

TO: Hawai'i Teachers Standards Board

FROM: Rhonda. S. Black, Professor and Chair
Department of Special Education, University of Hawai'i and Mānoa

SUBJECT: TESTIMONY

**TEACHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE AND GENERAL
BUSINESS MEETING**

AGENDA ITEMS:

Teacher Education Committee Agenda: ACTION III E, NBI 24-22 The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Teacher Leader Program Review

**General Business Meeting Agenda:
IV. New Business, Committee Reports, and Pending Committee Action,
Item G. NBI 24-22 The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Teacher Leader Program Review**

POSITION: OPPOSE NBI 24-22

Public Testimony: Addressing Inaccuracies in NBI 24-22

Esteemed members of the committee,

This testimony is presented to address three significant assumptions in NBI 24-22 that result in inaccuracies regarding our program, its faculty, and its collaboration with the Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE). These assumptions undermine the credibility of our efforts in preparing education leaders and the collaborative efforts of faculty in the Department of Special Education at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. In addition, as this NBI is a public record, these inaccurate statements should be corrected.

1. Faculty Credibility and Experience

Assumption: Faculty without recent experience in HIDOE lack credibility.

Quote from the Program Review Committee's report:

Eight faculty member curriculum vitae were submitted, but only three have taught in the Hawai'i Department of Education. The most recent employment was in 2013, over ten years ago. Having teaching experience in the HIDOE or HIPCS brings credibility.

NBI 24-22reads:

Despite only having three UHM COE faculty members who have taught in the HIDOE, UHM COE faculty responded that there is a collaboration with HIDOE staff on a federal grant and that having faculty with no HIDOE experience brings a different perspective.

Clarification:

It is true that three of the eight faculty members associated with this Leadership and Research Master's Program (requesting Add-a-field for Teacher Leader) have taught in HIDOE. This is **good** for our Department and **good** for our State. However, the suggestion that other faculty without HIDOE experience are less credible disregards the broader qualifications and contributions of our faculty. As a graduate program, each faculty member must hold a doctorate and be vetted by the Graduate Division of the University, meeting stringent Graduate Faculty Standards, which include substantial contributions to national peer-reviewed publications and presentations. Our faculty members' diverse experiences as teachers and leaders in other states bring valuable perspectives that enrich the special education and leadership content offered in our program. This broad expertise complements the local context, enhancing rather than detracting from our program's relevance. This diversity is not a detriment but an asset, providing insights into different special education systems and practices that can benefit HIDOE's initiatives. The claim that faculty must have recent HIDOE experience to be credible overlooks the value of varied educational backgrounds and national-level expertise that our faculty contributes.

2. Collaboration with HIDOE

Assumption: There was no collaboration with HIDOE, especially with leaders in the Exceptional Support Branch.

Statement from Program Review:

Did faculty members consult with HIDOE or Hawai'i Public Charter school teachers to determine if the courses and content apply to the current Hawai'i educational context? How do faculty members stay informed of current HIDOE and HIPCS SPED initiatives and processes? (Application, p. 60).

We responded yet the NBI states:

The committee's concern is about the disconnect with the initiatives of HIDOE's Exceptional Support Branch (Special Education) and the Teacher Leader Institute's vision for teacher leadership.

Clarification:

This assumption that we did not collaborate with HIDOE is factually incorrect. Our faculty

maintain active and ongoing collaborations with HIDOE at multiple levels—school, complex area, and state. We regularly serve as consultants, participate on committees, deliver professional development workshops, and observe in classrooms, thereby continuously engaging with HIDOE’s needs and initiatives.

