

STATE OF HAWAII
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
KA 'OIHANA OLAKINO
P. O. Box 3378
Honolulu, HI 96801-3378
doh.testimony@doh.hawaii.gov

Testimony COMMENTING on H.B. 1779, H.D. 1
RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS

REPRESENTATIVE CHRIS TODD, CHAIR
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

Hearing Date: March 4, 2026
10:00 AM

Room Number: Conference Room 308
and Videoconference

1 **Fiscal Implications:** The Department of Health (DOH) defers to the Department of Education
2 (DOE) and Hawaii State Public Charter School Commission for fiscal implications of
3 implementation.

4 **Department Position:** The DOH offers comments on House Bill 1779, House Draft 1 (H.B. 1779
5 H.D. 1) which expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to
6 all public school students, including public charter school students, regardless of whether the
7 student participates in a federal school meals program.

8 **Department Testimony:** Proper and adequate nutrition is essential for student focus, classroom
9 engagement, and academic success. Students who are food insecure and do not have access to
10 consistent, healthy meals are at increased risk for stress, anxiety and depression, and chronic
11 diseases. Providing universal free school meals enhances the nutritional intake of students and
12 promotes equitable access to the opportunity to learn and engage in school.

13 The National School Lunch program is vital but currently fails to reach every food
14 insecure child in need in Hawaii. One in three families in Hawaii is food insecure, and one in five
15 households had members who were hungry but did not eat because there was not enough

1 money for food.¹ Hawaii’s current eligibility threshold for participation in the free school
2 breakfast and lunch program is 300% of the federal poverty level (\$113,000 for a family of
3 four), however 50% of households in Hawaii with children earn below the Asset Limited,
4 Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) Threshold and cannot afford the basics needed to live
5 and work in the modern economy.² Many students from ALICE households start their
6 schooldays hungry and nearly half (46%) of ALICE households struggle with consistent food
7 access.² Additionally, students themselves report going hungry because there was not enough
8 food in their home.³

9 Providing universal free school meals ensures that Hawaii’s keiki have equitable access
10 to healthy, nutritious meals and drastically reduces the administrative burden on both families
11 and schools caused by the current requirement to demonstrate income and need.

12 Hawaii can help address the alarming food insecurity in our communities by joining
13 eight other states implementing a universal free schools meals program and ensuring our keiki
14 have the support and access they need to healthy, nutritious meals to enhance their health,
15 well-being, and academic success across our state.

16 **Offered Amendments:** None.

17 Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this measure.

¹ The State of Food Insecurity in Hawai’i 2024-2025. Hawai’i Foodbank. Accessed January 26, 2026.

[HawaiiFoodbank FoodInsecurityReport_2025-25.pdf](#)

² ALICE in Hawai’i: 2024 Facts and Figures. Aloha United Way. Accessed January 26, 2026.

https://www.auw.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2024_ALICE-Report_Facts-and-Figures_v-25-01-09.pdf

³ Hawaii State Departments of Education and Health. Hawaii Health Data Warehouse, Hawaii School Health Survey: Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Nutrition/Health - went hungry, past 30 days by Year, 2023. Published September 20, 2024. Accessed January 26, 2026.



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: 03/04/2026
Time: 10:00 AM
Location: 308 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE
Committee: FIN

Department: Education

Person Testifying: Keith T. Hayashi, Superintendent of Education

Title of Bill: HB1779, HD1, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS.

Purpose of Bill: Expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all public school students, including public charter school students, regardless of whether the student participates in a federal school meals program. Effective 7/1/3000. (HD1)

Department's Position:

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) supports the intent of HB 1779, HD 1. The school meal program operates in each of the Department's non-charter schools and offers meals to its students in elementary through high school. The Department understands the importance of child nutrition and its role in improving overall student health and agrees that children should have adequate meals provided to them, including breakfast and lunch. It supports free meals if the State can subsidize what is not received through Federal claim reimbursements.

In order to carry this out, funds would need to be appropriated to cover the cost. The Department would request that the appropriation in the measure be directed to the Department's School Food Services Branch (SFSB) which manages the school food program operations and the state funding for the Department's non-charter schools.

The cost to cover the cash sales for all students who currently pay for their meals would be approximately \$16,058,765, at the current meal participation rates. This number ranges due to several variables, including reimbursement rate changes, meal participation and labor increases, food and supply cost increases, and lower return rates of meal benefit applications, resulting in more students qualifying at the paid reimbursement rate. For example, currently, lunch participation is approximately 50%. If that were to increase to 60%, the fiscal need would be at minimum \$26,526,938 for all students who would normally pay for their meals because of the increase in unsubsidized meal costs.

The entire amount of funding in addition to the recurring allocation the Department would need for Universal Meals for all students (including covering the cash sales for reduced price, ALICE and paid students, and the unsubsidized cost of meals) would be \$50,393,332 at the current participation rates. At 60% participation, the entire amount

of funding needed would be \$111,445,939. If fewer students submit meal benefit applications when meals are free for all, the costs would rise.

The Department appreciates this proposal and asks that any additional funding does not affect the Governor's approved budget requests. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this measure.

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR



MAKALAPUA ALENCASTRE, ED. D.
CHAIRPERSON

STATE OF HAWAII
STATE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION
(‘AHA KULA HO‘ĀMANA)

<http://CharterCommission.Hawaii.Gov>
1164 Bishop Street, Suite 1100, Honolulu, Hawaii 96813
Tel: (808) 586-3775 Fax: (808) 586-3776

FOR: HB 1779 RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS
DATE: March 4, 2026
TIME: 10:00 A.M.
COMMITTEE: Committee on Finance
ROOM: Conference Room 423 & Videoconference
FROM: Ed H. Noh, Ed. D., Executive Director
State Public Charter School Commission

Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi and members of the Committee:

The State Public Charter School Commission (“Commission”) appreciates the opportunity to offer testimony in **SUPPORT with COMMENTS on HB 1779 HD1** which expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all public school students, including public charter school students, regardless of whether the student participates in a federal school meals program.

The State Public Charter School Commission supports the intent of this bill. However, not all charter schools are able to provide meals for their students due to lack of facilities, and those that do subsidize meals do so through their per pupil allocation. Each charter school develops its own budget addressing the needs of the students they serve. In addition, the governing board of each charter school would set policies respectful of collection of fees. Therefore, the Commission suggests the following language:

- **§302D- School meals. (c) Charter school governing boards may adopt rules or policies governing the collection of funds for student meal accounts with a negative fund balance; provided that no rule or policy shall prohibit feeding a student or otherwise conflict with subsection (b).**

Charter Schools serve just under 14,000 students without the support of centralized purchasing or food preparation. The Commission appreciates the legislature considering a separate appropriation to charter schools to support this worthy goal to provide free healthy meals to all public school students, which includes charter schools.

The Commission is available to work with this committee, the DOE, all school food related agencies, and our public charter schools in moving this legislation forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.



Chair Todd
Vice Chair Takenouchi
House Committee on Finance

Tuesday, March 3rd, 2026
2:00 PM

TESTIMONY IN STRONG SUPPORT OF HB1779 RELATING TO SCHOOL LUNCHESES

Aloha Members of the House Committee on Finance.

The Hawai‘i State Youth Commission was first created through Act 106 in 2018, “to advise the governor and legislature on the effects of legislative policies, needs, assessments, priorities, programs, and budgets concerning the youth of the State.” The Hawai‘i State Youth Commission’s Education legislative committee is in strong support of House Bill 1779.

As young people, we understand how deeply hunger impacts learning. The bill highlights research showing that food insecurity is linked to higher risks of stress, depression, and chronic disease, and that universal free school meals have led to measurable academic gains, the equivalent of six additional weeks of learning. When students are nourished, we are more engaged, more present, and more able to succeed.

Just as importantly, this measure affirms student dignity. The bill clearly states that no student shall be denied a meal solely for failure to pay. Universal meals remove stigma. They eliminate the visible line between who can pay and who cannot. They tell every student: you belong here, and your well-being matters.

From a youth perspective, this is about more than food. It is about equity. It is about ensuring that students from rural communities, neighbor islands, immigrant families, Native Hawaiian families, and working-class households all have the same opportunity to thrive. It is about recognizing that rising costs of living affect our families, and that supporting students is one of the strongest investments the State can make.

As Commissioners entrusted with uplifting the voices of Hawai'i's youth, we respectfully urge you to pass HB1779. No student should have to choose between learning and hunger. By advancing this bill, you are choosing to stand with students and affirm that our health, dignity, and success are priorities for this Legislature.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.

