



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

ON THE FOLLOWING MEASURE:

H.B. NO. 1770, H.D. 1, RELATING TO SCHOOL BUS DRIVERS.

BEFORE THE:

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON LABOR

DATE: Thursday, February 12, 2026 **TIME:** 9:30 a.m.

LOCATION: State Capitol, Room 309

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

Chair Sayama and Members of the Committee:

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

The bill: (1) requires the Department of Education (DOE) to establish a School Bus Driver Recruitment Grant Program; (2) establishes a School Bus Driver Recruitment Special Fund; (3) establishes a Repayment Signing Bonus Program; (4) requires a report to the Legislature; and (5) appropriates funds.

Repayment of Grants

The Department suggests that additional wording regarding the repayment of grants be included in this bill. In section 2 of this bill, new section 302A-A, Hawaii Revised Statutes (HRS), starting on page 4, line 4, can be revised to insert new subsections (d) through (h)

(d) If the recipient of a grant provided pursuant to this section fails to satisfy the work requirements in accordance with [include a subsection providing for work requirements following a grant award, or utilize the thirty-six month period to retain the signing bonus], the recipient shall repay the total amount of grant funds received as a loan repayable to the department. The repayment shall be subject to the terms and conditions set by the department, including circumstances under which recipients may be eligible for deferment or forgiveness due to hardship or inability to secure employment, as well as potential for fees for the collection of delinquent repayment.

(e) Grant funds repaid by a grant recipient pursuant to subsection (d) shall be deposited into the school bus driver recruitment special fund [or an appropriate other fund should be designated here].

(f) The department may accept federal funds to support the school bus driver recruitment grant program.

(g) In accordance with chapter 103D, the department may enter into written contracts with collection agencies to collect delinquent repayment of grants owed to the department pursuant to subsection (d). A collection agency that enters into a written contract with the department to collect delinquent grant repayments pursuant to this section may collect a fee from the debtor in accordance with the terms of, and up to the amounts authorized in, the written contract.

(h) The department may adopt rules pursuant to chapter 91 to implement and administer the grant program, including the terms of repayment pursuant to subsection (d).

Repayment of Signing Bonuses

Section 3 of the bill, starting on page 7, line 1, establishes a repayment signing bonus program to be administered by the DOE, authorizing and disbursing a one-time signing bonus of \$2,000 to an individual with a commercial driver's license at the time the individual is hired as a school bus driver with the DOE. The Department suggests that additional wording regarding the repayment of the signing bonus be included in the bill. The Department suggests replacing subsections (c) through (e) on page 7, lines 7 through 16, with the following:

(c) If the recipient of a signing bonus provided by subsection (a) leaves employment voluntarily or is terminated before completing thirty-six months of employment as a school bus driver with the department of education, the recipient shall repay the total amount of the signing bonus received as a loan repayable to the department. The repayment shall be subject to the terms and conditions set by the department, including circumstances under which recipients may be eligible for deferment or forgiveness due to hardship or inability to maintain employment, as well as potential for fees for the collection of delinquent repayment.

(d) Signing bonus funds repaid by a signing bonus recipient pursuant to subsection (c) shall be deposited into the general fund [or an appropriate other fund should be inserted here].

(e) The department may accept federal funds to support the signing bonus program.

(f) In accordance with chapter 103D, the department may enter into written contracts with collection agencies to collect delinquent repayment of signing bonuses owed to the department pursuant to subsection (c). A collection agency that enters into a written contract with the department to collect delinquent signing bonus repayments pursuant to this section may collect a fee from the debtor in accordance with the terms of, and up to the amounts authorized in, the written contract.

(g) The department may adopt rules pursuant to chapter 91 to implement and administer the repayment signing bonus program, including the terms of repayment pursuant to subsection (c).

