



**TESTIMONY OF  
THE DEPARTMENT OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL  
KA 'OIHANA O KA LOIO KUHINA  
THIRTY-THIRD LEGISLATURE, 2026**

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**ON THE FOLLOWING MEASURE:**

S.B. NO. 2395, RELATING TO STUDENT TRANSPORTATION.

**BEFORE THE:**

SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

**DATE:** Wednesday, February 4, 2026      **TIME:** 1:00 p.m.

**LOCATION:** State Capitol, Room 229

**TESTIFIER(S):** Anne E. Lopez, Attorney General, or  
Anne T. Horiuchi, Deputy Attorney General

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Chair Kim and Members of the Committee:

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

This bill requires the Department of Education (DOE) to establish a student bus fare rate system that includes free school bus passes for students whose households qualify them for free lunch or reduced-price lunch under the free and reduced-price lunch program.

There are references throughout the bill to "a free bus pass" or to "free bus passes" that could be misconstrued as including free municipal bus passes, in addition to free school bus passes. To avoid any potential misinterpretation, the Department suggests inserting the word "school" between "free" and "bus" on: page 2, lines 16, 19, and 21; page 3, lines 11-12; page 4, lines 6, 11, 16, and 20; page 5, lines 5, 9, and 17; page 6, lines 3, 10, 13, and 14; page 7, lines 3 and 12; and the report title page.

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



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

**Date:** 02/04/2026

**Time:** 01:00 PM

**Location:** CR 229 & Videoconference

**Committee:** EDU

**Department:** Education

**Person Testifying:** Keith T. Hayashi, Superintendent of Education

**Title of Bill:** SB2395, RELATING TO STUDENT TRANSPORTATION.

**Purpose of Bill:** Requires the Department of Education to establish a student bus fare rate system that includes free bus passes for students whose household qualifies the student for free lunch or reduced price lunch under the free and reduced price lunch program. Requires reports to the Legislature. Appropriates funds.

**Department's Position:**

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) appreciates the opportunity to express its concerns on SB 2395, which proposes to expand and prioritize free school bus access for students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The Department cannot support SB 2395 in its current form but looks forward to working with the Legislature to find a way forward.

While the Department supports the intent to reduce inequities for economically disadvantaged students, there are operational and regulatory considerations from both the School Food Services Branch (SFSB) and the Student Transportation Services Branch (STSB) that need to be addressed.

Under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Hawai'i Child Nutrition Programs (HCNP) regulations, the Department is not permitted to automatically share student meal eligibility information or household income data outside SFSB, even with other branches within the Department. Parents and/or guardians must authorize data sharing by checking the appropriate box on the Acknowledgement form that is part of the school bus application. If families do not grant permission, STSB cannot access the necessary information used to certify free transportation benefits based on meal eligibility status. These federal privacy protections ensure confidentiality for families but limit the Department's ability to broadly use meal data to automatically determine transportation eligibility.

Further challenges occur with schools operating under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) as the USDA does not allow SFSB to process meal benefit forms for students at CEP schools. Without this information, income cannot be appropriately identified for students to receive benefits.

Finally, the nation-wide shortage of bus drivers is a challenge that the Department is also facing here in Hawaii. As such, bus capacity is limited in several complexes statewide. Prioritizing seats solely based on free or reduced-price meal status could unintentionally limit access for other students facing transportation hardship, such as those who live far from their home school, lack safe sidewalks, or qualify under non-income-based criteria, including McKinney-Vento Act (MVA), foster care, special education services or Department-directed school placement.

The Department supports the intent of SB 2395 and shares the goal of improving equitable access to school transportation; however, compliance with federal privacy rules, unique circumstances at CEP schools, and capacity limitations require a balanced approach to ensure fairness for all students who depend on bus transportation.

The Department thanks the Committee for the opportunity to comment on SB 2395.



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Executive Director

## TESTIMONY TO THE HAWAI'I SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

**Item: SB 2395 – Relating to Student Transportation**

**Position: Support**

**Hearing: Wednesday, February 4, 2025, 1:00 pm, Room 229**

**Submitter: Osa Tui, Jr., President - Hawai'i State Teachers Association**

Dear Chair Kim, Vice Chair Kidani, and members of the committee,

The Hawai'i State Teachers Association **supports** S.B. 2395, which establishes the Hawai'i Free School Bus Access for Low-income Students Act. This measure is a critical step toward ensuring that every child in Hawai'i has a reliable way to get to the classroom. By codifying the requirement for free bus passes into Hawaii Revised Statutes, this bill provides the long-term stability that families need. It ensures that transportation remains a protected component of a student's right to education rather than a policy that could be modified without legislative oversight.

This legislation is particularly vital following the passage of S.B. 1300 (Act 139, 2025), which significantly expanded free school meals in our state. While that law correctly addresses student hunger by expanding free meal eligibility to families earning up to 300% of the federal poverty level—well beyond standard U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines—a gap remains in our transportation policy. Currently, there is no reciprocal benefit for transportation, meaning many students receiving free meals are still required to pay for school bus passes. S.B. 2395 closes this gap by ensuring that any student qualifying for free or reduced-price meals receives a free bus pass.

Beyond the financial benefits, S.B. 2395 addresses systemic barriers created by the current reservation-based system. Many low-income families struggle to secure seats due to limited internet access or inflexible work schedules. By requiring the Department of Education to prioritize these students and streamline the application process to avoid duplicative paperwork, this bill removes the hurdles that lead to chronic

absenteeism. We urge committee to pass S.B. 2395 and ensure that our progress in fighting student hunger is matched by our commitment to student mobility.

Mahalo.