The Hawai'i State Youth Commission
hawaiistateyc@gmail.com



HIPHI Board

May Okihiro, MD, MS
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Department of Pediatrics

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Dina Shek, JD
Medical-Legal Partnership
For Children in Hawai'i

JoAnn Tsark, MPH
John A. Burns School of Medicine, Native
Hawaiian Research Office

Danette Wong Tomiyasu, MBA
Retired, Hawai'i State Department of
Health

HIPHI Initiatives

Coalition for a
Tobacco-Free Hawai'i

Community-Based Research &
Evaluation

Community Health
Worker Initiatives

Environmental Health

Hawai'i Climate Change and Health
Working Group

Hawai'i Drug & Alcohol-Free Coalitions

Hawai'i Immunization Coalition

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: March 3, 2026

To: Rep. Chris Todd, Chair
Rep. Jenna Takenouchi, Vice Chair
Members of the House Committee on Finance

RE: Support for HB 1779 HD1, Relating to School Meals

Hrg: Wednesday, March 4, 2026 at 10:00 AM, Conference Room 308

Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI)¹ and the Healthy Eating + Active Living (HEAL) Statewide Coalition² are in **support of HB 1779 HD1**, which expands free school meals to all public school students beginning in 2029-2030.

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 providing free school meals for all students.

Hunger is a Roadblock to a Strong Education

Hungry students can't learn. Providing healthy nutrition to our students will ensure they have the resources they need to thrive. Studies have shown that free school meal programs lead to improved student performance. This program is only estimated to cost around 1-2% of the Department of Education's (DOE) total budget and provide a 15% increase in test scores, a 15:1 return on investment.³

Hungry Students Face Increased Health Risks

Students experiencing food insecurity face a higher risk of stress, depression, and chronic disease.⁴ By failing to ensure they have access to meals during the school day, we are undermining their health, development, and future success.⁵

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.

³ ["Universal free lunch is linked to better test scores in New York City, new report finds"](#)

⁴ ["Food Insecurity and Psychological Distress"](#). Candice A. Meyers.

⁵ ["Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review"](#)



Free School Meals Programs Have Led to Federal Funding Increases

Eight other states—California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico and Vermont—have implemented free school meal programs, with data showing increases in their federal reimbursement funding. In California, free and reduced-price lunch enrollment rates have risen alongside the implementation of their program, further maximizing federal support for students.⁶ Hawai'i can follow the lead of these other states by implementing free school meals for all students while also increasing the federal funding we receive to support the program.

Removing Benefits Cliffs

Many students who are food insecure are not eligible for free school meals. These students need help but are unable to get it because our program isn't inclusive enough. Creating a program where all students are eligible ensures that no student facing food insecurity goes hungry.

Applications are a Barrier to Accessibility

The current system requires families to fill out paperwork that can be a barrier to enrollment.⁷ From embarrassment for participating in federal programs, to fear of being targeted by immigration, or for not having the correct paperwork to prove eligibility, there are dozens of reasons why an eligible family may not enroll in the existing meal programs.⁸ It's important we don't keep any students from accessing meals throughout the day, regardless of their situation.

Ending Stigma Based on Economic Status

Lastly, free school meals for all can remove the stigma that students feel when participating in free school meals programs.⁹ Economic situations should not play a factor in how students socialize with one another, but the existing program creates these dynamics. Removing economic status from a student's daily experience can create a more welcoming and comfortable environment for the entire student body.

Ending Childhood Hunger is Inexpensive

Using the DOE's 2025 Report on Meal Cost¹⁰ and their increased participation rate estimates, we calculated lost revenue of \$14.58 million for existing student meal purchasers, and increased input costs due to higher participation rates of \$18.09 million, leading to a total cost of HB 1779 in the 2029-2030 school year of \$32.67 million. Calculations can be found on page 3 of our testimony.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of free school meals for all.

Mahalo,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Nate Hix'.

Nate Hix

Director of Policy and Advocacy

⁶[Free or Reduced-Price Meal \(Student Poverty\) Data](#). California Department of Education.

⁷[Key Steps to Improve Access to Free and Reduced-Price School Meals](#). Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

⁸[Food Over Fear: Overcoming Barriers to Connect Latinx Immigrant Families to Federal Nutrition and Food Programs](#).

⁹[Stop the shame and the hunger: the need for school meal program reform](#).

¹⁰[Report on Meal Cost](#). Hawai'i Department of Education. December 2025.



**Estimated Costs of HB 1779
Free School Meals in 2029-2030**

The Department of Education's [Report on Meal Cost](#) shows 7.1 million student meals sold in the 2024-2025 school year. If 18% are breakfast and 82% are lunch, based on [past](#) figures, we calculate \$17.38 million in revenue on full-priced meals. Subtracting the \$2.8 million in meal prices covered in [SB 1300](#) for families with incomes below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level, that leaves total lost revenue of \$14.58 million for the 2029-2030 school year.

Lost Revenue for Existing Participants		
	Meals Served	Estimated Lost Revenue
Estimated Full-Priced \$1.10 Breakfasts in 2024-2025	1.3 million	\$1,430,000
Estimated Full-Priced \$2.75 Lunches in 2024-2025	5.8 million	\$15,950,000
Total Full Priced Meals Served in 2024-2025	7.1 million	\$17,380,000
Estimated Lost Revenue for Households <300% FPL, Covered under SB 1300		\$2,800,000
Total Estimated Lost Revenue (\$17,380,000 - \$2,800,000)		\$14,580,000

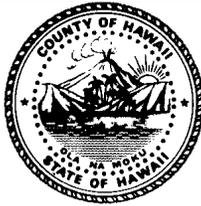
With free school meals, the DOE projects a possible increase in participation rate from 50% to 60%. That would lead to an additional 3.9 million meals. The per-meal cost is \$4.66, calculated from variable input costs including ingredients, milk, and materials. Fixed costs such as labor are excluded. This results in additional DOE costs of \$18.09 million in the 2029-2030 school year.

Additional Costs for Increased Participation		
Ingredients, Milk and Materials & Supply Cost per Meal	\$4.66	
Additional Meals Served with 60% Participation Rate	3.9 million	
Total Cost of Additional Meals (\$4.66 x 3.9 million)		\$18,090,000

Adding the lost revenue and the increased participation costs, the total estimated cost of HB 1779 in the 2029-2030 school year is \$32.67 million.

Total Estimated Cost of HB 1779 in 2029-2030		
Total Estimated Lost Revenue		\$14,580,000
Total Cost of Additional Meals		\$18,090,000
Total Estimated Cost of HB 1779 in 2029-2030		\$32,670,000

Jennifer Kagiwada
Council Member District 2 South Hilo



Office: (808) 961-8272
jennifer.kagiwada@hawaiicounty.gov

HAWAI'I COUNTY COUNCIL - DISTRICT 2

25 Aupuni Street • Hilo, Hawai'i 96720

DATE: March 3, 2026
TO: House Committee on Finance
FROM: Jennifer Kagiwada, Council Member
Council District 2
SUBJECT: HB1779

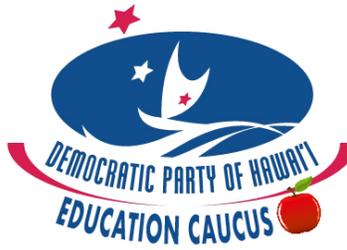
Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and esteemed Committee Members,

I am writing **in strong support of HB1779**. One in three households in Hawai'i report experiencing food insecurity. In Hawai'i County we have 43% or 90,000 individuals facing regular food insecurity. Food insecurity does not only affect individual students; it affects the entire learning environment. When even one student is distracted or struggling due to hunger, teachers must shift their focus to classroom management, and the whole class feels the impact. Ensuring all students are guaranteed access to breakfast and lunch establishes a solid baseline. It ensures that every child has the nourishment they need to focus, learn, play, and grow.

Mahalo,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jenn Kagiwada".

Jenn Kagiwada



HOUSE BILL 1779, HD1, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS

MARCH 4, 2026 · FIN HEARING

POSITION: Support.

RATIONALE: The Democratic Party of Hawai'i Education Caucus **supports** HB 1779, HD1, which expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all public school students, including public charter school students, regardless of whether the student participates in a federal school meals program.

Hungry children can't learn.

According to a recent 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. **This measure builds on last year's historic passage of Act 139—which expanded free school meals to those earning up to 300 percent of the federal poverty limit by the 2026-2027 school year—by creating a statutory mandate to extend free school meals to all students within the next five years.**

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, making this a sustainable intervention in support of learning growth. Additionally, a recent study released by the National

**Kris Coffield, Chairperson • Camron Hurt, Vice Chairperson •
Amy Perruso and Justin Hughey, SCC Members**

Bureau of Economic Research examined whether the provision of schoolwide free meals through the Community Eligibility Provision impacted school suspension rates and estimated that the chances of being suspended multiple times fell in both elementary school and in middle school.