For the development of the Teacher Leader add-a-field proposal, we replaced elective courses with **two** field courses designed in collaboration with leaders such as [REDACTED], Education Specialist, Special Education Section of HIDOE, and [REDACTED], State Exceptional Support Branch Director, [REDACTED]. These courses, SPED 629 Clinical Practice Special Projects, taken in the first and second year of the program focus on practical applied projects such as improving IEP development and implementation processes, directly benefiting the schools where our students work. Working with our partners in HIDOE ensures that our program remains aligned with HIDOE’s goals and initiatives. It is important to note that while the application did not require us to list every individual consulted, the ongoing input from HIDOE leaders has been integral to our program’s design and refinement. For the federal grant that was funded in the amount of one million dollars, we secured letters of support from **three** Principals, the two individuals mentioned above who are state level leaders in the Exceptional Support Branch, **one** from the Hawaii Teacher Induction Center, Leadership Institute and from Superintendent [REDACTED]. I am proud of the numerous collaborations that our faculty have cultivated. I believe the NBI does not reflect accurately the amount of substantial collaboration that was involved in creating this teacher leader program.

3. Efficacy of Online Learning Formats

Assumption: Online synchronous formats are inadequate for teaching leadership skills and navigating difficult conversations.

The following is directly taken from the NBI:

The program’s exclusive reliance on hybrid (synchronous and asynchronous) learning raises concerns regarding the Teacher Leader Students’ ability to practice content and collaborate within the K-12 school setting. This format limits opportunities for teacher leaders to practice and refine essential leadership and collaboration skills, particularly in facilitating meetings and learning experiences within the school context. As current HIDOE educators, the committee sees a need for effective leadership development that requires frequent application of skills and constructive feedback. Incorporating in-person (face-to-face) interactions would allow Teacher Leader Students to observe exemplary facilitation practices, engage in peer learning with their cohort, and receive valuable feedback on their facilitation skills. One need the committee sees in their current role is helping Special Education Teachers learn leadership skills to prepare for and to navigate hard conversations that usually occur during an Individualized Education Program meeting.

Clarification:

This assumption overlooks the significant advancements and effectiveness of hybrid learning models. Our program utilizes synchronous online platforms that enable meaningful discussions and practice opportunities. Through these platforms, students engage in real-time discussions, role-playing, simulations and other interactive methods that allow students to develop and refine their leadership and facilitation skills that prepare them for real-world scenarios. The claim that such skills can only be acquired in face-to-face settings is unfounded. In addition, our program includes six credits specifically dedicated practicing skills related to IEPs and Specially Designed Instruction in their school settings, ensuring that our students are equipped to handle challenging conversations and leadership roles within their schools.

Moreover, the flexibility of online learning allows current HIDOE educators on all islands in the State to balance their professional responsibilities while pursuing advanced training, making our program accessible and practical for working professionals. Denying access to potential teacher leaders on neighbor islands is NOT in the best interests of Special Education in the State of Hawai'i.

Conclusion

The assumptions presented in NBI 24-22 regarding faculty credibility, collaboration with HIDOE, and the efficacy of online learning formats are unfounded and detract from the significant efforts and successes of our program. Our faculty's diverse expertise, active collaboration with HIDOE, and innovative use of online learning platforms ensure that we prepare highly capable educational leaders in special education. I urge the committee to reconsider these assumptions and recognize the strengths and contributions of our program.

Thank you for your attention and for allowing me the opportunity to clarify these points. It is important that the public record includes an accurate description of the actions of the Department of Special Education at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. At this time, NBI 24-22 does not do that.

Sincerely,

Rhonda S. Black
Professor and Chair



Department of Special Education, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

TO: Hawai'i Teachers Standards Board

FROM: Sara Cothren Cook, Associate Professor, Department of Special Education, University of Hawai'i and Mānoa

SUBJECT: TESTIMONY

**TEACHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE MEETING AND
GENERAL BUSINESS MEETING**

AGENDA ITEMS:

- **Teacher Education Committee Meeting, Agenda item III (E): NBI 24-22, UHM Teacher Leader Program Review**
- **General Board Meeting, Agenda item IV (G): NBI 24-22 UHM Teacher Leader Program Review**

POSITION: OPPOSED TO NBI 24-22

Dear Members of the Board,

Teacher retention remains a critical issue in Hawai'i, particularly in special education. Advanced professional development opportunities, such as those provided through the **MEd in Special Education Leadership and Research track**, play a vital role in addressing this challenge by equipping teachers with the skills and support needed to thrive and stay in the profession.

