



**TESTIMONY OF
THE DEPARTMENT OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
KA 'OIHANA O KA LOIO KUHINA
THIRTY-THIRD LEGISLATURE, 2025**

ON THE FOLLOWING MEASURE:

H.B. NO. 1500, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS.

BEFORE THE:

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

DATE: Tuesday, February 11, 2025 **TIME:** 2:01 p.m.

LOCATION: State Capitol, Room 309

TESTIFIER(S): Anne E. Lopez, Attorney General, or
Anne T. Horiuchi or Randall M. Wat, Deputy Attorneys General

Chair Woodson and Members of the Committee:

The Department of the Attorney General (Department) provides the following comments.

The bill repeals the authority of the Department of Education (DOE) to set the price for school meals. The bill accomplishes this by removing the entire text of section 302A-405(a), Hawaii Revised Statutes (HRS). Page 1, lines 4-10.

Removing the DOE's authority to set meal prices, as accomplished in the bill, has the effect of also striking the DOE's mandate to use rule-making to set a lower price for meals ("the department by rule shall provide a lower rate or free meals to children based on their economic need."). Section 302A-405(a), HRS. The Department suggests that the DOE should retain this rule-making authority. To achieve this, we recommend retaining a portion of section 302A-405(a), HRS, as follows:

§302A-405 School cafeterias; funds; expenditures. (a) The ~~[price for school meals shall be set by the department to ensure that moneys received from the sale of the meals shall be not less than one-half of the cost of preparing the meals. The prices for school meals may be adjusted annually based on the previous year's costs rounded to the nearest five cents; provided that the]~~ department by rule shall provide a lower rate or free meals to children based on their economic need.

This suggested revision would replace the text of the bill on page 1, lines 3 through 10, and subsections (b) and (c) would not be re-numbered.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on this bill.

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR



KEITH T. HAYASHI
SUPERINTENDENT

STATE OF HAWAII
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
KA 'OIHANA HO'ONA'AUAO
P.O. BOX 2360
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96804

Date: 02/11/2025

Time: 02:01 PM

Location: 309 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Committee: House Education

Department: Education

Person Testifying: Keith T. Hayashi, Superintendent of Education

Bill Title: HB 1500 RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS.

Purpose of Bill: Repeals the authority of the Department of Education to set the price for school meals.

Department's Position:

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on HB 1500.

Repealing the authority of the Department to set the price for school meals places the School Food Service Branch (SFSB) annual food budget at extreme risk for a shortfall. The State would need to subsidize what is not received through Federal claim reimbursements. Increasing school meal costs is driven by local food costs and meal program needs are reviewed annually. The Department instead requests that the requirement be lowered to "not less than one-quarter of the cost of preparing the meals" as reflected in HB 1075.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this measure.



HOUSE BILL 1500, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS

FEBRUARY 11, 2025 · EDN HEARING

POSITION: Support.

RATIONALE: The Democratic Party of Hawai'i Education Caucus **supports** HB 1500, relating to school meals, which repeals the authority of the Department of Education to set the price for school meals.

Hungry children can't learn.

Currently, under HRS §302A-405, the DOE is required to set school meal prices at an amount that covers half of total student meal costs. This led the department to propose significant increases in student meal prices earlier this year (along with proposals to increase a range of other student fees). HIDOE requested approval from the Board of Education to nearly double the cost of school meals over the next four years. School lunches would have increased from \$2.50 for elementary and middle school students and \$2.75 for high school students to \$4.75 and \$5.00 by the 2028-2029 school year. This would be tremendously harmful for working families, who already face one of the highest costs of living in the nation.

According to a new ALICE (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed) report, nearly half (46 percent) of ALICE households struggle with consistent food access. The report also found that over one-third (37 percent) of households have considered leaving Hawai'i due to high living and

housing costs. **As we repeal the statutory provision that compels the DOE to raise student meal prices, we should also support free school meals for all, which would expand access to food security for children who may not otherwise be able to eat.** Two out of three families that are struggling with Hawai'i's cost of living are currently ineligible for free school meals through the federal free lunch program. Studies have shown that schools that implement free school meals experience gains in Math and English test scores equivalent to six additional weeks of school.

As the National Education Association has stated, through universal free school meals programs, "We can grow generations of healthy eaters and save our country billions." School meals cost less per student when more students participate in a free meal program. An article in *Nutrients* entitled "Universal Free Meals Associated with Lower Meal Costs While Maintaining Nutritional Quality" found that **schools that participated in a universal meal program spent 67 and 58 cents less per lunch and breakfast**, respectively, while maintaining the same nutritional quality.

Nutrition is essential to academic success. This bill will help to ensure that Hawai'i's keiki are healthy and ready to reach their full potential.

Contact: educationcaucusdph@gmail.com

To: House Committee on Education
Re: **HB 1500 – Relating to School Meals**
Hawai'i State Capitol & Via Videoconference
February 11, 2025, 2:01 PM

Dear Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, and Committee Members,

On behalf of Hawai'i Children's Action Network Speaks!, I am writing in **SUPPORT of HB 1500**. This bill repeals the authority of the Department of Education to set the price for school meals.

Hawai'i public schools provide students with nutritious meals through the federal National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. Currently, students qualify for free school meals if their families earn up to 130% of the federal poverty level (FPL) and for reduced-price lunch if their income is between 130% and 185% of the FPL.