Moreover, a 2021 study by the Brookings Institute found that schoolwide free meals improve math performance. This is further bolstered by research conducted by the Food Research and Action Center, which has noted that students who participate in school breakfast programs have improved attendance, behavior, academic performance, and achievement. Studies have clearly demonstrated the link between school meals and student success, which is especially important as schools and educators continue to strategize how to combat the lingering loss of opportunity to learn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Improving access to school meals will boost overall health outcomes, both now and in the future. Thirty million students rely on schools to provide them with breakfast and lunch every day in the United States. Those who participate in the school meal program consume breakfasts and lunches of higher nutritional quality than nonparticipants and are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables. Participation in the school breakfast program is associated with lower body mass index (BMI), lower probability of being overweight, and a lower likelihood of obesity. More Americans are sick than they are healthy: half of adults have diabetes or prediabetes; more than half of adults have cardiovascular disease; and 3 in 4 adults are overweight or obese. Healthcare costs account for 29 percent of state budgets and 28 percent of the federal budget.

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 · 808-679-7454

Date: March 4, 2026

To: Representative Chris Todd, Chair
Representative Jenna Takenouchi, Vice Chair
Members of the House Committee on Finance

From: Early Childhood Action Strategy

Re: House Bill 1779 HD1, Relating to School Meals

Early Childhood Action Strategy (ECAS) is a statewide cross-sector collaborative designed to improve the system of care for Hawai'i's youngest children and their families. ECAS partners work to align priorities for children prenatal to age eight, streamline services, maximize resources, and improve programs to support our youngest keiki.

ECAS strongly supports House Bill 1779 HD1 which would Expand free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all Department of Education students regardless of whether the student participates in a federal school meals program.

ECAS recognizes the economic situation that many families in our community face each day. It is expensive to live, work, and raise a family in this state, and this results in numerous families living at or below the federal poverty level. Furthermore, these economic factors often lead to food insecurity that affects countless local families and their children.

Moreover, we would like to particularly emphasize that the cost of providing these meals is vastly outweighed by the impact it could have on keiki in our schools. A wealth of research into school meal programs has continued to show that access to free meals has a marked impact on student test scores. If we are committed to providing our keiki with the best educational opportunities possible, supplementing their school day with free, nutritious meals is an absolute necessity.

For these reasons, ECAS strongly supports House Bill 1779 HD1.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit this testimony.



March 4, 2026

Representative Chris Todd, Chair
Representative Jenna Takenouchi, Vice Chair
Committee on Finance

American Heart Association Testimony for HB 1779 Relating to School Meals

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, Members of the Committee:

The American Heart Association stands in **strong support** of HB1779 HD1 and providing universal free school meals in Hawaii.

The situation for keiki in Hawai'i is dire. According to a recent report from the Hawai'i Foodbank, 34% of children experienced food insecurity, up from 29% back in 2023. One in five children live in homes where they did not eat enough food because of financial difficulties. One in three households experience food insecurity, with many families struggling to provide enough food for their children. This statistic has not changed since 2023. Even more concerning, 45% of households with children reported skipping meals because they couldn't afford enough food in the 2024-2025 year. This lack of proper nutrition directly impacts our keiki, leading to poor academic performance, increased health risks such as depression and anxiety, and the potential for long-term chronic diseases.

As background, during the COVID-19 public health emergency, all school meals nationwide were provided free of charge through federal funding. Although this critical waiver expired after the 2021-2022 school year, several states have since taken action to continue offering free school meals. These efforts have been proven to reduce childhood food insecurity.

American Heart Association strongly believes that healthy, nutritious meals are essential for a successful school day. When students have access to breakfast and lunch, their health, mood, and academic performance significantly improve. Unfortunately, too many keiki in Hawai'i are still forced to go hungry throughout the day. This reality underscores the urgent need for free school meals for every student in our state.

While the free National School Breakfast and Lunch programs are vital, they fail to reach every family in need. If we genuinely believe that our keiki deserve a quality education, it is imperative that we ensure they have the nourishment required to learn.

Hawai'i can help address food insecurity in our communities by joining other states, including California, Colorado, and Massachusetts, in implementing a state-funded universal free school meals program. Studies show that this important investment could result in a 15% improvement in student test scores, equivalent to an additional six weeks of school.

When students are hungry, they aren't ready to learn. Students who participate in school meals, particularly those who are experiencing food insecurity, have better health outcomes, have improved test scores, and are better able to concentrate in school.

We have the resources and the responsibility to ensure that all of our keiki have access to healthy, nutritious meals. We urge the Hawai'i State Legislature to act decisively this legislative session and provide free school meals to all students.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lauren Simpson-Gomez', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Lauren Simpson-Gomez
Hawai'i Government Relations Director



1200 Ala Kapuna Street • Honolulu, Hawai'i 96819
Tel: (808) 833-2711 • Fax: (808) 839-7106 • Web: www.hsta.org

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Andrea Eshelman
Executive Director

TESTIMONY TO THE HAWAI'I HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

Item: HB 1779, HD1 – Relating to School Meals

Position: Support

Hearing: Wednesday, March 4, 2026, 10:00 am, Room 308

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

Dear Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and members of the committee,

The Hawai'i State Teachers Association (HSTA) **supports** H.B. 1779, HD1 which expands free school meal coverage to all public school students beginning with the 2029-2030 school year. This vital measure builds upon the progress of Act 139, Session Laws of Hawai'i 2025, by ensuring that every student in a department school has access to nutritious meals, regardless of their federal eligibility status. Research indicates that universal free school meal programs are a highly cost-effective academic intervention, with the potential to raise student test scores by the equivalent of six additional weeks of school.

By removing the financial barriers to basic nutrition, we can mitigate the risks of stress and depression associated with food insecurity while fostering an environment where all keiki can focus on their education. Aligning our schools with a universal model ensures that no student in Hawai'i goes hungry and that every child has the fuel they need to succeed academically. HSTA urges the committee to pass this bill to guarantee a more equitable and healthy future for all our students.

Mahalo.



Parents And Children Together

BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIPS
THAT MATTER MOST

ParentsAndChildrenTogether.org

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1779 HD1 RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS

TO: Chair Todd, Vice-Chair Takenouchi, & Members,
House Committee on Finance
FROM: Trisha Kajimura, Vice-President of Strategy and External Affairs
DATE: March 4, 2026 at 10:00 AM

Parents and Children Together (PACT) supports HB 1779 HD1 Relating to School Meals, which expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all Department of Education students.

Founded in 1968, PACT is a statewide community-based organization providing a wide array of innovative and educational social services to families in need. Assisting more than 15,000 people across the state annually, we help identify, address, and successfully resolve challenges through our 20 programs. Among our services are early education programs, domestic violence prevention and intervention programs, child abuse prevention and intervention programs, childhood sexual abuse supportive group services, child and adolescent behavioral health programs, sex trafficking intervention, poverty prevention and community building programs.

Through our programs, we see the rise in food insecurity that our local families face. We saw this increase start during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerate through the rise of inflation and the 2023 Maui wildfire crisis. In response, we have increased direct food and financial assistance to program participants in the Kalihi and Maui communities. Additionally, we support survivors of domestic violence through the financial impact of keeping their families safe, which often includes leaving their abusive financial provider partner. Many of the survivors we serve struggle through houselessness and loss of income. Increased access to food assistance such as school meals would help these families achieve and/or maintain basic stability.

Universal Free School Meals will eliminate the social stigma of participating in a free or reduced school lunch program. Students will not be labeled as “poor” or “needy” and will be free of the negative social consequences that impact their educational experience. Students will have access to nutritious meals twice a day. Such programs in other states have shown large test score improvements and improved academic performance.¹

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Please contact me at (808) 847-3285 or tkajimura@pacthawaii.org if you have any questions.

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



March 2, 2026

Subject: Hawai'i Foodbank in Support of HB1799

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and members of the committee,

On behalf of Hawai'i Foodbank, I express our support for HB1799, Relating to School Meals. This bill expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all Department of Education students regardless of whether the student participates in a federal school meals program.

The State of Food Insecurity in Hawai'i 2024-2025, released by Hawai'i's Foodbank Hui in November of 2025, found that 34% of children face food insecurity, up from 29% in 2023. Eleven percent of children lived in households where one or more children were hungry, but the family could not afford more food. Further, in households with children, food insecurity among adults was especially high at 45%, up from 38% in 2023, and those with young children found themselves most susceptible — indicative that parents and caregivers will sacrifice their own food security before letting their children go without food.