January 31, 2026

**Testimony in Support of S.B. 2395  
Relating to Student Transportation**

Aloha Chair Kim, Vice Chair Kidani, and members of the Committee,

Aloha United Way stands in **support** of **S.B. 2395**, which establishes free school bus access for students from households qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch.

In Hawai'i, approximately 40% of households are below the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) threshold. These are working families who earn above the federal poverty level but still cannot afford basic necessities. For many of these families, transportation is a quiet but critical barrier to accessing education. When bus passes are unavailable or unaffordable, students face inconsistent attendance, missed learning time, and added stress on working families and caregivers.

S.B. 2395 takes an important equity step by ensuring that students who already qualify for free or reduced-price lunch are also eligible for free bus passes, with proactive identification, prioritization, and communication. This approach recognizes that a first-come, first-served system can unintentionally disadvantage families with limited internet access, language barriers, or inflexible work schedules.

Access to reliable transportation is not a luxury, but foundational to educational opportunity. Removing this barrier helps students get to school consistently, supports working families, and strengthens long-term academic and workforce outcomes, particularly for ALICE households striving to stay afloat.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge your support of S.B. 2395. Mahalo for the opportunity to testify and for your commitment to educational equity in Hawai'i.

Mahalo,

Michelle Bartell  
President & CEO  
Aloha United Way

**SB-2395**

Submitted on: 1/30/2026 10:15:30 AM

Testimony for EDU on 2/4/2026 1:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Corey Idleburg	Individual	Comments	Written Testimony Only

## Comments:

Families and students should not have to worry about who will be getting them to and from school. Our tax dollars should be able to cover all K-12 students transportation, regardless of their families income. Hawaii's high cost of living is enough for families to worry about.

**SB-2395**

Submitted on: 1/30/2026 1:15:32 PM

Testimony for EDU on 2/4/2026 1:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Megan Blazak	Individual	Comments	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Honorable Chair Kim, Vice Chair Kidani, and Members of the Committee,

As a constituent of Senate District 1, I offer the following comments on SB 2395:

Hawaii County's Hele-on Bus provides free fares to all riders until December 31, 2028. Therefore, the proposed legislation will not provide any new or additional benefits to students in Hawaii County over the next two years.

Please also consider the benefits this program would have for neighbor islands that are served by rural bus systems that do not operate like the urban Honolulu bus system. Families in Hawaii County may have concerns about the safety of the public transportation system for their school-aged children, and therefore would not benefit from the proposed program described in SB 2395. Hawaii County's bus system primarily comprises roadside "flag-stop" bus stops that do not have shelters, lighting, or security. Bus stops are located along very busy highways and minors would have to stand on the road shoulder to flag a bus down.

Nearly all buses in Hawaii County's bus system are "coach" style buses where passengers sit side-by-side facing forward unlike the layout of Honolulu's urban buses that are an "open layout" with standing areas and seats facing multiple directions. The layout of a "coach" style bus creates a physical environment where minors may not feel safe riding with other adults on the bus due to the bus driver not being able to have all passengers in their line of sight. Thank you for your consideration of these comments.



**SB-2395**

Submitted on: 1/30/2026 6:15:34 PM

Testimony for EDU on 2/4/2026 1:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
M. Leilani DeMello	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha,

I KĀKO‘O this bill.

Mahalo,

M. Leilani DeMello

‘Ōla‘a, Puna, Hawai‘i

**SB-2395**

Submitted on: 2/1/2026 1:14:23 PM

Testimony for EDU on 2/4/2026 1:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Brett Kulbis	Individual	Oppose	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Chair Kim and Committee Members,

My name is Brett Kulbis, I'm a 26yr retired Navy Veteran, who took a solemn oath to defend the Constitution from all enemies foreign and domestic, and that oath didn't expire when I retired. I live in Ewa Beach.

I am writing in **STRONG OPPOSITION** to SB-2395. While helping low-income students get to school is a good goal, this bill should not pass. The Department of Education is already failing at running the bus system we have now. We should not expand a broken system.

The Hawaii Department of Education has canceled school bus routes three years in a row when school starts. In August 2024, over 100 routes were canceled, leaving 2,900 to 3,720 students without bus service. The department knew for weeks that it did not have enough bus drivers, but it did not tell families until just days before school started.

Right now, the department is short about 130 bus drivers. The system is unstable and families cannot count on it. Why would we ask the department to give free bus passes to more students when it cannot even serve the students who already pay for bus passes?

The biggest problem with this bill is in Section 4. It says the state will spend "\$\_\_\_" (blank) dollars on this program. That is not a real number. Nobody knows how much this will cost.

The real cost could be anywhere from \$18 million to \$95 million per year, compared to the \$76 million the department already spends on buses. That is like asking voters to sign a blank check. The legislature should never pass a law that spends money without knowing how much money it will spend.

I understand that low-income families need help getting their kids to school. That is true. But this bill is not the answer right now. The Department of Education is broken. The bill has no real cost estimate. And the buses are already full.

Please vote **NO** on SB-2395.

Respectfully,

Brett Kulbis

**LATE**

February 3, 2026

Aloha Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Allie Kai-Sumiki. I am writing in support of SB2395, relating to student transportation.

I previously worked as a long-term substitute at a high school in Hilo, where I regularly saw how transportation challenges affected students' ability to attend school. Many students arrived late, missed school entirely, or walked long distances because they did not have a reliable ride to and from campus. Students often shared how difficult it was for their families to coordinate transportation around work schedules or limited resources.

These challenges were not due to a lack of motivation or care from students or families, but rather barriers built into the system. When transportation is inconsistent, students fall behind academically and experience added stress that interferes with learning.

By providing free bus passes to students who already qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, SB2395 removes a major barrier for families and supports consistent school attendance. For these reasons, I am in support of this bill.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.

Allie Kai-Sumiki