The MEd in Special Education Leadership and Research track is an established, AAQEP-accredited program that is also aligned with the **Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Advanced Preparation Standards**. In September 2023, my colleague and I received notification that we were awarded a [\\$1 million federal OSEP grant](#) to fund 30 scholars committed to advancing teacher leadership in special education. As part of this grant, we engaged in a planning year that allowed us to enhance the program further. During this time, we collaborated with HIDOE state-level personnel to align the program with Hawai'i's needs, reviewed syllabi, and updated major course assignments to ensure alignment with both the CEC Advanced Standards and the **ETS Teacher Leader Standards**.

The purpose of this Add-a-Field application was to provide formal recognition for the teacher leaders we are developing across the state. Regardless of whether the Board recognizes the program as such, I am confident that our program is preparing exceptional special education teacher leaders who are making meaningful contributions to Hawai'i's schools.

That said, after reviewing the feedback from the review team and communicating with Board members, I find it necessary to publicly address the inaccuracies, inconsistencies, and contradictions in both the formal review feedback and the New Business Item (NBI) 24-22. These comments and statements do not fully represent our initial submission nor our responses to the review team's feedback. I believe it is important to clarify these matters publicly.

In the following testimony, I provide a detailed response to the claims outlined in NBI 24-22, supported by specific evidence from our program application and supplemental materials. This testimony not only aims to clarify inaccuracies but also provides a comprehensive understanding of how our program aligns with the Teacher Leader Add-a-Field designation, addressing the unique needs of Hawai'i's special education teachers and schools. I begin by addressing each claim directly, using evidence to demonstrate how our program fulfills the requirements of the Add-a-Field designation. Following this, I discuss two broader concerns that emerged from the review:

1. **The use and interpretation of the HAR:** The review process revealed inconsistencies and a lack of clarity regarding how HAR requirements are applied to Add-a-Field programs for licensed educators. The review appeared to hold our program to standards more appropriate for initial licensure, raising questions about how these requirements should be interpreted for advanced programs.
2. **The scope and focus of the review:** The review heavily critiqued our already accredited special education program while providing **no feedback** on the program's alignment with the **ETS Teacher Leader Standards**, which are the core focus of this application.

NBI 24-22 Claim 1: The program does not meet all HAR and HTSB requirements

In our original submission, we provided detailed evidence demonstrating how our program meets the HAR and HTSB requirements in meaningful ways for licensed educators and graduate students. Using the HTSB application prompts, we described how each HAR requirement is addressed (see pages 44–48 of our application), supported by sample resources and course assignments. Since the MED in Special Education Leadership and Research track is a graduate program for advanced licensure (HAR §8-54-9.3(b)), our syllabi do not explicitly align with HTSB initial licensure standards. Instead, we stated:

“We recognize, however, the importance of these initial licensure standards as the prerequisite to advanced licensure. To ensure a comprehensive approach, we have developed a program matrix (See Appendix for Section 4) that shows the alignment of HTSB initial licensure standards with CEC advanced preparation standards. This matrix has been utilized by course instructors and program leaders to ensure that the program considers both initial and advanced licensure expectations to provide a scaffolded experience in this graduate degree program” (pp. 18–19).

Despite our detailed submission, the review team determined that we did not provide sufficient evidence to meet HAR requirements. Their feedback focused on specific details, including:

- “There is no specific reference to learning about the Hawaiian language, history, and culture in SPED 641d and SPED 641f (Application, p. 46).”
- “Student standards are learned in SPED 642. There is no direct topic about student standards in SPED 629, but in-service teachers must include P-12 student standards in an assignment.”
- “The course syllabi do not reference learning about gifted and talented students. The program application states SPED 602 addresses this HAR, but no information was found in the course syllabus.”
- Regarding reading, the review team stated: “In-service teachers have opportunities to demonstrate the teaching of reading to students with difficulties,” but then added, “The course syllabi do not mention specific reading strategies or assessments that will be learned.”