Hawai'i Foodbank distributes food to families and individuals on O'ahu and in Kaua'i County through direct service programs and through our network of more than 250 hunger relief partners, including 59 school pantries. Last year, we served an average of over 160,000 people each month, distributing more than 22 million pounds of nutritious food, including more than 7.1 million pounds of fresh produce.

There are well-documented links between food insecurity and poor child health and behavioral outcomes, including physical, developmental, and cognitive impairments. Offering free school meals is an important step in our collective effort to reduce barriers to food access and enhance dignity for all children in Hawai'i. We urge you to consider this important measure.

With aloha,

Amy Miller
President and CEO, Hawai'i Foodbank



House Committee on Finance

Hawai'i Alliance for Progressive Action (HAPA) Supports: HB1779 HD1

Wednesday, March 4th, 2026 at: 10:00 a.m.; Conference Room 308

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi and Members of the Committee,

HAPA supports HB1779 HD1 which expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all Department of Education and Charter Schools students regardless of whether the student participates in a federal school meals program.

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity,¹ and almost half (46%) of ALICE households reported food insecurity². Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals³. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai'i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai'i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Access to healthy meals ensures better learning outcomes for students. Please support HB1779 HD1 to reduce food insecurity for our keiki!

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anne Frederick', is positioned below the 'Respectfully,' text.

Anne Frederick
Executive Director

¹ <https://hawaiifoodbank.org/food-insecurity/>

² <https://www.auw.org/auw-alice-report-2024/>

³ <chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/APECIII-Vol1.pdf>



CATHOLIC CHARITIES HAWAII

SUPPORT FOR HB 1779 HD1: RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS

TO: House Committee on Finance

FROM: Betty Lou Larson, Legislative Liaison, Catholic Charities Hawaii

Hearing: Wednesday, March 4, 2026; 10:00 AM; CR 308 or Videoconference

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members, Committee on Finance:

I am Betty Lou Larson with Catholic Charities Hawaii. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in **support of HB 1779 HD1**, which expands free school meal coverage to all Department of Education (DOE) students, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year.

Catholic Charities Hawaii (CCH) is a tax-exempt, Community-Based Organization that has provided social services in Hawaii for more than 78 years, now serving over 40,000 individuals statewide each year. CCH has programs serving children, families, elders, individuals experiencing homelessness, veterans, and immigrants. Our mission is to provide services and advocacy for Hawaii's most vulnerable. We have a long-standing history of leadership in affordable housing, homelessness solutions, and child welfare.

Catholic Charities Hawaii participates with other organizations in assisting ALICE families who are working but still are unable to afford the basic necessities of life. (ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed.) Many of these families have expressed a need for food for their kids. This bill would ensure that all students in the DOE system would have access to daily school meals. This is not only important for their health but also their educational development. Nutritious food is needed so that students can focus and learn. Free school meals also remove any stigma attached to receiving food. It would create a more supportive school environment.

Food is a basic need. Yet thousands of children across the state go hungry due to the lack of consistent food. **Free school lunches can ensure that all children have at least one nutritious meal each day.** With one in three households in Hawaii experiencing food insecurity, including 34 percent of children, decisive action is needed to ensure all Hawaii's keiki have consistent access to nutritious food. HB 1779 HD1 represents a meaningful and practical solution to this urgent challenge.

We respectfully urge your support for this bill. If you have any questions, please contact our Legislative Liaison, Betty Lou Larson, at (808) 527-4813.



To: House Committee on Finance
Re: **HB1779 HD1 – Relating to School Meals**
Hawai'i State Capitol & Via Videoconference
March 4, 2026, 10:00 AM

Dear Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Committee Members,

On behalf of Hawai'i Children's Action Network Speaks!, I am writing in **SUPPORT of HB1779 HD1**. This bill expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all public school students, including public charter school students, regardless of whether the student participates in a federal school meals program.

Hawai'i public schools provide students with nutritious meals through the federal National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. The federal income limit for free school meals is 130% of the federal poverty level and for reduced-price meals is 185% of the federal poverty level.

Last session, you and your colleagues expanded free school meal coverage to students who currently qualify for reduced-price lunch, and next school year it will be further expanded to students whose family income is up to 300% of the federal poverty level,¹ which is just about the ALICE income level.

It would be more efficient to simply provide free meals for all students, as schools would benefit from reduced administrative burdens because they no longer need to collect meal payments. A well-designed study found that universal free school meals provide average **administrative savings of 67.3 cents per lunch and 58.5 cents per breakfast served**.²

The nutrition and health benefits of universal free school meals is well documented,³ and currently **111 DOE schools are already providing universal free meals**,⁴ so it would make sense to build from there. This bill would strengthen our educational system by investing in our children's most basic needs so they are ready to learn and thrive.

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

Sincerely,

Nicole Woo
Director of Research and Economic Policy

¹ https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session/archives/measure_indiv_Archives.aspx?billtype=SB&billnumber=1300&year=2025

² <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7922198/>

³ <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/forefront.20220504.114330/>

⁴ <https://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/TeachingAndLearning/HealthAndNutrition/StudentHealthResources/Pages/CEP.aspx>

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 6:41:55 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Susan B Roberts Emery	Green Party of Hawai'i	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and members of Committee,

My name is Susan RobertsEmery, as Co Chair of the Green Party of Hawai'i, I write on behalf of our members in Very Strong Support of HB1779 HD1. We are very grateful to see that this bill is still alive and we believe, that being able to feed all students regardless of need, at no cost to the students, allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs. This will also remove a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please Pass this bill so all children can eat well balanced meals at school, which helps our communities thrive.

Mahalo,

Susan RobertsEmery

Green Party of Hawai'i

Paauiilo



Date of Hearing: 4 March, 2026

To: Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi and the House Committee on Finance

Subject: **HB 1779 HD1**, Relating to Education

Aloha,

Hawai'i Food+ Policy submits testimony in strong support of HB1779 HD1, which expands access to free school meals for students across the State. HB1779 HD1 will directly benefit students, working families, teachers, and broader community wellbeing. When students have access to nutritious meals at school, families experience reduced financial stress, educators see improved classroom engagement, and schools are better able to support students' learning and health.

We strongly support the bill's intent to move toward universal school meals, which helps eliminate the stigma associated with free or reduced-price meal programs. Universal or near-universal access normalizes school meals as part of the educational environment, rather than as a marker of family income. This will support keiki from ALICE families who might not qualify for traditional assistance but struggle with high costs of living in our State. As the Legislature considers HB1779 HD1 and HB1561 HD1, we encourage continued movement toward a comprehensive, systemwide universal meals framework that applies equitably across both DOE and public charter schools.

We also support the bill's language applying to schools "where students are required to eat meals at school." This provision appropriately ensures that when schools operate under closed-campus or similar policies that require students to remain on campus during meal times, those schools must also take responsibility for providing meals. No keiki should be required to stay on campus without access to food security.

HB1779 HD1 addresses a critical need. Testimony has highlighted how there will always be an imperceptible gap between 'Attend Today' and 'Achieve Tomorrow' if keiki are hungry and unable to concentrate in school. Ensuring consistent access to school meals is a proven strategy to ameliorate educational inequality, by improving attendance, academic performance, and student wellbeing. Hawai'i Food+ Policy urges the Committee to pass HB1779 HD1.

Mahalo,

Brandon Kinard & the Food+ Policy Team

#fixourfoodsystem

The Food+ Policy internship develops student advocates who learn work skills while increasing civic engagement to become emerging leaders. We focus on good food systems policy because we see the importance and potential of the food system in combating climate change and increasing the health, equity, and resiliency of Hawai'i communities.

In 2026, the cohort of interns are undergraduate and graduate students and young professionals working in the food system. They are a mix of traditional and nontraditional students, including parents and veterans, who have backgrounds in education, farming, public health, nutrition, and Hawaiian culture.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:28:36 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Davina Akau Brooks	Halau Ku Manu PCS	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

TO: Aloha Chair and Members of the House Committee

SUBJECT: In STRONG AGREEMENT of HB 1779

My name is Davina Akau Brooks, and I am a student at Halau Ku Mana PCS Public Charter School, residing in Honouliuli. I am testifying in strong support of HB 1779.

This legislation is important because it expands free school meal coverage to all public school students, including public charter school students, regardless of their participation in federal meal programs. The most compelling reason for my support is its potential to ensure that every student has access to nutritious meals, which is essential for learning, health, and overall well-being.

For example, research shows that students who receive regular, healthy meals perform better academically and have improved concentration and energy levels throughout the school day. As a student who cares deeply about the future of our islands, I believe passing HB 1779 will help create a healthier, more equitable environment for my generation and those to come. At Halau Ku Mana, we learn the importance of mālama ‘āina (caring for the land) and mālama kanaka (caring for people), and this bill supports those values by promoting the well-being of all keiki (children) through access to nourishing food.

