



HAWAI‘I CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION **KOMIKINA PONO KIWILA O HAWAI‘I**

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Wednesday, April 2, 2025 10:01 a.m.
Conference Room 211 & Videoconference
State Capitol, 415 South Beretania Street

To:

[COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS](#)

Senator Donovan M. Dela Cruz, Chair

Senator Sharon Y. Moriwaki, Vice Chair

From: Dr. William J. Puette, Chair
and Commissioners of the Hawai‘i Civil Rights Commission

Re: H.B. 620 H.D. 1 S.D. 1 Relating to Education

Testimony in SUPPORT

The Hawai‘i Civil Rights Commission (HCRC) carries out the Hawai‘i constitutional mandate that no person shall be discriminated against in the exercise of their civil rights. Art. I, Sec. 5. HCRC enforces laws protecting the people of Hawai‘i from discrimination in the areas of housing, employment, public accommodations, and in state and state-funded services.

The purpose of H.B. 620 H.D. 1, S.D.1 is to create a Braille literacy resource center and provide pro-activ Braille services for low vision and blind students attending department of education schools. Promoting literacy and opportunity for low vision and blind students through the provision of Braille educational services will serve to provide equal educational opportunities for students, allowing them and equal opportunity to participate in education and all of the positive benefits of literacy including life-satisfaction and self-esteem. Hawai‘i has long been a refuge of linguistic diversity and literacy. Higher rates of Braille literacy will serve to increase independence, inclusion, and diversity benefitting our whole community.

HCRC supports H.B. 620 H.D. 1, S.D.1.



DISABILITY AND COMMUNICATION ACCESS BOARD

1010 Richards Street, Room 118 • Honolulu, Hawaii 96813
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April 2, 2025

TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

House Bill 620 HD1 SD1 – Relating to Education

The Disability and Communication Access Board (DCAB) supports House Bill 620 HD1 SD1 – Relating to Education. This bill establishes braille literacy as a policy of the State. Requires literacy assessments for eligible low vision and blind students to include braille instruction and the use of braille. Authorizes the Department of Education to adopt administrative rules. Establishes the Braille Literacy Resource Center. Appropriates funds. Effective 7/1/2050. (SD1)

Braille literacy is essential for students who are blind or have low vision to learn and post-graduation, obtain and maintain remunerative employment. Some students have vision which diminishes over time, and by that point the Department of Education decides Braille is appropriate the student is about to age out of the public school system. House Bill 620 HD1 SD1 ensures that the accommodation desires of the student are given primary consideration.

Thank you for considering our position.

Respectfully submitted,

KIRBY L. SHAW
Executive Director

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR
KE KIA'ĀINA



RYAN I. YAMANE
DIRECTOR
KA LUNA HO'OKELE

JOSEPH CAMPOS II
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
KA HOPE LUNA HO'OKELE

STATE OF HAWAII
KA MOKU'ĀINA O HAWAI'I
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
KA 'OIHANA MĀLAMA LAWELawe KANAKA
Office of the Director
P. O. Box 339
Honolulu, Hawaii 96809-0339

TRISTA SPEER
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
KA HOPE LUNA HO'OKELE

April 1, 2025

TO: The Honorable Senator Donovan M. Dela Cruz, Chair
Senate Committee on Ways and Means

FROM: Ryan I. Yamane, Director

SUBJECT: **HB 620 HD1 SD1 – RELATING TO EDUCATION.**

Hearing: April 2, 2025, 10:01 a.m.
Conference Room 211 & Videoconference, State Capitol

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: The Department of Human Services (DHS) supports this measure as it provides expanded educational and employment opportunities for students who are blind or low vision. DHS defers to the Department of the Attorney General and the Department of Education (DOE) on the preferred language and implementation, and provides comments.

PURPOSE: This measure establishes braille literacy as a policy of the State. It requires literacy assessments for eligible low vision and blind students to include braille instruction and the use of braille. Authorizes the Department of Education to adopt administrative rules. Establishes the Braille Literacy Resource Center. Appropriates funds. Effective 7/1/2050. (SD1)

The House Committee on Education amended this measure by:

- (1) Changing the effective date to July 1, 3000; and
- (2) Making technical, nonsubstantive amendments for the purposes of clarity, consistency, and style.