Many of the families who have to pay the full price for school meals struggle to make ends meet. For example, **a family of four that makes \$67,000 per year doesn't qualify for free or reduced-price school meals**,¹ while the ALICE household survival budget to be able to afford the "bare-minimum costs of basic necessities" for that same family nearly \$108,000.² If that family has two students eating breakfast and lunch at school, they currently pay about \$1,300 per year for those meals.

This bill addresses **a problematic provision in current state law that the DOE cited to justify raising school meal prices even higher** at a Board of Education meeting last month,³ to levels that would put Hawai'i at or above the 90th percentile of school meal prices in the nation.⁴

There is NO federal mandate about the full price level for school meals, yet current state law sets that level at not less than one half of the cost of preparing the meals. **Rather than further burden students and their families with higher school meal prices, it makes sense to simply remove the state price mandate altogether.**

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide this testimony. Please pass this bill.

Thank you,
Nicole Woo
Director of Research and Economic Policy

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<https://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/TeachingAndLearning/HealthAndNutrition/StudentHealthResources/Pages/FreeReducedLunch.aspx>

² <https://www.auw.org/about/alice-initiative/alice-reports/>

³ <https://www.civilbeat.org/2025/01/hawai%ca%bbi-families-could-face-big-price-hike-for-school-meals/>

⁴ <https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024-Trends-Report.pdf>



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Hawai'i Farm to School Network

Hawai'i Oral Health Coalition

Hawai'i Public Health Training Hui

Healthy Eating + Active Living

Kūpuna Collective/Healthy Aging &
Community Living

Public Health Workforce Development

Date: February 10, 2025

To: Representative Justin H. Woodson, Chair
Representative Trish La Chica, Vice Chair
Members of the House Committee on Education

RE: Support for HB 1500, Relating to School Meals

Hrg: Tuesday, February 11, 2025, at 2:01 PM, Conference Room 309

Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI)¹ and the Healthy Eating, Active Living² (HEAL) Coalition **supports HB 1500**, which repeals the requirement that the Department of Education set school cafeteria meal prices at no less than half the cost of meal preparation.

One in three families in Hawai'i face food insecurity, leaving many students to go hungry throughout the school day. One in ten keiki in Hawai'i skip meals due to food insecurity. Hawai'i can ensure all students are able to eat by removing this provision and providing free school meals for all students.

Meal Revenues Make Up Only a Tiny Fraction of the Education Budget

The Department of Education has an annual budget of over \$2 billion, with meal revenues totaling around \$20 million per year, or just 1% of the overall budget. Collecting meal prices from students is not necessary to keep the Department of Education functioning. Students receive free education regardless of income level and the nutrition they need to learn should be free too.

Half of Struggling Families are Currently Ineligible for Meal Subsidies

The current federal free and reduced-price school meals programs fail to support all students in need. Eligibility is limited to families earning below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) for free meals and below 185% for reduced-price meals, even though a family needs at least 300% of the

¹ Hawai'i Public Health Institute's mission is to advance health and wellness for the people and islands of Hawai'i. We do this through expanding our understanding of what creates health of people and place, fostering partnerships, and cultivating programs to improve policies, systems, and the environments where people live, learn, work, age, and play.

² The Healthy Eating + Active Living (HEAL) Coalition, formerly known as the Obesity Prevention Task Force, was created by the legislature in 2012 and is comprised of over 60 statewide organizations. The HEAL Coalition works to make recommendations to reshape Hawai'i's school, work, community, and health care environments, making healthier lifestyles obtainable for all Hawai'i residents.



FPL to meet basic living expenses. As a result, half of the families earning below this threshold receive no meal assistance at all.

This large assistance gap leaves behind many ALICE families who are struggling to make ends meet. As a result, countless students go hungry throughout the school day, impacting their health, well-being, and ability to learn.

Health Risks

Students experiencing food insecurity face a higher risk of stress, depression, and chronic disease. By failing to ensure they have access to meals during the school day, we are undermining their health, development, and future success. Removing the cost provision will expand access to nutritious meals, helping students receive the nourishment they need to grow, learn, and thrive.

Please support HB 1500 and pave the way for free school meals for all keiki.

Mahalo,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nate Hix". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Nate Hix
Director of Policy and Advocacy



HAWAII APPLESEED
CENTER FOR LAW & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

LATE

Testimony of the Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice
Support for HB 1500 – Relating to School Meals
House Committee on Education
Tuesday, February 11, 2025, at 2:01pm

Dear Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 1500. This bill would eliminate the requirement that the Department of Education set school meal prices at least half the meal preparation cost.

We wholeheartedly support any measure that would expand access to free school meals, and this bill would remove one significant statutory obstacle to that goal. **Beyond removing this statutory limitation, we hope that the legislature will also make the bold move to provide universal free meals for all students, as is proposed by another bill the committee is considering today, HB 757.**

For some Hawai‘i children, school meals are the only balanced, nutritious meals they receive in a day. Research consistently links proper nutrition to better educational and health outcomes and conversely, students who miss meals tend to perform poorly in school.¹ Meals are more than just nutrition—they are an essential school supply, and we should not be passing this cost on to struggling families, and putting these students at risk of falling behind in life.

We are pleased that the Hawai‘i legislature is acknowledging this important issue, and considering this first step in the right direction. Thank you for your consideration.

¹ Amy E. Schwartz & Michah W. Rothbart, “Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance,” Maxwell School Center for Policy Research, July 2019.

HB-1500

Submitted on: 2/10/2025 1:54:34 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/11/2025 2:01:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Rachel Ebert	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

It is already hard enough for families to support themselves in Hawaii. Please don't do this, which would make feeding our children so much harder.