In summary, I strongly urge the committee to pass HB 1779 to support the health, education, and dignity of all students in Hawai‘i. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of this important measure.

Mahalo nui loa,

Davina Akau Brooks

O Honouliuli mai au

Student at Halau Ku Mana PCS



2026 Network Members

Aloha Harvest
Aloha United Way
Chef Hui
City and County of Honolulu
County of Hawai'i
Hawai'i Alliance for
Progressive Action (HAPA)
Hawai'i Appleseed
Hawai'i Children's Action
Network
Hawai'i Dept. of Agriculture
Hawai'i Dept. of Health
Hawai'i Food Bank
Hawai'i Food Bank - Kaua'i
Branch
Hawai'i Good Food Alliance
Hawai'i Public Health Institute
Kōkua Kalihi Valley
Lanakila Pacific
Mālama Kaua'i
Maui Department of
Agriculture
Maui Food Bank
Parents and Children Together
Supersistence
The Food Basket
The Pantry, by Feeding Hawai'i
Together
Wai'anae Coast
Comprehensive Health Center

hawaiihungeraction.org

House Finance Committee

Wednesday, March 4, 2026 at 10:00AM

RE: Support for HB 1779, Relating to School Meals

Dear Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

The Hawai'i Hunger Action Network, a coalition of more than twenty local organizations with the mission to advocate for food security for Hawai'i households, would like to express **strong support for HB 1779** which would ensure Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) for all public school students.

This would not be an immediate budget hit to the state. This bill upholds the 5-year-plan to achieve free school meals by 2030, giving ample time to plan and phase in funding by School Year 2029-30 .

In Hawai'i, where 34 percent of children are reported to experience food insecurity, free school meals are not just beneficial—they are essential to students' health, learning, and well-being.¹ Offering up to two free meals a day would eliminate the stigma associated with unpaid meal balances, ensuring that every student has access to healthy food, regardless of their family's financial situation. UFSM has even proven to improve academic performance in other states by ensuring children receive proper nutrition necessary for healthy development and learning.²

Thank you for your leadership and for your consideration of this important legislation because keiki cannot learn when they are hungry.

With aloha,
Hawai'i Hunger Action Network membership

¹ Hawai'i Foodbank, "[The State of Food Insecurity in Hawai'i](#)." 2025.

² 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.

https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/docs/default-source/research/cpr/working-papers/wp-203-let-them-eat-lunch.pdf?sfvrsn=efae783d_8



March 2, 2026

**Testimony in Support of H.B. 1779 HD1
Relating to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program**

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi and Members of the Committee,

Aloha United Way supports H.B. 1779 HD1, which expands free school meal coverage to all public school and public charter school students beginning in the 2029–2030 school year.

According to Aloha United Way’s ALICE research, nearly 40%¹ of Hawai’i households struggle to afford the basic cost of living, with fresh food being one of the first things families leave out to offset rising costs. These are working families who earn above the federal poverty level but still struggle to afford the state’s high cost of housing, food, childcare, transportation, and healthcare. Many do not qualify for free or reduced-price meals, yet still face food insecurity and difficult monthly tradeoffs.

Universal free school meals would provide meaningful financial relief to ALICE households while ensuring that every child has consistent access to nutritious food. Research shows that students experiencing food insecurity are at higher risk for stress and poor health outcomes, while access to free school meals improves attendance, academic performance, and overall well-being.

Lastly, this bill removes stigma and simplifies access by ensuring that all students are treated equally, regardless of family income.

H.B. 1779 is a smart investment in our keiki, our working families, and Hawai’i’s long-term economic stability. We respectfully urge passage of this measure

Mahalo,

Michelle Bartell
President & CEO
Aloha United Way

¹ <https://www.auw.org/about/alice-initiative/alice-reports/>



HAWAII APPLESEED

CENTER FOR LAW & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Testimony of the Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice
Support for HB 1779 – Relating to School Meals
House Committee on Finance
Wednesday, March 4, 2026 at 10:00AM

Dear Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **strong support of HB 1779**, which would expand free school meal coverage to all Department of Education (HIDOE) public and public charter school students regardless of whether the student is eligible beginning with the 2029-2030 school year.

Providing free school meals to all students does more than just address food insecurity. Studies of universal free school meals in other states have shown significant improvements in test scores and academic performance, and research consistently links proper nutrition to better healthy development and learning outcomes.¹ UFSM also creates a more inclusive and supportive school environment, and can even support Farm-to-School initiatives and local farmers by incorporating fresh, locally grown produce into school meals.

We were very pleased with the legislature’s passage of SB 1300 (now Act 139) last session, and Governor Josh Green’s stated commitment to achieving free school meals for all students in the next five years.² This bill puts that commitment to paper, ***without any financial impact to the state until Fiscal Year 2030.***

Using meal count data from HIDOE, we estimate the **cost of the bill** would be ~\$16.3 million to cover HIDOE students at current participation rates. However, this doesn't account for other ongoing costs the Department will incur regardless of this proposal, which explains the discrepancy between our estimates. The Department is also short an additional \$36 million, bringing the **total program cost** (if this bill passes) to ~\$52 million in FY2030.

We also estimate an additional \$1.3 million to extend this benefit to public charter school students. This does not account for administrative costs. See our cost analysis attached to this testimony.

If the price tag for this service is cause for concern, there are other ways the state might consider making up the shortfall that don’t place the burden on public school parents. Several bills being considered by this committee this week—and hopefully later on this session—would appropriately tax corporations and Hawai‘i’s wealthiest residents, raising anywhere from \$36 million to \$260 million – enough to fund this service multiple times over.

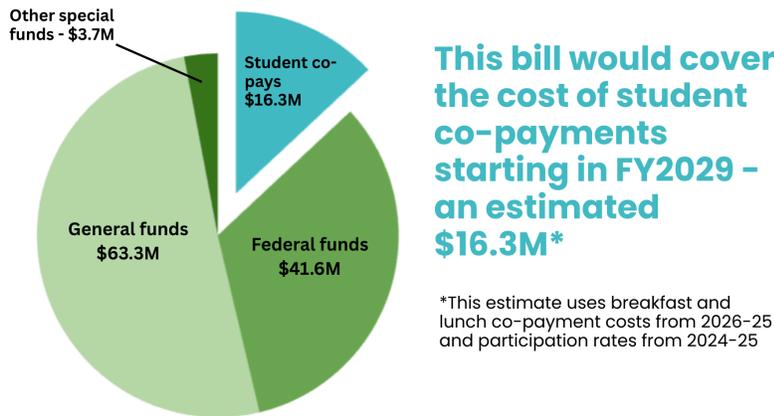
¹ Amy E. Schwartz & Michah W. Rothbart, “Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance,” Maxwell School Center for Policy Research, July 2019.

https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/docs/default-source/research/cpr/working-papers/wp-203-let-them-eat-lunch.pdf?sfvrsn=efae783d_8

² Hawaii News Now, “Gov. Green Revisits Hawai‘i’s Tsunami Preparedness, Food Security, His Future in Politics,” August 4 2025, www.hawaii.newsnow.com/video/2025/08/04/gov-green-revisits-hawaiis-tsunami-preparedness-food-security-his-future-politics/

We are pleased that the Hawai‘i legislature is paying attention to this important issue. Thank you for your consideration of this bill.

Figure: Revenue Sources for School Meals - HIDOE Schools



Source: HIDOE FY2025 Quarter 2 Fiscal Report, School Food Services, available at: <https://hawaiipublicschools.org/data-reports/fiscal>

Table: Annual Cost Estimates starting FY2030 - HIDOE Public and Public Charter Schools

	Current participation levels (2024-25 data)	Projected (assumes a 10% increase in participation)
HIDOE Schools only <i>Accounts for the loss of student co-pays only (breakfast and lunch at 2025 co-pay prices) Co-pays are currently paid by all students over 185% FPL.</i>	\$16,319,370	\$31,182,471
Public Charter Schools only <i>Assumes the state will cover: - The federal per-meal reimbursement rate for reduced-price and paid students (at non-CEP schools) - A \$1-per-meal subsidy for all students (at CEP schools)</i>	\$1,368,947	N/A
Total (not including administrative costs)	\$17,688,317	32,551,418

The Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice advocates for economic justice for and with Hawai‘i’s people. We envision a Hawai‘i that puts its people first—where everyone can meet their basic needs while living happy, healthy and creative lives.



HAWAII APPLESEED

CENTER FOR LAW & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Testimony of the Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice
Support for HB 1779 – Relating to School Meals
House Committee on Finance
Wednesday, March 4, 2026 at 10:00AM

Dear Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **strong support of HB 1779**, which would expand free school meal coverage to all Department of Education (HIDOE) public and public charter school students regardless of whether the student is eligible beginning with the 2029-2030 school year.