This feedback suggests that the review committee prioritized granular details within syllabi rather than

fully engaging with the comprehensive narrative provided. As we explained, syllabi offer a framework of objectives and assessments but are not intended to include exhaustive detail on every resource or assignment. Our narrative provided a thorough explanation of how we integrate HAR within major course topics and align our program to CEC Advanced Standards and Leadership Standards, supported by examples of resources and assignments to demonstrate this alignment.

Other related claims in the NBI 24-22 include:

- *Claim 1a: Initial Evidence of course Content Did Not Include SPED Landmark Cases in Hawai‘i and an Understanding of the Hawai‘i Public Education System*
 - **Response:** “The syllabi submitted are designed to show alignment with federal law, including IDEA, which serves as the foundation for understanding special education policies and practices nationwide. This aligns with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Advanced Preparation Standards, which guide our program and ensure its rigor and relevance. The submitted syllabi provide a broad framework of course objectives, topics, and assessments rather than a week-by-week breakdown of activities and readings. Our program does, in fact, integrate Hawai‘i-specific content, such as Chapter 60 and Ninth Circuit Court decisions through the use of state-level resources, case law, and guest speakers from the Hawai‘i Department of Education (HIDOE) who provide direct insights into local policies and practices. These elements ensure that in-service teachers gain knowledge and application skills specific to Hawai‘i’s educational system while maintaining alignment with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Advanced Preparation Standards.”
- *Claim 1b: UHM COE faculty stated that the Hawaiian language, history, and culture is a HAR initial licensure requirement, which is incorrect. Adding a teaching field program must address all HAR requirements.*
 - **Response: This statement misrepresents our proposal.** We explicitly stated (p. 45): “Knowledge of Hawaiian language, history, and culture will be embedded as a prerequisite for exploring advanced graduate topics. This foundational knowledge is essential for our graduate students to effectively engage with and understand the diverse cultural contexts in which they will teach. This preparation enables them to promote and perpetuate traditional ways of knowing, learning, and teaching, ensuring they can address the unique educational needs of all students, particularly those from diverse and indigenous backgrounds.”
- *Claim 1c: The course syllabi had inconsistencies with aligning national standards, course objectives, and assignments and understanding how grading would be achieved.*
 - **Response:** This claim lacks specificity and ignores the evidence provided. Each syllabus includes a clear matrix that directly shows how signature assignments align with relevant standards. Furthermore, we included several matrices in the application to meet the requirements outlined in the review process.
- *Claim 1d: An examination of the courses reveals limited opportunities for Teacher Leader Students to develop assessments, monitor K-12 student progress, and adjust their practice accordingly.”*
 - **Response:** This assertion is entirely unsubstantiated. One of the signature assignments that explicitly aligns with both CEC Advanced Standards and ETS Teacher Leader Standards is the Designing SDI assignment (see Table on pages 20-30 that shows how all of our signature assignments support students in meeting Teacher Leader Standards). This assignment (p.20) requires candidates to develop and implement specially designed instruction (SDI), collect and analyze assessment data, and make instructional decisions based on their findings. This is just one example of how our program provides substantial opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate

assessment expertise. Assessment is in every aspect of special education and must be incorporated across all coursework (even if not specifically a “weekly topic” in the syllabus).

NBI 24-22 Claim 2: The committee’s concern is about the disconnect with the initiatives of HIDOE’s Exceptional Support Branch (Special Education) and the Teacher Leader Institute’s vision for teacher leadership.

This concern is also unsubstantiated. In fact, in our formal response, we provided the following information:

“...we have consistently and purposefully collaborated with HIDOE state-level representatives to ensure that this program meets the specific needs of Hawai‘i’s educational system. During the development of our federally funded grant application, HIDOE state representatives provided detailed ideas and recommendations for incorporation into our courses. These recommendations were integrated directly into the program design and inform how we prepare teacher leaders to address the unique challenges in Hawai‘i’s schools.