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



STATE OF HAWAII
KA MOKU'ĀINA O HAWAII
STATE COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES
'A'UNIKE MOKU'ĀPUNI NO KA NĀ KĀWAI KULA

PRINCESS VICTORIA KAMĀMALU BUILDING
1010 RICHARDS STREET, Room 122
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February 12, 2026

The Honorable Jackson D. Sayama, Chair
House Committee on Labor
The Thirty-Third Legislature
State Capitol
State of Hawai'i
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96813

Dear Chair Sayama and Committee Members:

SUBJECT: HB1770, HD1, RELATING TO SCHOOL BUS DRIVERS

The Hawai'i State Council on Developmental Disabilities is in **SUPPORT of HB1770, HD1**, Requires the Department of Education to establish a School Bus Driver Recruitment Grant Program. Establishes a School Bus Driver Recruitment Special Fund. Establishes a Repayment Signing Bonus Program.

We want to uplift the perspective of parents, including students with disabilities, who experience school transportation barriers firsthand. Families share that when bus service is unreliable, it leads to missed instructional time, lost wages, and added stress on households already managing medical, behavioral, or accessibility needs. For Kaiapuni families and those on neighbor islands who must travel long distances to reach appropriate programs, these challenges are even greater.

By improving local access to training, helping cover licensing costs, and supporting mobile training options, this measure addresses barriers that limit participation from rural and neighbor island residents. Strengthening community-based pathways can improve route stability, increase local capacity, and make transportation services more responsive to the communities they serve.

The Council also encourages improved communication with families. A clear point of contact and greater transparency about how routes and schools are prioritized would help address concerns families have about receiving timely information from the Student Transportation Branch.

Outreach through PTAs and community networks, along with practical supports during training and pathways for existing school staff, could further strengthen participation and service reliability.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **support of HB1770, HD1**.

Sincerely,

Daintry Bartoldus, Executive Administrator



LATE *Testimony submitted late may not be considered by the Committee for decision making purposes.

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

Date: 02/12/2026
Time: 09:30 AM
Location: 309 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE
Committee: LAB

Department: Education

Person Testifying: Keith T. Hayashi, Superintendent of Education

Title of Bill: HB1770, HD1, RELATING TO SCHOOL BUS DRIVERS.

Purpose of Bill: Requires the Department of Education to establish a School Bus Driver Recruitment Grant Program. Establishes a School Bus Driver Recruitment Special Fund. Establishes a Repayment Signing Bonus Program. Requires a report to the Legislature. Appropriates funds. Effective 7/1/3000. (HD1)

Department's Position:

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on HB 1770, HD1, which proposes a series of State-administered initiatives addressing the statewide school bus driver shortage. While the Department shares the Legislature's commitment to strengthening the school bus driver workforce, the Department must highlight substantial implementation challenges within the current operating model.

Under the Department's existing student transportation system, all school bus services are delivered through private contractors, who provide drivers, vehicles, maintenance, training, and operational services as bundled capacity. School bus drivers are employees of these private companies—not the Department. As a result, the Department is not positioned to directly administer or oversee hiring incentives, signing bonuses, repayment requirements, or other employment-based initiatives contemplated in HB 1770, HD1.

The bill's provisions assume an employment relationship between the Department and drivers that does not exist. Administering grant payments, tracking driver hiring and separation, enforcing repayment obligations, and maintaining detailed personnel-type records would require an entirely new compliance and oversight framework within the Department, necessitating significant restructuring of the Student Transportation Services Branch and expansion of staffing capacity the Department currently does not possess. The Department does not maintain personnel records for contractor-employed drivers and does not have authority to require contractors to produce or verify many of the data points mandated in the bill's quarterly reporting requirements.

Furthermore, many of the incentives envisioned in HB 1770, HD1 are already being offered directly by school bus contractors as part of their recruitment and retention efforts. Signing bonuses, training reimbursements, paid CDL training support, and internal retention incentives are already implemented by our current school bus contractors. Because the driver workforce is employer-based within the private carriers, incentives administered by the State would duplicate existing contractor efforts while introducing complex administrative responsibilities for the Department without improving hiring authority or workforce control.