The Senate Committee on Education amended this measure by:

- (1) Deleting its contents and inserting the comments of SB 530, SD 1, a substantially similar measure, which:
 - (A) Establishes braille literacy as a policy of the State;
 - (B) Requires section 504 plans or individualized education programs to provide low vision or blind students the opportunity to receive braille educational services and administer literacy assessments for eligible low vision and blind students to include braille instruction and the use of braille;
 - (C) Establishes the Braille Literacy Resource Center; and
 - (D) Appropriates funds for the establishment of the Braille Literacy Resource Center; and
- (2) Making technical, nonsubstantive amendments for the purposes of clarity and consistency. (SD1)

Ho'opono Services for the Blind, a branch of the DHS Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), recognizes that reading and writing skills are essential for blind individuals who are seeking higher education and competitive, integrated employment. Notably, technology is not a replacement for literacy.

Ho'opono Services for the Blind works with blind and low vision individuals to teach many skills, such as orientation and mobility, home management, Braille, technology, and other independent living skills, to prepare them for vocational training, higher education, and employment. Building skills and confidence in these areas contributes to our consumers' sense of independence and empowerment, enabling them to become contributing members of their families and communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in support of this measure.

National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii
Testimony submitted by James Gashel, legislative chair

Senate Ways and Means (WAM) Committee

Thirty-third Legislature, 2025 regular session

April 2, 2025, 10:01 am, hearing on HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Ways and Means committee members. I am James Gashel, National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Hawaii legislative chair, proudly supporting HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1. Thank you for considering this important bill for decision making. HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1, declares a pro-active Braille literacy approach and policy for our state, which is much needed and long overdue.

This bill has lots of powerful words, saying blind people, and particularly blind keiki matter to the legislature and our people in the Aloha State. Literacy education is fundamental to success in life. When we're blind, our literacy toolbox must include strong Braille reading and writing skills. HB620 HD 1, S.D. 1, affirms this understanding.

We're please to note that this bill enjoys the expressed support of Hawaii-based agencies and organizations, including:

Department of Education (DOE), State of Hawaii;
Department of Human Services (DHS), State of Hawaii;
Ho'opono Services for the Blind, State of Hawaii;
National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Hawaii;
Hawaii State Committee of Blind Vendors; and
Hawaii Organization of Parents of Blind Children; and
Additional support of numerous individuals.

Speaking on behalf of NFB of Hawaii and our blind keiki members too, I am proud to ask you to join these supporters and pass HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1. Standing up for literacy is never the wrong thing to do. Please affirm this value for the blind people in our state today and tomorrow. Mahalo for your consideration.

To: Senator Donovan M. Dela Cruz, Chair
Senator Sharon Y. Moriwaki, Vice Chair
Senate Committee on Ways and Means

From: Chevelle Davis, MPH - Director of Early Childhood & Health Policy
Hawai'i Children's Action Network Speaks!

Subject: Measure H.B. No. 620, H.D. 1, S.D. 1 – Relating to Education

Hearing: Wednesday, April 2, 2025, at 10:01 AM, Conference Room 211

POSITION: STRONG SUPPORT

Aloha e Chair Dela Cruz, Vice Chair Moriwaki, and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of Hawai'i Children's Action Network (HCAN) Speaks!, mahalo for the opportunity to submit testimony in **STRONG SUPPORT of H.B. No. 620, H.D. 1, S.D. 1**, which establishes braille literacy as a policy of the State, requires literacy assessments for eligible low vision and blind students to include braille instruction and use, authorizes the Department of Education to adopt administrative rules, establishes the Braille Literacy Resource Center, and appropriates necessary funds.

Braille literacy is essential to ensuring that children who are blind or have low vision receive the education and opportunities they need to thrive. Research has shown that proficiency in braille significantly increases academic achievement, employment rates, and independence for people who are blind or have low vision. Despite advances in technology, braille remains a crucial tool for literacy and lifelong learning.