Providing free school meals to all students does more than just address food insecurity. Studies of universal free school meals in other states have shown significant improvements in test scores and academic performance, and research consistently links proper nutrition to better healthy development and learning outcomes.¹ UFSM also creates a more inclusive and supportive school environment, and can even support Farm-to-School initiatives and local farmers by incorporating fresh, locally grown produce into school meals.

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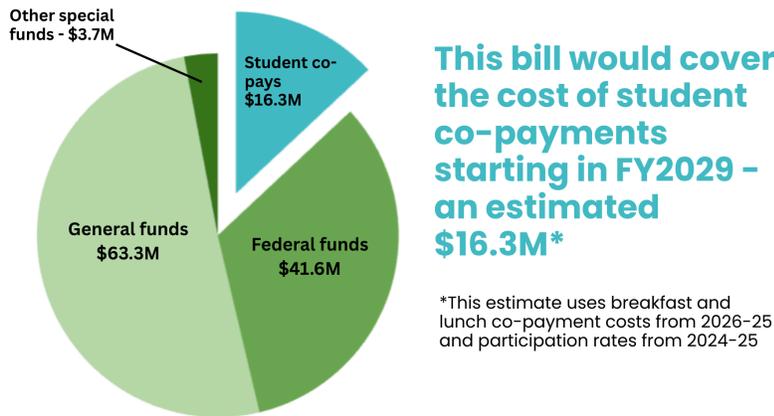
¹ Amy E. Schwartz & Michah W. Rothbart, “Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance,” Maxwell School Center for Policy Research, July 2019.

https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/docs/default-source/research/cpr/working-papers/wp-203-let-them-eat-lunch.pdf?sfvrsn=efae783d_8

² Hawaii News Now, “Gov. Green Revisits Hawai‘i’s Tsunami Preparedness, Food Security, His Future in Politics,” August 4 2025, www.hawaii.newsnow.com/video/2025/08/04/gov-green-revisits-hawaiis-tsunami-preparedness-food-security-his-future-politics/

We are pleased that the Hawai‘i legislature is paying attention to this important issue. Thank you for your consideration of this bill.

Figure: Revenue Sources for School Meals - HIDOE Schools

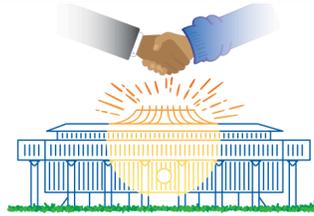


Source: HIDOE FY2025 Quarter 2 Fiscal Report, School Food Services, available at: <https://hawaiipublicschools.org/data-reports/fiscal>

Table: Annual Cost Estimates starting FY2030 - HIDOE Public and Public Charter Schools

	Current participation levels (2024-25 data)	Projected (assumes a 10% increase in participation)
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Public Charter Schools only <i>Assumes the state will cover: - The federal per-meal reimbursement rate for reduced-price and paid students (at non-CEP schools) - A \$1-per-meal subsidy for all students (at CEP schools)</i>	\$1,368,947	N/A
Total (not including administrative costs)	\$17,688,317	32,551,418

The Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice advocates for economic justice for and with Hawai‘i’s people. We envision a Hawai‘i that puts its people first—where everyone can meet their basic needs while living happy, healthy and creative lives.



CLIMATE FUTURE FORUM



Serena, Chelsey
King Kekaulike High
School

Arianna
Mililani High School

Keanu
Kamehameha Schools
Maui

Alvis, Alliyannah, Jaden
Maui High School

Mia
Kalani High School

**Seuta'atia, Henrik, Irene,
Andrew, Sijin, Desiree**
'Iolani School

Kaylie
Honoka'a High School

Leilani, Janey
Mid-Pacific Institute

An
Hawaii Pacific University

**Vivienne, Leila,
Brayden, Madison**
UH Mānoa

**Christopher, Maile,
Meridian, Jessica,
Maya, Erika, Chelsea**
Punahou School

Joleena
Maryknoll School

Gabriel
Lāna'i High School

To: Representative Todd, Chair
Representative Takenouchi, Vice Chair
Members of the Committee on Finance

Hearing: **03/04/26, 10:00am**

From: Climate Future Forum, Hawai'i Youth Food Council

Re: **STRONG SUPPORT for HB1779 HD1 RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS**

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the Committee on Finance,

We are youth leaders from the Hawai'i Climate Future Forum, a youth-led organization bringing together young people across the islands to address key climate issues, and the Hawai'i Youth Food Council (HYFC), a youth-led council empowering high school and college students to engage in food systems advocacy and education. On behalf of the Climate Future Forum's Regenerative Food Systems Working Group and HYFC, we respectfully submit this **joint youth testimony in strong support of HB1779 HD1.**

HB1779 HD1 expands free school meals to all public and charter school students beginning in the 2029-2030 school year. Youth across the state chose this as a priority bill because food security is the foundation of what everything else is built on - and this bill is one of the strongest commitments the legislature can make to our generation.

When students are hungry, it becomes much harder to learn, and for many keiki across our islands, school meals are the most consistent source of nutrition they have. Income-based eligibility leaves too many students

behind, and this bill closes that gap entirely - so that no keiki has to go hungry.

Research shows that universal free school meal programs improve student performance by the equivalent of six additional weeks of learning, making this one of the most practical supports the legislature can put in place for Hawai'i's students. With the high cost of living and the food insecurity many families face, this bill meets an immediate and critical need.

Expanding school meals can also help Hawai'i's food system goals. Greater demand for school meals also creates an opportunity to source locally, strengthening our agricultural sector and reducing dependence on imported food, an important step toward a more climate-resilient Hawai'i.

We ask the Committee on Finance to invest in students like us. When keiki are nourished and supported, our whole community is stronger.

For these reasons, the Hawai'i Youth Food Council Climate Future Forum Regenerative Food Systems Working Group Youth Policy Leaders are in **strong support of HB1779 HD1** and respectfully urge the Committee to pass this measure.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify,

The Hawai'i Youth Food Council

& The Youth Leaders of the Climate Future Forum Regenerative Food Systems Working Group



1050 Bishop St. PMB 235 |
Honolulu, HI 96813
P: 808-533-1292 | e:
info@hawaiiifood.com

Executive Officers

Kit Okimoto, Okimoto Corp., *Chair*
Jayson Watts, Mahi Pono, *Vice Chair*
Jill Tamura, Tamura Super Market, *Secretary/Treas.*
Lauren Zirbel, HFIA, *President and Executive Director*
Paul Kosasa, ABC Stores, *Advisor*
Toby Taniguchi, KTA Superstores, *Advisor*
Joe Carter, Coca-Cola Bottling of Hawaii, Odom, *Advisor*
Eddie Asato, Pint Size Hawaii, *Advisor*
Gary Okimoto, Safeway, *Advisor*
Maile Miyashiro, C&S Wholesale, *Immediate Past Chair*

TO: Committee on Finance
FROM: HAWAII FOOD INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION
Lauren Zirbel, Executive Director

DATE: March 4, 2026
TIME: 10am

RE: HB1779 HD1 Relating to School Meals
Position: Support

The Hawaii Food Industry Association is comprised of two hundred member companies representing retailers, suppliers, producers, manufacturers and distributors of food and beverage related products in the State of Hawaii.

HFIA is in support of this measure. Students' access to healthy meals is critical to academic success and achievement. Access to nutritious meals also promotes students' short term and long-term health, improves behavioral outcomes, and improves overall wellbeing.

Ensuring that all keiki have access to enough food should be a top priority of the State.

For some students, school meals may be their only consistent source of food.

As this measure notes the current income level for eligibility in the school lunch program excludes many children whose families cannot afford lunch. Other children may miss out on free school lunch programs because of stigma, or other reasons. Providing free school meals to all Hawaii keiki ensures that every child in our school system has access to food.

Hawaii's keiki deserve this, and we urge the committee to pass this measure. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 10:24:27 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Emma Waters	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Writing in strong support of this important bill to ensure every keiki has access to nutritious food. Mahalo.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 1:36:32 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
David Ball	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I support this legislation.

Davd Ball,

Waiialae-Kahala

COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

Rep. Chris Todd, Chair

Rep. Jenna Takenouchi, Vice Chair

HEARING:

Wednesday, March 4, 2026 at 10:00 am

Conference Room 308 and Via Videoconference

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1779, HD1 - RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS.