The Department supports legislative efforts to expand access to CDL training statewide and to strengthen the driver pipeline; however, these efforts must align with the existing contracted-service model and be designed to operate through—or in partnership with—the private contractors who employ and manage the school bus driver workforce. Without such alignment, the initiatives in HB 1770, HD1 may be infeasible for the Department to administer and may not yield meaningful improvements in driver recruitment.

The Department appreciates the Legislature's attention to this issue and thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide comments on HB 1770, HD1.



HOUSE BILL 1770, HD1, RELATING TO SCHOOL BUS SERVICES

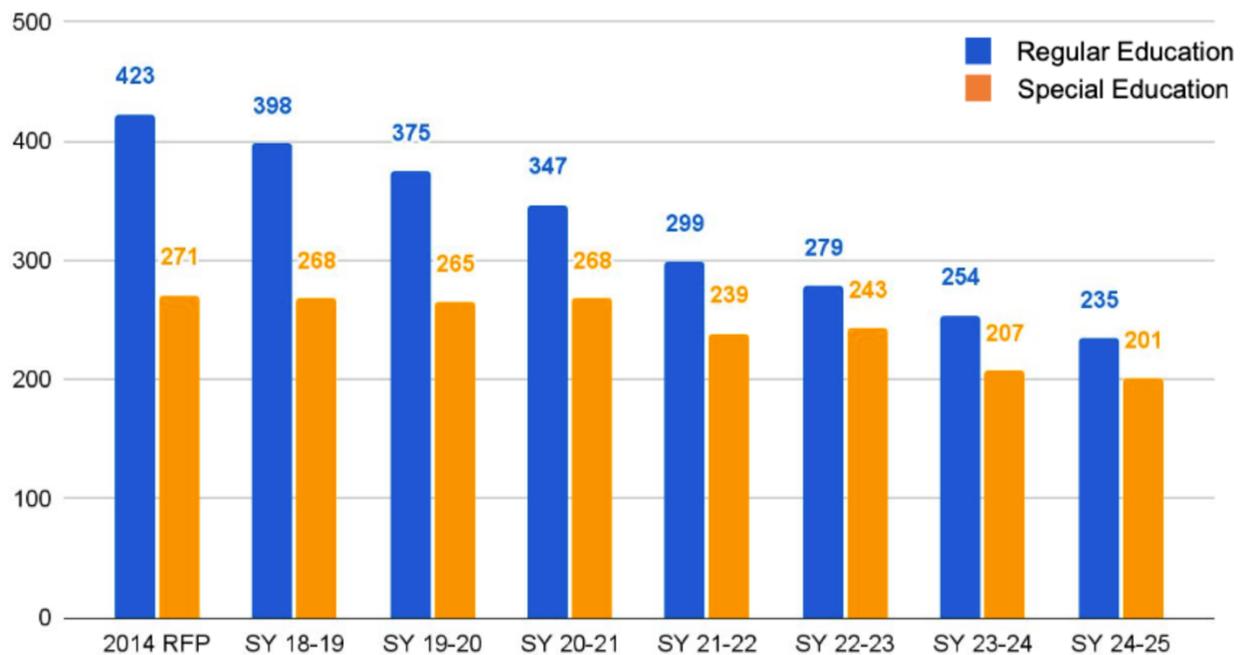
FEBRUARY 12, 2026 · LAB HEARING

POSITION: Support.

RATIONALE: The Democratic Party of Hawai'i Education Caucus **supports** HB 1770, HD1, relating to school bus drivers, which requires the Department of Education to establish a School Bus Driver Recruitment Grant Program; establishes a School Bus Driver Recruitment Special Fund; establishes a Repayment Signing Bonus Program; establishes a School Bus Driver Outreach and Pathway Program; and requires a report to the Legislature.