Furthermore, we have received constructive feedback from HIDOE partners and have used this feedback to identify additional ways to strengthen this partnership and grow the teacher leaders who will emerge from the program. It is important to note that in addition to working with HIDOE partners at the State Office (in Special Education), the State Director of Special Education is a member of the advisory board for the federally funded grant.

This strong partnership with HIDOE underscores our commitment to providing a program that is both relevant and responsive to the needs of Hawai‘i’s educational system while also equipping teacher leaders with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives necessary for success.”

I am happy to provide letters of support that were provided to us for our federally funded project upon request. We received support from many HIDOE State Level representatives including, [REDACTED] (Superintendent) and [REDACTED] (Director, Exceptional Support Branch). Dr. [REDACTED], Educational Specialist at the Office of Student Support Services, Exceptional Support Branch has collaborated with our team to ensure we are aligned with HIDOE initiatives.

NBI 24-22 Claim 3: Reliance on hybrid (synchronous and asynchronous) learning raises concerns regarding the Teacher Leader Students’ ability to practice content and collaborate within the K-12 school setting.

The review committee expressed concerns about the hybrid format of the program, stating:

“This format limits opportunities for teacher leaders to practice and refine essential leadership and collaboration skills, particularly in facilitating meetings and learning experiences within the school context.”

It is important to clarify that this program is a job-embedded program where candidates actively work in schools while completing coursework. Assignments are designed to directly connect to their roles as educators, allowing them to engage in leadership experiences, practice collaboration, and reflect on their work in real-time. These job-embedded assignments provide meaningful, authentic opportunities for candidates to develop and refine their leadership and collaboration skills within the K-12 school

setting.

We are particularly concerned about **the initial draft of NBI 24-22 (received via email from Director [REDACTED] on January 9, 2024), which mischaracterized the program as entirely asynchronous.**

While this error has since been corrected (upon our request), the feedback has also shifted. In the original version (in which the review team stated we had an asynchronous program), we were asked to provide “synchronous virtual **or** in-person interactions. The revised feedback now states we need to provide in-person opportunities. Not only does this seem contradictory, it raises broader concerns that other critical aspects of the program may have been overlooked during the review process.

Regardless, we maintain that this program’s synchronous virtual learning sessions provide robust opportunities for interaction, feedback, and peer learning. These sessions ensure statewide accessibility while maintaining the rigor and relevance of the coursework. Additionally, job-embedded assignments throughout the program allow candidates to apply their learning directly within their professional contexts, ensuring practical skill development.

Requiring in-person instruction would create unnecessary barriers for teachers across Hawai‘i, particularly those in rural or remote areas. The program’s hybrid format was intentionally designed to balance accessibility and rigor, ensuring that candidates statewide can participate without sacrificing the quality of their experience. Meeting in person to teach classes should not be a requisite of the program when synchronous learning, combined with job-embedded assignments, effectively supports candidates in achieving the program’s objectives.

We respectfully assert that the program provides ample opportunities for candidates to engage in practical experiences, receive feedback, and develop the skills necessary to navigate leadership challenges, including those encountered during IEP meetings and other collaborative settings. The mischaracterization of the program’s format highlights a need for further clarity in the review process to ensure a fair and comprehensive evaluation.

Having addressed each claim outlined in the NBI with specific evidence, the following describes two broader concerns that emerged during this review process: the interpretation and application of **HAR §8-54-19** and the review’s disproportionate focus on critiquing the special education program rather than assessing alignment with the **ETS Teacher Leader Standards**, which were the core focus of this Add-a-Field application (similar to UH Hilo’s Teacher Leader Program--see [NBI 18-12](#)). These overarching issues reveal inconsistencies in the review process and raise critical questions about the criteria used for evaluation.

