



## Support for HB 4091, Pacific Islander Student Success Bill

February 3, 2022

Alii, Aloha, Hafa Adai, Iakwe, Kasalelei, Malo 'e lelei, Ran Anim, Kasalelei, Talofa and Tirowand Chair Alonso Leon, Vice-Chairs Neron and Weber and members of the House Education committee,

We write to you as the Oregon Pacific Islander Coalition (OPIC) **in support of House Bill 4091**. OPIC is a collective of Pacific Islander led and serving organizations, and individual leaders organizing to create thriving Pacific Islander (Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian) communities rooted in our many indigenous values, languages, cultures, and histories. OPIC originally formed in April 2020 as a community-led COVID-19 Response Task Force. Our leaders knew firsthand that **the existing burdens of chronic illnesses and the lack of Pacific Islander-specific public health infrastructure would result in devastating impacts** for Oregon's Pacific Islander communities unless we acted in collaboration with one another.

Through this effort our organizations have displayed the power of Pacific Islander-led work - organizing testing and vaccine clinics, distributing financial relief, and being trusted sources of information to our most vulnerable community members. Many local public health authorities lean on this expertise and the relationships of our leaders to address the ongoing impacts of COVID-19. Despite these efforts, **Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPIs) had the highest case rates of COVID-19 among all races and ethnicities in Oregon in 2020** speaking to the urgent need for a well-resourced and concerted effort between government and community leaders to address the long existing inequities NHPI communities experience.<sup>1</sup>

These inequities include a severe lack of support and poor outcomes in Oregon's education system for NHPI students. Education is a key upstream social determinant of health that protects communities against chronic illnesses, and thus, hospitalization and death due to COVID-19.<sup>2 3</sup> In 2020-2021, NHPI students in grades

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oregonlive.com/coronavirus/2020/07/pacific-islanders-have-higher-covid-19-rates-than-any-other-race-in-oregon.html>

<sup>2</sup> "Education Access and Quality", Social Determinants of Health, CDC Healthy People 2030, accessed 1/31/2022.

<sup>3</sup> Kaholokula JK, Samoa RA, Miyamoto RES, Palafox N, Daniels. COVID-19 special column: COVID-19 hits Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities the hardest. *Hawaii J Health Soc Welf.* 2020;79:144-6

9-12 had the **highest rate of being chronically absent** at 47.6% , the **second lowest graduation rate** at 76.6%, and the **lowest rate of students on track to graduate** at 57.4%.<sup>4</sup> It is critical to understand that despite these educational outcomes, **NHPI communities are fiercely committed to the development and success of future generations.**

What quantitative data, and aggregate categories like Asian Pacific Islander (API), fails to capture is the unique structural barriers that NHPI students navigate. The financial hardship, language access issues, and cultural and familial responsibilities placed on our youth often clash with Western systems of education. Access to resources that meet the unique needs of NHPI students and families is difficult to come by. Micronesian students and families who migrate to the U.S. through the COFA (Compact of Free Association) are allowed to enter the U.S. without restrictions, but cannot be granted full citizenship status. This has limited COFA islanders access to important resources. It was not until December 2020 that COFA Islanders had full access to medicaid and **COFA islanders remain ineligible to access FEMA's COVID-19 funeral assistance funds.** A hardship that continues to impact Micronesian families, and thus students, as the COVID-19 pandemic persists.

These experiences **continue to remain invisible because education and health data that drives Oregon's decision-making fails to disaggregate Pacific Islanders from the larger Asian category,** and provide more **granular level data to highlight the unique needs within the 10,000+ islands, twenty-two nations, and vast cultures and ethnicities represented in Oregon's Pacific Islander communities.** House Bill 4091 provides Oregon with the opportunity to develop a robust and culturally specific effort to support NHPI students. This includes designing culturally-specific interventions, data disaggregation, and partnership with community-leaders who are already working to advance the educational experiences of NHPI youth. We urge you to **support HB4091** and invest in the future of Oregon's Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities.

Sincerely,



Alyshia Alohalani Macaysa on behalf of the Oregon Pacific Islander Coalition

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**Additional Signatures Page Follows →**

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/reportcards/Documents/rptcard2021.pdf>

**Coalition Members:**

Samoan Pacific Development Corporation

United Territories of Pacific Islanders Alliance - Portland

Micronesian Islander Community

Ka 'Aha Lāhui O 'Olekona Hawaiian Civic Club of Oregon and SW Washington

Living Islands

Le'o 'o e Ofa

Oregon Marshallese Community Association

**Individual Members:**

Makerusa Porotesano, M.Ed OPIC Executive Committee

Aileen Duldulao, PhD, MSW, OPIC Data Advisor

Virgnia Luka, MS, OPIC Community Engagement and Education Advisor

Jackie Leung, JD, MS, MIC Executive Director

**Additional Supporting Organizations:**

Coalition of Communities of Color