School bus service is essential for getting students to and from school, particularly for students who lack other transportation options or face hardship in obtaining school transportation services due to economic difficulty. Yet, chronic bus driver shortages have led to the cancellation or consolidation of many school bus routes, especially in West O'ahu and in rural and remote areas of the neighbor islands, reducing transportation options for local families.

In the decade preceding 2025, the number of bus drivers serving DOE students has fallen from 423 serving general education students and 271 drivers serving special education students in 2014 to just 235 drivers serving general education students and 201 serving special education students for the 2024-2025 school year. The department has made serious efforts to address this shortage, but student transportation remains a persistent problem that undermines learning.



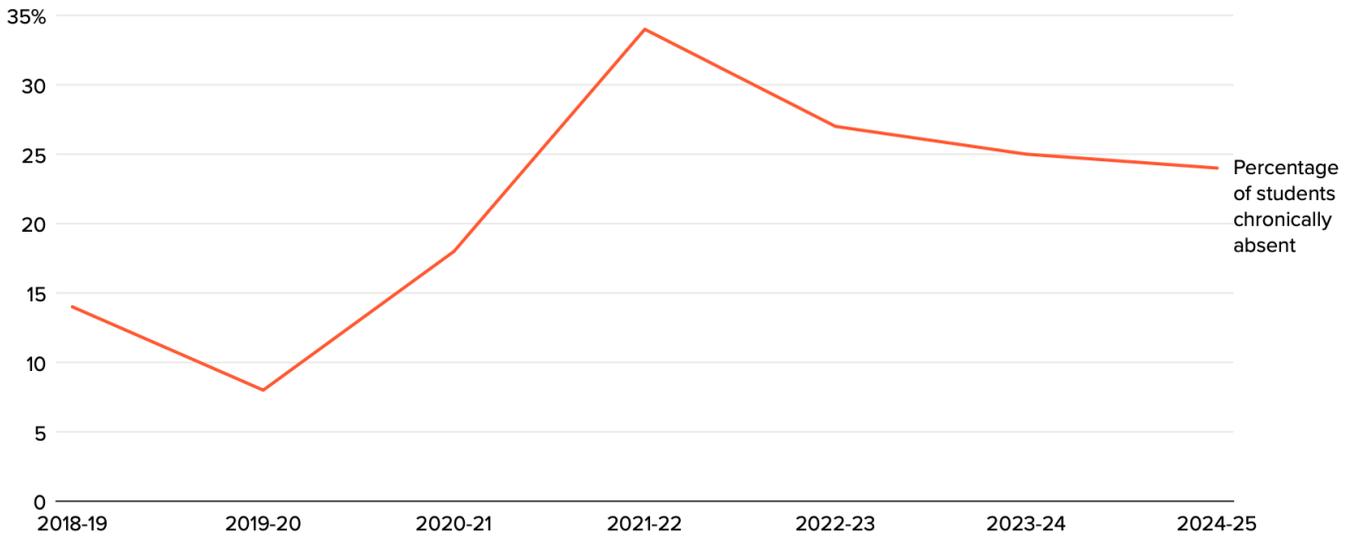
This decline has led to dramatic service disruptions, the most recent of which occurred in August of 2024 when department officials unexpectedly announced that they were temporarily suspending 108 bus routes serving middle and high school students in central O’ahu and students of nearly all grade levels on the southern and eastern portions of Hawai’i Island.

Similarly, in July of 2023, the department cancelled or suspended school bus service for fourteen schools statewide, which impacted nearly 1,400 students across O’ahu and Kaua’i. The bus driver shortage has severely impacted Hawai’i Island school communities, where county bus services do not operate as frequently as on O’ahu and where many students face commutes that can exceed one and a half hours each way.

A lack of adequate school bus transportation service exacerbates chronic absenteeism. Rates of chronic absenteeism are highest in rural, remote, and socioeconomically disadvantaged school communities. In the 2024-2025 school year, 24 percent of Hawai’i students were chronically absent from school, meaning they missed fifteen or more days of class. Numerous studies show that chronic absenteeism hampers student achievement and lowers graduation rates.

