

JAN 23 2026

A BILL FOR AN ACT

RELATING TO EDUCATION.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF HAWAII:

1 SECTION 1. The legislature finds that the BridgeUSA J-1
2 visa program, administered by the United States Department of
3 State, offers foreign teachers an opportunity to teach in
4 accredited schools in the United States serving students in
5 grades kindergarten through twelve. The J-1 visa program was
6 also designed to help address the ongoing chronic teacher
7 shortage while providing academic and cultural exchange
8 opportunities to visiting teachers. Furthermore, the J-1 visa
9 program offers the opportunity for foreign teachers of various
10 backgrounds to become a part of educational communities to
11 reflect the diversity of student populations across the nation.

12 The legislature further finds that although 22.4 per cent
13 of the public school student population in Hawaii identifies as
14 Filipino, only 7.4 per cent of educators share the same ethnic
15 background. According to the federal Institute of Education
16 Sciences, diverse educator representation has a significantly
17 positive effect on student learning. Teachers of color can



1 often help close achievement gaps and improve attendance and
2 behavioral outcomes and are highly rated by students of all
3 backgrounds. Beyond academic benefits, having educators who
4 reflect their students' backgrounds can inspire future goals.
5 Seeing role models in the classroom can encourage students to
6 pursue similar career paths. Presently, the State's
7 implementation of the J-1 visa program has aimed to expose
8 Filipino children to Filipino educators, inspiring them to
9 consider careers in education. Moreover, the J-1 visa program
10 has contributed to classroom diversity while eliminating certain
11 barriers to academic achievement.

12 Since its implementation, the J-1 visa program has been a
13 resounding success. To date, three hundred sixty-five
14 internationally certified educators, primarily from the
15 Philippines, serve in one hundred and one public schools
16 statewide. Similar to the Philippines, Kenya also has strong
17 educational equivalencies, and the State currently employs four
18 educators from Kenya with twenty-five additional educators from
19 Africa set to arrive in the 2026-2027 school year. Educators
20 from the J-1 visa program are beneficially affecting the State's
21 diverse classrooms, and the program has strong support from



1 community organizations, including groups from the Filipino
2 community.

3 However, the State's existing licensing rules limit the
4 full potential of prospective international teachers
5 participating in the J-1 visa program. Because the State does
6 not recognize foreign teaching licenses for reciprocity,
7 visiting international teachers are required to complete a
8 series of additional examinations that often cost more than
9 \$1,000 and demand extensive preparation time. These
10 requirements place a disproportionate burden on educators who
11 are already adapting to a new cultural and professional
12 environment.

13 As a result, many teachers in the J-1 visa program are
14 unable to complete the State's full licensure requirements
15 within the three-year duration of their visa program. This
16 inability prevents them from remaining for the optional two-year
17 extension permitted under federal rules -- an extension that
18 many other states use by offering streamlined visiting-
19 international-teacher permits for the full duration of the
20 teachers' visas. States such as Florida, Indiana, Ohio, and



1 Texas have implemented specialized permits that allow teachers
2 to serve for the full five years of their exchange program.

3 Accordingly, the purpose of this Act is to require the
4 Hawaii teacher standards board to develop an alternative pathway
5 for a visiting international educator permit aligned to the
6 duration of the educator's J-1 visa program. By doing so, the
7 State would create a more equitable and culturally responsive
8 public educational system, strengthening teacher retention,
9 increasing instructional continuity for students, and ensuring
10 that Hawaii benefits from the full five years of service that
11 these highly qualified teachers are eligible to provide.

12 SECTION 2. Section 302A-802, Hawaii Revised Statutes, is
13 amended by amending subsection (c) to read as follows:

14 "(c) The board shall adopt policies, exempt from chapters
15 91 and 92, to initiate the following:

16 (1) Develop criteria allowing more individuals with trade
17 or industry experience to teach in vocational,
18 technical, and career pathway programs, and criteria
19 for the issuance of permits allowing qualified
20 individuals to teach when recommended by the
21 superintendent or the commission, when appropriate.



1 The department or the commission, when appropriate,
2 shall be responsible for the review and acceptance of
3 the relevant licenses, certificates, or other
4 qualifications related to an individual's vocational,
5 technical, or career pathway education-related
6 experience that the department or the commission, when
7 appropriate, deems necessary for a permit. The
8 department or the commission, when appropriate, shall
9 have the authority to waive the requirement of a
10 bachelor's degree to teach in a vocation, technical,
11 or career pathway education program;

12 (2) Develop a plan to accept teachers from any state as
13 long as they have completed state-approved teacher
14 education programs and pass relevant Hawaii teacher
15 examinations or their equivalent;

16 (3) Clarify the requirements, on a state-by-state basis,
17 for out-of-state licensed teachers to obtain a license
18 in Hawaii;

19 (4) Develop a plan to facilitate licensing for those who
20 intend to teach in Hawaii immersion programs, the
21 island of Niihau, or any other extraordinary situation



1 as defined by the superintendent or the
2 superintendent's designee, or by the commission, when
3 appropriate;

4 (5) Pursue full teacher license reciprocity with all other
5 states; [and]

6 (6) Develop a plan to facilitate an optional certification
7 for those who teach or intend to teach at private
8 schools[.]; and

9 (7) Develop an alternative pathway for a visiting
10 international educator permit to promote cultural
11 exchange between the State and foreign nations. The
12 permit shall authorize a visiting international
13 educator who agrees to come to the United States
14 temporarily as a full-time teacher of record in an
15 accredited primary or secondary school to teach all
16 subjects and grade levels for which the educator is
17 qualified and is employed by the department. A
18 visiting international educator permit developed by
19 the department shall remain valid for the duration
20 necessary to complete the educator's participation in
21 a visiting international educator exchange program."



1 SECTION 3. Statutory material to be repealed is bracketed
2 and stricken. New statutory material is underscored.

3 SECTION 4. This Act shall take effect upon its approval
4 and shall be repealed on June 30, 2031; provided that section
5 302A-802, Hawaii Revised Statutes, shall be reenacted in the
6 form in which it read on the day prior to the effective date of
7 this Act.

8

INTRODUCED BY:

15 a. 411



S.B. NO. 2551

Report Title:

J-1 Visa Program; Hawaii Teacher Standards Board; Visiting International Educator Permit

Description:

Requires the Hawaii Teacher Standards Board to develop an alternative pathway for a visiting international educator permit aligned to the duration of the educator's J-1 visa program. Repeals 6/30/2031.

The summary description of legislation appearing on this page is for informational purposes only and is not legislation or evidence of legislative intent.