Unfortunately, many students in Hawai'i who would benefit from braille instruction do not receive adequate support due to a lack of resources and trained educators. By requiring literacy assessments to include braille instruction where appropriate, this bill ensures that eligible students are provided with the tools they need to develop essential literacy skills. Additionally, establishing the Braille Literacy Resource Center will strengthen the State's capacity to support students, families, and educators by providing training, resources, and advocacy for braille education.

Investing in braille literacy is an investment in equity, accessibility, and the future success of Hawai'i's keiki. This bill will help ensure that all students, regardless of visual ability, have access to the high-quality education they deserve. HCAN Speaks! urges the Legislature to pass this critical measure and allocate the necessary funding to support its successful implementation.

HB-620-SD-1

Submitted on: 3/29/2025 4:54:52 PM

Testimony for WAM on 4/2/2025 10:01:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Marie Kouthoofd	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Testimony of Marie Kouthoofd in SUPPORT of HB620 HD1 SD1: Braille Literacy Education Act

Dear Chair Dela Cruz, Vice Chair, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Marie Kouthoofd, and I stand in strong support of HB620 HD1 SD1. The Braille Literacy Education Act ensures that blind and low-vision students receive proper assessments, Braille instruction when needed, and access to a Braille resource center.

About 70% of blind and low-vision adults are unemployed. Literacy is a major factor. Those who learn Braille are far more likely to find meaningful employment. Braille is literacy—and without it, we are not just leaving blind and low-vision students behind; we are placing a stumbling block in front of them before they even begin.

I know this firsthand. I was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa at age seven and told my vision would worsen. But because I still had usable vision, Braille was never offered.

As my sight declined, I was left trying to catch up—struggling to access information that should have been within reach.

Had I been taught Braille early, I could have transitioned smoothly as my vision declined, using both visual and tactile input. I could have built fluency while I still had sight and carried that foundation with me as I lost it. Instead, I was forced to rely heavily on speech, without the tactile literacy skills that should have been developing alongside my vision loss.

I continue to struggle today because of the lack of early instruction, as shown by my limited proficiency in Braille. I should be reaching for Braille instinctively, but instead I work hard just to recognize tactile symbol, skills that were never properly wired. Early learning is crucial.

HB620 HD1 SD1 is about making sure no student has to face the same uphill battle I did. It's about giving them the tools they need from the start so they can build a future with the critical skills they need to succeed.

I can't go back and fix my past, but I can give my testimony today in hopes of changing the future for the next generation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
Marie Kouthoofd

Brandon Young

3/30/2025

Testimony submitted by Brandon Young

Senate Ways and Means (WAM) Committee

Thirty-third Legislature, 2025 regular session

April 2, 2025, 10:01 am, hearing on HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Ways and Means committee members. I am Brandon Young, proudly supporting HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1. Thank you for considering this important bill for decision making. HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1, declares a pro-active Braille literacy approach and policy for our state, which is much needed and long overdue.

This bill has lots of powerful words, saying blind people, and particularly blind keiki, matter to the legislature and our people in the Aloha State. But words alone are not enough—true literacy requires action, and for blind children, that action must include a solid foundation in Braille from an early age. Braille is not optional—it is essential. It is the key to reading, writing, learning, and full participation in both the classroom and society.

Far too often, blind students are denied access to Braille instruction, resulting in academic disadvantages that persist into adulthood. We would never dream of sending a sighted child to school without the opportunity to learn to read. Yet for blind children, this continues to happen when Braille is not actively taught and supported in our education system. HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1, addresses this inequity head-on by declaring that Braille literacy is a right—not a privilege—and must be made available as early and as thoroughly as possible.

We are pleased to note that this bill enjoys the expressed support of Hawaii-based agencies and organizations, including:

Department of Education (DOE), State of Hawaii;

Department of Human Services (DHS), State of Hawaii;

Ho‘opono Services for the Blind, State of Hawaii;

National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Hawaii;

Hawaii State Committee of Blind Vendors;

Hawaii Organization of Parents of Blind Children; and

Additional support of numerous individuals.