State Chronic Absenteeism Rates, 2018 to 2024

Students who are chronically absent miss 18 or more days of the school year.



Chronic absenteeism rates for the 2019-20 school year are only calculated for the first three quarters of the year because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chart: Megan Tagami/Civil Beat • Source: [Hawai'i Department of Education](#)

Governor Josh Green announced an emergency proclamation related to the school bus shortage on August 17, 2023, which allows the Department of Transportation to grant exemptions for the use of vehicles other than school buses to transport students and allows commercial driver's license holders with a "P" endorsement for driving passenger vehicles to operate student transportation vehicles. The order allows for alternative vehicles—such as vans and minibuses—to transport students in impacted communities. While this proclamation was significant and commendable, more needs to be done, to sustain critical bus service programs for Hawai'i's public school students and their 'ohana. This measure provides the funding necessary for innovative approaches to bus driver recruitment and retention, as well as school-level solutions to student transportation challenges that endanger the potential of our keiki.

Contact: educationcaucusdph@gmail.com · 808-679-7454

HB-1770-HD-1

Submitted on: 2/12/2026 3:32:53 AM

Testimony for LAB on 2/12/2026 9:30:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Angela Young	CARES	Support	Remotely Via Zoom

Comments:

support

HB-1770-HD-1

Submitted on: 2/10/2026 10:37:19 AM

Testimony for LAB on 2/12/2026 9:30:00 AM

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

Comments:

Honorable Chair Sayama, Vice Chair Lee, and Members of the Committee,

As a constituent of House District 2, I support the intent of this measure. This bill attempts to address the severe and persistent shortage of qualified bus drivers across the state. All students and families deserve safe, reliable, and affordable access to transportation to and from school. Please pass this measure.

HB-1770-HD-1

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 7:55:50 PM

Testimony for LAB on 2/12/2026 9:30:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Tiffany Edwards Hunt	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Testimony in SUPPORT of HB 1770

Relating to School Bus Driver Recruitment and Retention

Aloha Chairs, Vice-Chairs, and Members of the Committees,

I am writing in **strong support of HB 1770**. As the Student Activities Coordinator at Keaau Middle School, I witness daily how the school bus driver shortage isn't just a budget line item—it is a direct threat to student engagement and equity. In the Keaau-Ka'u-Pahoa district, our families are already spread across vast distances; when we lose a route because we cannot fill a position, students lose their only reliable way to get to school.

While the financial incentives in HB 1770 are a vital start, recruitment is only half the battle. **Retention is failing because of driver morale.**

The Need for Driver Empowerment and Safety

Drivers in our district have shared that one of their greatest stressors is the lack of authority to manage "incessant bad behavior."

- **The Problem:** Drivers are frequently forced to transport students who have a documented history of disruptive or unsafe behavior because the Department of Education does not ban them from ridership.
- **The Impact:** This creates a hostile work environment. It is exhausting to manage a heavy vehicle on rural roads while simultaneously acting as an unsupported disciplinarian. This "moral injury" is a primary reason drivers leave the profession.

Accountability for Families and Students

We must ensure our families understand that **bus ridership is a privilege**. I strongly urge that the implementation of HB 1770 includes provisions to:

1. **Empower Drivers:** Give drivers the formal authority to recommend immediate ridership suspension for repeat offenders.

2. **Ensure DOE Backing:** Require the DOE to uphold these bans when safety is at risk, rather than forcing the driver to continue to endure the behavior.
3. **Clear Communication:** Use this bill as a vehicle to signal to the community that bad behavior will not be tolerated and *will* affect a student's ability to ride.

If we want to fill these positions, we must make the job one where drivers feel safe, respected, and empowered.

Mahalo for your time and for supporting our Keiki and the professionals who transport them.

Sincerely,

Tiffany Edwards Hunt

Student Activities Coordinator

Keaau Middle School