critical next steps. We look forward to meeting with the department and members of the BOE in the coming weeks to complete the mid-term negotiations necessary to reopen our schools in a safe and timely manner.

Thank you for your time and consideration.