Speaking on behalf of the NFB of Hawaii and our blind keiki members too, I am proud to ask you to join these supporters and pass HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1. Standing up for literacy is never the wrong thing to do. Please affirm this value for blind people in our state today and tomorrow by ensuring that Braille is recognized and taught as the core literacy tool it is. Mahalo for your consideration.

HB-620-SD-1

Submitted on: 3/31/2025 6:08:50 AM

Testimony for WAM on 4/2/2025 10:01:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Ann Lemke	Individual	Comments	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Hello,committee chair, vice chair and members,

My name is Ann Lemke and I am a blind retired professional testifying on support of the Hawaii Braille education act. It appears that this legislation enjoys broad support including that of the Department of Education and the Department of Health.

This legislation can ensure that Hawaii's blind and visually-impaired keiki will have the opportunity to learn Braille.

When I was a child, I had some functional vision, so educators did not present Braille as a serious option. As with so many other people, I lost my remaining sight. If I had not sought out a blind friend who agreed to teach me Braille, I might have remained practically illiterate. Instead, I completed almost 45 years working in higher education. I used Braille every day and I still do as a retired person. In point of fact, I am writing this testimony in Braille with a small bluetooth Braille keyboard.

Yes, Braille matters!

Ann Lemke, Ph.D., UH windward, retired

HB-620-SD-1

Submitted on: 3/31/2025 11:14:40 AM

Testimony for WAM on 4/2/2025 10:01:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Donald Sakamoto	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Testimony of Donald Sakamoto

Senate Ways and Means Committee (WAM)

Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session

April 2, 2025, 10:01 am, hearing on HB620 H. D. 1 S. D. 1

Good Morning Chair, Vice Chair, and members. I am Donald Sakamoto, testifying to support HB620 H.D. 1 S. d. 1, in promoting Braille literacy for low vision and blind students in K-12 education.

HB620 H. D. 1 S. d 1, declares a” pro-active Braille literacy approach and policy for our state, which is truly much needed and long overdue.

This bill has lots of powerful words, saying blind people, and particularly blind keiki matter to the legislature and our people in the Aloha State. Literacy education is fundamental to success in life. When we're blind, our literacy toolbox must include strong braille reading and writing skills. Furthermore, this bill truly affirms this understanding.

Many years ago, a blind friend of mine named Terrence Tom learned how to read braille at a young age and became a successful attorney and served on the Hawaii House of representative 48 District for some many years.

We truly need to prepare in having this bill to proceed on to allow our blind students to have the same opportunities that Terrence Tom experienced. Famous “by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail” by Benjamin Franklin.

Thank you so much for allowing me to testify on this important bill.

HB-620-SD-1

Submitted on: 4/1/2025 8:36:16 AM

Testimony for WAM on 4/2/2025 10:01:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Emily Cruz	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Ways and Means committee members. My name is Emily Cruz, and I strongly support HB620.

I have Stargardt disease, a genetic eye condition that causes vision loss from a young age. My sister has it too, and growing up, we struggled in school without the right resources. Simple things like reading the board or keeping up with assignments were a daily challenge, and we were left to figure things out on our own. If we had access to Braille education and better support, school would have been so much easier.

This bill will give blind and low-vision students the opportunities I wish I had. Braille literacy leads to greater independence, confidence, and future job success. Right now, only 17 out of 160 blind or low-vision students in Hawai'i receive Braille instruction, that needs to change. HB620 will help make sure kids get the education they deserve.

I urge you to pass this bill and give blind and low-vision students a real chance to succeed. Thank you for your time.

HB-620-SD-1

Submitted on: 4/1/2025 9:10:23 AM

Testimony for WAM on 4/2/2025 10:01:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Tabatha Mitchell	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Committee,

Thank you kindly for scheduling this hearing and for giving our blind kids an opportunity to be taught alongside their sighted peers within the schools and campuses throughout our Hawaiian islands. My daughter, a graduate of Kalaheo High School on Oahu, is now in her first year of college. She is living on campus in a dorm with a stranger for a room mate. She is walking to classes independently just like her other classmates. She eats in the dining hall with her friends from all walks of life. She is celebrating her wins and lamenting her losses as she studies to be a Biochemist.