1. Clarification Needed on HAR §8-54-19

There is a significant inconsistency in how the review team and members of the Board have interpreted HAR §8-54-19. While the review team concluded that **HAR §8-54-19(5), the Clinical Practice requirement**, is not applicable because the program is designed for licensed educators, this interpretation is not directly supported by the language of the HAR. While we agree with the decision to exclude formal clinical practice hours as a requirement, we note that this interpretation is not explicitly stated in the guidance manual. This raises important questions about how other aspects of HAR §8-54-19 have been interpreted and applied to this Add-a-Field program. Please note, however, that we do describe clinical experiences that are (job) embedded and appropriate for graduate students who are already licensed.

In **NBI 24-22**, the Board states:

“The HAR §8-54-19(1-5) states that educator preparation programs submitting initial or adding a field application program ‘must provide evidence’ of meeting HAR requirements.”

It should be clarified that the HAR does not explicitly refer to initial or adding a field application in this part of the document. Instead, **HAR §8-54-19 (1-5)** refers broadly to “educator preparation programs” and does not explicitly differentiate between initial licensure programs and Add-a-Field programs. Furthermore, it is unclear to me whether this statement in the NBI is intended to suggest that clinical practices are now considered a requirement for Add-a-Field programs (contradicting the review team’s original feedback).

These inconsistencies and ambiguities highlight the need for clear and consistent guidance regarding the application of HAR requirements to programs designed for licensed educators. Without explicit clarification, it is difficult to understand how the review team determined which components of HAR §8-54-19 are applicable and how these interpretations align with the distinct purpose of Add-a-Field programs.

Although we have addressed HAR requirements in ways appropriate for graduate-level candidates, we seek clarification on what is actually outlined in the HAR and how it applies to Add-a-Field programs. Specifically:

- Why is **HAR §8-54-19(5) (Clinical Practices)** deemed unnecessary for licensed educators, yet all other components of **HAR §8-54-19** are assumed to apply without question?
- Is it appropriate for graduate-level Add-a-Field programs to be held to standards used for initial licensure programs, particularly when candidates have already completed licensure requirements?

We respectfully assert that our program has met HAR requirements in a meaningful way for licensed graduate-level candidates, but it seems we are being held to an interpretation of the HAR rather than what is explicitly stated. This lack of clarity creates inconsistencies in the evaluation process and raises concerns about the fairness and applicability of the review criteria for Add-a-Field programs.

2. Concerns Regarding the Focus of the Review

The most significant concern with this review is the disproportionate focus on critiquing our already accredited special education program while providing no feedback on how the program aligns with the **ETS Teacher Leader Standards**, which are the core focus of this Add-a-Field application. The purpose of this proposal was to demonstrate the program’s alignment with the Teacher Leader standards, yet the feedback from the review committee failed to address this critical aspect.

Instead, the review heavily scrutinized our special education program, which has already been accredited and recognized as meeting advanced licensure requirements. In addition, at the federal level, we have been awarded external funding to prepare these leaders, further affirming the program’s rigor and relevance. Despite this recognition, the review team made extensive critical statements about the program.

We question the evaluation rubric and process used to assess this application. If the review team did not provide feedback on how the program aligns with the **ETS Teacher Leader Standards**, how was alignment to these standards evaluated? The lack of clarity and transparency in this process raises concerns about whether the review criteria were applied consistently and fairly.

We respectfully request:

- clarification on the criteria and process used to evaluate alignment with the **ETS Teacher Leader Standards** and why the focus of the review deviated so significantly from the stated purpose of

- the application.
- These concerns should be addressed and clarified, ensuring that add-a-field programs are evaluated fairly and have clear criteria that reflect their purpose and scope.

In addition, given the inconsistencies and inaccuracies of the review process and report, **I do not support the decision in NBI 24-22. I also request that Members of the Board consider all of the evidence shared as you cast your vote.**

Our program remains committed to preparing exceptional special education teacher leaders who can meet the unique needs of Hawai'i's schools and students, and we stand ready to collaborate to ensure that this important goal is achieved.

Sara Cook, PhD
Associate Professor
MEd Leadership and Research Track Chair
Department of Special Education
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa