April 24, 2020

The Honorable David Y. Ige
Governor, State of Hawaii
Executive Chambers, State Capitol
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

Dear Governor Ige:

I am writing you as president of the National Education Association (NEA), a union of more than 3 million teachers and education support professionals across the nation. In support of our members in Hawaii affiliated with NEA through the Hawaii State Teachers Association, I urge you not to take the drastic, unprecedented step of cutting teacher salaries or instituting furloughs or layoffs in response to the fiscal impact of COVID-19.

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic, while relatively mild in Hawaii as compared with other states, has already devastated Hawaii’s economy. I appreciate and understand that you face very difficult choices about how to respond to the loss of revenues brought on by the steep decline in tourism, services, and trade in your state. However, furloughing, laying off, or reducing the pay of teachers and other public employees will only compound this crisis.

Taking any of these steps would greatly limit these individuals’ ability to purchase goods and services. Not only would their families suffer the consequences of not having enough to make ends meet; damage to the communities in which they live and work, and ultimately to your state, would be severe when Hawaii’s economy is already contracting. In fact, the University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization has estimated that such a contraction would have a multiplier effect, causing a $3.3-billion drop in GDP in 2020-2022.

As a teacher, however, what troubles me most about what you are considering is the impact on students.

This pandemic has shined a light on the huge disparities in resources that exist in communities across the nation—disparities teachers see in classrooms every day. But it has also exposed how dedicated teachers are to nurturing and supporting every student, no matter the circumstances.

I have the privilege daily of speaking to NEA teachers who have confronted this crisis with love, pragmatism, selflessness, and creativity. They are driving through neighborhoods in caravans and posting videos on YouTube to let students know that even in—especially in—these tough times, they are still there for them. They are coaching parents through lesson plans and figuring
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out best-practices for distance learning, and where families don’t have access to the Internet, they
are calling their students to provide whatever assistance they can, meanwhile attending to their
own families’ needs.

Teachers are rising to meet this challenge because we know our students need us now, and will
rely on us to restore a sense of normalcy when the crisis ebbs. This will be much more difficult if
pay cuts or furloughs are enacted because Hawaii will very likely lose teachers across the
spectrum: those who are close to retirement, those with several years of experience and expertise,
and those just entering the profession, bringing new insights and perspectives. Given the teacher
shortage your state already faces, students will ultimately pay for this loss at a time when Hawaii
will need all hands on-deck to create the nurturing environments that will help students recover
and thrive.

Let me add that of all the states, only Hawaii is considering taking this dangerous step. In other
states, the emphasis has been on maintaining public services during the pandemic by making full
use of the provisions of the CARES Act, which has allocated $53 million to Hawaii’s schools
and colleges (funds that can be used to pay salaries).

Governor Ige, I ask that you not cut, furlough, or lay off teachers and other public employees,
but rather, use all methods available through the CARES Act and the state’s rainy day fund to
avoid these drastic measures. Surely, Hawaii’s students and their families deserve better.

Sincerely,

Lily Eskelsen García
President, National Education Association