ALL of this is possible because she was taught Braille alongside her sighted peers. When they were learning to read and write with a pencil or crayon, she was learning to read Braille with her fingers and to write Braille with her Braillewriter.

Every ounce of her accomplishments in life thus far correlate with her being exposed to Braille at the same time that her sighted peers were being exposed to print. It matters. And, it us a huge deficit that impacts our blind citizens FOR LIFE. Please support this bill. It is hugely important. It truly has lifelong impacts.

Mahalo for the opportunity to share my lived experience with my daughter that happens to be blind.

HB-620-SD-1

Submitted on: 4/1/2025 9:45:25 AM

Testimony for WAM on 4/2/2025 10:01:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Jessica Parsell	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

My name is Jessica, and I am honored to submit my strong support for HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1. This bill is not just about education policy—it is about ensuring true equity for blind students in Hawaii. Literacy is the foundation of success, and for blind children, that means Braille. Without it, they face significant barriers in education, employment, and independence.

HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1 takes a bold and necessary step by affirming that Braille literacy is a right, not a privilege. Despite decades of advancements, too many blind keiki are still denied the opportunity to learn Braille, leaving them at an academic disadvantage that follows them into adulthood. We would never consider withholding reading instruction from sighted children—so why should blind students be treated any differently?

This bill is more than words on paper. It sends a clear message that Hawaii values and prioritizes the education of blind students. It ensures that Braille is not treated as an afterthought but as an essential tool for literacy and success. By passing HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1, we commit to real action that empowers blind children with the skills they need to thrive.

I am proud to stand with the many organizations and individuals supporting this legislation, including:

- The Hawaii Department of Education (DOE)
- The Hawaii Department of Human Services (DHS)
- Ho‘opono Services for the Blind
- The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Hawaii
- The Hawaii State Committee of Blind Vendors
- The Hawaii Organization of Parents of Blind Children
- And numerous advocates across our community

Mahalo for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to ensuring a future where every child—regardless of vision—has the opportunity to become fully literate. I urge you to pass HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1.

Jessica Parsell

LATE

Testimony submitted by Katie Keim

Senate Ways and Means (WAM) Committee

Thirty-third Legislature, 2025 regular session

April 2, 2025, 10:01 am, hearing on HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Ways and Means committee members. My name is Katie Keim proudly supporting HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1. Mahalo for considering this important bill for decision making. HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1, declares a pro-active Braille literacy approach and policy for our state, which is much needed and long overdue.

I stand in strong support of the testimony submitted by James Gashel, Legislative chair, on behalf of the NFB of Hawaii.

As a blind professional and in my past career and independent instructor and advocate for blind children in DOE, I am pleased to note that this bill enjoys the expressed support of Hawaii-based agencies and organizations, including:

Department of Education (DOE), State of Hawaii;

Department of Human Services (DHS), State of Hawaii;

Ho'opono Services for the Blind, State of Hawaii;

National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Hawaii;

Hawaii State Committee of Blind Vendors;

Hawaii Organization of Parents of Blind Children; and

Additional support of numerous individuals.

Mahalo for hearing my testimony and moving this important bill forward in support.

LATE

Testimony submitted by Virgil Stinnett

Senate Ways and Means (WAM) Committee

Thirty-third Legislature, 2025 regular session

April 2, 2025, 10:01 am, hearing on HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Ways and Means committee members. My name is Virgil Stinnett, President of the NFB of Hawaii, strongly supporting HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1. Mahalo for considering this important bill for decision making. HB620 H.D. 1, S.D. 1, declares a pro-active Braille literacy approach and policy for our state, which is much needed and long overdue.

I stand in support of the testimony submitted by James Gashel, Legislative chair, on behalf of the NFB of Hawaii.

Mahalo for receiving my testimony and moving this important bill forward in support this session.