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, Rep. Miyake for my district, Rep. Yamashita of Maui, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Christine Andrews and I am a long-term resident of Wailuku, Maui. I write to you today in **strong support of HB 1779, HD1**, Relating to School Meals, which expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all Department of Education students regardless of whether the student participates in a federal school meals program.

My children were born and raised on Maui, but we spent ten years in Saint Paul, Minnesota where they attended Saint Paul Senior High School, a large urban high school of over 2,000 students. The Saint Paul Public School system provides free school breakfast and lunch for all students. Even though our family was not income eligible, I saw the benefits of this program for my own children.

My kids, like most high schoolers I know, would leave for school late or forget to eat breakfast. Fortunately for them, at all entrances to their school, there were carts that had little containers of milk, containers of yogurt, and fresh fruit. I had the opportunity when volunteering at the school to watch students walking into the school, almost all of them grabbing a milk and, my eyes did not deceive, a fruit on the way to class. As a parent who would nag my kids to eat before school or to eat their fruit, and be responded to with an eye-roll, there was something supremely comforting in feeling like my kids' school had their back. That they might not stop for breakfast if I reminded them, but that they would grab something from the cart under the warm gaze of the school cafeteria workers. My daughters both had very bad social anxiety, and also had almost daily after school activities. I am very certain that they would not have felt comfortable bringing a packed lunch to school. They never would or did. I do feel like the free lunch, the communal experience that all students shared equally at the cafeteria, made it possible for my girls to eat at school when they otherwise would not have. So, even as a family that would not have qualified for free school meals, I know that having free school meals made a significant difference in my kids' lives.

You don't have to take my word for it. I know that the cost of these meals, especially if provided to children who would not otherwise qualify, seems like a big investment. Yet, the benefits of these programs have been well documented. In fact, the benefits of free school meals in Minnesota were so substantial that Gov. Tim Walz was tapped as a candidate for Vice President and spent a good part of 2024 boasting about them. According to the Rockefeller Foundation's [True Cost of Food: School Meals Case Study](#), "Research and practice suggest that providing this benefit without the burden of income eligibility to all students would: enable students that may hover at or slightly above the income threshold to receive the financial and health benefits of free, healthy meals; mitigate problems of stigmatization; eliminate the administrative burdens of meal applications and lunch debt on students, families, and administrators; and translate into better academic performance and lasting improved health outcomes. Additionally, an increase in economies of scale for school meals may allow many schools to provide better food at the reimbursement rate, and have an even greater beneficial impact on local economies and the environment".

The foreword of the [Case Study](#) notes, "This case study shows that school meals are essential for the health and economic stability of communities. **We learned that while school meal programs cost \$18.7 billion per year to run, they provide nearly \$40 billion in human health and economic benefits, providing at**

least \$21 billion in net benefit to society even when we measure only their benefits to human health and economic equity. Enhancements to school meal programs can increase their net value even more as they expand their benefits to additional impact areas. **We analyze investments to maximize student participation, improve dietary composition, and optimize food purchasing policies, which together would produce an additional \$10 billion worth of net-positive health, equity, environmental, and economic impacts.**” [emphasize added].

I encourage the members of the Committee to read the report, (available for download at <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/reports/true-cost-of-food-school-meals-case-study/>) in its entirety so that they can fully appreciate that, while the costs of providing free school meals (breakfast and lunch) to ALL Hawai`i students, without regard to income eligibility, is not insubstantial, it has a net benefit to health, academic performance, local food producers, and the economy, that makes the investment in our children a wise one.

I thank the members of the Committee for their time and humbly request that they **vote in support of HB 1779, HD1.**

Mahalo for all you do to support Hawai`i keiki,

Christine Andrews, JD
Wailuku, Maui

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 1:41:09 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Karen Takamine	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I 100% would like my tax dollars to fund school meals for keiki. Please SUPPORT this measure.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 2:04:15 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Suzanne Fields	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Greetings:

Many struggling families do not meet the strict income limits for free and reduced-price lunch, which are capped at 185% of the Federal Poverty Level—far below the 300% or more that is actually needed to cover basic living expenses. Students who experience hunger face greater risks of stress, depression, and long-term health issues.

Research has shown that providing free school meals leads to improved academic performance, including higher test scores.

For just 1% of the DOE budget we can ensure every student gets the meals they need. Please amend this bill to provide funding to make school meals free for all students in our state.

I've volunteered for multiple years to provide the summer meals programs to school age kids; we KNOW that without this support, these children would not be able to thrive as they should.

Let's do the right thing to ensure that all kids have adequate nutrition ALL the time!

Suzanne Fields

Haiku, Maui

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 2:24:41 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Kristy Arias	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha. I fully support this bill. We all know this is where a lot of our keiki are getting their meals from...school settings. Kids should never go hungry. Please support free meals for our keiki.

Mahalo

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 2:25:25 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Amber	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I am writing in strong support of HB1779 because I believe every child in Hawai'i deserves access to healthy, nutritious meals during the school day. As a parent and community member, I know how much proper nutrition impacts a child's ability to focus, learn, and feel secure at school. No student should have to worry about where their next meal is coming from while trying to succeed in the classroom.

Expanding free school meals is a practical and compassionate step that helps reduce food insecurity, supports working families, and ensures all children have an equal opportunity to thrive. HB1779 is an investment in our keiki and in the future of our islands. I respectfully urge you to pass this important measure.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 2:26:27 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Lauren Pokipala	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha,

I **support HB1779** because ALL students deserve to eat free meals during the school day. At the high school level, some parents who don't qualify for FREE or REDUCED make the decision whether or not to put money on their child's account, and students have no control over that. Secondly, a child should not be embarrassed in front of their peers when their plate is taken away if they don't have enough money on their account. All those in position to make this happen need to collaborate and use their critical thinking skills to make this happen for our students!

*Think about the many scenarios our families are going through today, & ask yourself if you are okay that students aren't able to eat because they have no money on their meal accounts?

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 2:43:09 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

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

Comments:

Aloha, I am writing in support of HB1779 HD1. I believe no student should go hungry because of an inability to pay and students with higher family incomes on paper may not be able to pay because of unforeseen circumstances such as health crises or a death in their family. Mahalo for your consideration.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 3:30:37 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Caroline Azelski	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

In support of. Thank you.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 3:45:07 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Inepinou William	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I am a student attending Mililani High School. Both my parents work full time jobs and make a decent amount of money. With their hard work, we are able to live in a comfortable house and community. One day, I was riding with my dad and he shared how much he and my mom spent, monthly, on electricity, water, rent, food, and other essential stuff. I came to find out that they spent over \$5,000 monthly! Because they are tight with money, my parents have told my siblings and I that if we wanted to eat, we would need to bring from home. The way I see it, if students were to get free school lunch, families would have one less thing to worry about. I believe that's how everybody else should see it. Aside from family situations, student education is crucial for a child to succeed in life. School is a place where we obtain all the skills we need before going out into the real world. Besides recess, everybody loves lunch time. When lunch gets close, it is all students ever think about. Of course, this does not apply to all students. There are students who have lunch, and those who don't. I know there are times when kids would pay for two lunches rather than one just to feed their friends who don't have lunch. I am one of those hungry students. Most of the time I don't bring lunch to school, so before and after lunch time, I have a hard time focusing on lessons because all I'm thinking about is food. Again, if we were to get free school lunch, students, like myself, would not need to worry about having to pack from home and they would have a better chance at focusing on lessons. This is why I believe school lunch should be free.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 3:46:28 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
cheryl burghardt	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair and Committee Members,

I STRONGLY SUPPORT HB 1779 HD 1. I ask that you support this bill as well.

It seems like every session we ask that our keiki be taken care of by providing them with the physical nourishment they need to learn and grow. It is hard for me to understand why this has taken so long but I am grateful to see it moving.

As a retired elementary teacher, the evidence has always been clear that this is a necessary step to ensure the safety and well-being of our keiki. Mahalo for ensuring that this bill gets put into law this time. Our keiki should not have to wait.

Cheryl Burghardt

Nuuanu Oahu

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 3:56:55 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Maki Morinoue	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and members of this committee,

My name is Maki Morinoue, and I am writing to respectfully urge you to hear and support HB1779 to provide free school meals for all keiki in Hawai‘i.

I previously served as President of Holualoa Elementary School’s PTO for two years, before that I was Vice President, board member, and volunteer, and am currently a member of Kealakehe Intermediate School’s School Community Council (SCC). For six years, I helped organize supplemental produce distribution through a local church, collecting fruits and vegetables from backyard gardeners to support families in need at Holualoa Elementary. I have advocated for food security for ten years through both legislation and direct community service.

In West Hawai‘i, all of our public schools are Title I. With federal budget cuts and ongoing uncertainty about government shutdowns, some of the parents and teachers’ spouses I have worked alongside are currently without paychecks and unsure of their federal employment status. Housing costs remain unaffordable, and many families are already stretched beyond capacity.

Free school meals must not be treated as optional or temporary. They should be automatic and guaranteed every year. When children are hungry, they cannot focus, learn, or thrive. Ensuring consistent access to breakfast and lunch at school is one of the most direct, practical ways we can support academic success, family stability, and long-term community wellbeing.

Please schedule a hearing for HB1779 and help move this bill forward. Our keiki should never have to wonder where their next meal is coming from while at school. I respectfully ask for your leadership and your YES vote in strong support of free school meals for all.

I await the alert to testify in support of this much-needed bill.

With gratitude,
Maki Morinoue
Hawai‘i Island

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 4:14:51 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Chloe Amos	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Free school meals is definitely a goal we should all be moving toward, whatever the cost! Our current situation, with roughly 1/3 of children in Hawai'i facing food insecurity, is absolutely untenable and should be treated as a crisis situation with immediate action required. This level of food insecurity for our children and families is costly to our communities in terms of healthcare burdens and other immeasurable ripple effects to the overall health and safety of our communities. Our leadership absolutely needs to prioritize free school meals for all.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 4:17:45 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Shaina Mizusawa	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

As a parent and community member here in Hawai‘i, I strongly support providing free school meals to all keiki across our islands. No child should have to worry about whether they will eat during the school day. When students are hungry, it affects their ability to focus, learn, and fully participate in school.

Hawai‘i has one of the highest costs of living in the nation. Many families who work hard every day still struggle to keep up with rising food, housing, and utility costs. Free school meals would ease that burden and ensure every child — regardless of their family’s income — has consistent access to nutritious food.

Providing universal free meals removes stigma, supports working families, and promotes equity. Most importantly, it allows our keiki to focus on being kids — learning, growing, and thriving — instead of worrying about their next meal. Investing in free school meals is an investment in Hawai‘i’s future.

Our children deserve nothing less.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 4:57:00 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Ruta Jordans	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Strongly support!

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 5:06:08 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Marion McHenry	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Dear Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

I am writing to express strong support for Bill HB1779 HD1 a pivotal piece of legislation that has the potential to improve access to free school meals, ultimately strengthening our state’s food security landscape. This bill will ensure more keiki receive nutritious meals by Including all students

By making school meals universally free, all students can access nutritious meals without fear of judgment or embarrassment, fostering a positive and nurturing school culture. This would help to ease food insecurity experienced by so many families in our state.

Mahalo for your leadership and for your consideration of Bill no.. This bill is essential to building a thriving, food-secure Hawai‘i, which ensures our keiki are fed.

Sincerely,

Marion McHenry

Princeville, Kauai

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 5:14:09 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Norman Miyasato	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Please support HB1779 HD1

Norman Miyasato, Kaneohe

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 5:34:22 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Councilmember Tamara Paltin	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha e Chair and members,

I support H1779 HD1. Providing meals for all Hawai'i keiki is one of the best uses of our taxpayers funds. It ensures all of our children will be fed, hoping that we can see more fresh local produce included, but one step at a time.

Mahalo,

Tamara Paltin

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 5:41:19 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Jeannine Johnson	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

A few years ago I was involved with middle school children and learned that some children didn't eat all day because of varying circumstances. I learned then that we never know their situation. Please support HB 1779 HD1. Every child deserves to eat at school.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 5:58:51 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Michele Nihipali	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Dear Committee Memembers,

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai'i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai'i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

Mahalo for your consideration,

Michele Nihipali

54-074 A Kam Hwy.

Hauula, HI 96717

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 6:00:43 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
William Caron	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the committee,

I am testifying in strong support of HB1779, which would implement Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) for all Department of Education students beginning in the 2029-2030 school year. This visionary policy is one of the most direct and effective investments we can make in the health, equity, and academic success of every child in Hawai‘i.

The data and lived experience of our communities make the need unequivocal. Recent surveys show that 34% of children in Hawai‘i experience food insecurity, a distressing increase from 29% just the previous year. For these students, and for countless others in families struggling with our high cost of living, school breakfast and lunch are often the only reliable, nutritious meals they receive all day.

HB1779 would eliminate the anxiety of hunger and the burden of meal debt, ensuring that every student has the foundational nutrition required to focus, learn, and grow.

The benefits of this universal approach are profound and well-documented:

- **Boosts Academic Performance:** Studies from states that have implemented UFSM show significant improvements in test scores, attendance, and classroom behavior. Proper nutrition is directly linked to cognitive function and healthy development. This policy is a powerful tool to close achievement gaps and unlock the full potential of every learner.
- **Eliminates Stigma and Fosters Inclusion:** By providing meals to every student at no cost, we remove the social stigma and bureaucratic barriers associated with means-tested programs. This creates a more positive, equitable, and nurturing school culture where all keiki can thrive.
- **Strengthens Our Local Food System:** A universal program provides a stable, predictable demand for local agricultural products. By aligning with and expanding Farm-to-School initiatives, HB1779 would directly support our local farmers and ranchers, reduce our reliance on imported food, and build a more resilient and self-sufficient Hawai‘i.

Planning for implementation by 2029–2030 provides the necessary runway to build a robust and sustainable program. This is not just a meal program; it is a foundational commitment to the well-being of our next generation and the strength of our community. By feeding all our students, we are nourishing our collective future.

I urge you to pass HB1779 and make Universal Free School Meals a reality for every public school student in Hawai‘i.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 6:21:51 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Mollie Tynanes	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Mahalo for supporting the health and well being of our state, especially our keiki. I respectfully request that you hear HB1779, which would provide free school meals to all students by 2029-2030.

I, personally, grew up in the public school system, utilizing the free lunch as a necessity to my education. My family did not have the means to pay for school lunch, so instead of me starving until dinner, everyday, I was fortunate enough to receive lunch from government funding. It is not the children's fault they cannot afford food, so they should not have to pay the price with their health and education. School should be a place where students feel comfortable to learn, and that cognitively cannot happen if they are hungry.

One in three families in Hawai'i are food insecure, with one in ten families with children skipping meals. Free school meals is essential to help keiki arrive in the classroom ready to learn. Access to nutritious meals strengthens academic outcomes, reduces stigma, and eases administrative burden for local schools.

Mahalo for your consideration and support.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 6:27:29 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Georgia L Hoopes	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Committee Members.

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai'i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai'i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

Georgia Hoopes, Kalaheo

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 6:33:49 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Stephanie Austin	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Please support this bill which will ensure that no Keiki goes hungry! Much better to have (healthy!) food given to all!

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 6:34:20 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Ann Dorsey	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I urge you to support HB1779.

Many struggling families do not meet the strict income limits for free and reduced-price lunch, which are capped at 185% of the Federal Poverty Level—far below the 300% or more that is actually needed to cover basic living expenses. Students who experience hunger face greater risks of stress, depression, and long-term health issues. Research has shown that providing free school meals leads to improved academic performance, including higher test scores. For just 1% of the DOE budget we can ensure every student gets the meals they need. Please amend this bill to provide funding to make school meals free for all students in our state.

Thank you

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 7:38:21 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
kimdonghyeon	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai‘i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai‘i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

kimdonghyeon

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 7:53:33 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Erin Hagan	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha committee members,

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Up to one in four children in Hawai‘i regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai‘i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

Mahalo,

Erin Hagan

Waiialua

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 8:30:07 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Jotis Russell-Christian	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Many struggling families do not meet the strict income limits for free and reduced-price lunch, which are capped at 185% of the Federal Poverty Level—far below the 300% or more that is actually needed to cover basic living expenses. Students who experience hunger face greater risks of stress, depression, and long-term health issues. Research has shown that providing free school meals leads to improved academic performance, including higher test scores. For just 1% of the DOE budget we can ensure every student gets the meals they need. Please amend this bill to provide funding to make school meals free for all students in our state.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 9:26:59 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Judith White	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Keiki brains need fuel in order to learn!

Judith White, Kapaa

Member Kauai Indivisible

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 9:36:11 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Cheryl Ho	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Dear House Committee on Finance:

I strongly support the provision of free meals to all public and public charter schools, without regard to family income. This provision would help to equalize daily access to optimal health and education amongst Hawai'i residents, including especially those who have been economically affected by loss of land and immigration history.

Please pass HB1779 HD1!!

Mahalo nui,

Cheryl Ho, Nu'uaniu

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 9:38:05 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Noel Shaw	Individual	Support	Remotely Via Zoom

Comments:

The aloha demands keiki to have free meals at school!

One in three households in Hawai‘i report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai‘i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai‘i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Although there has been progress in providing more keiki with meals at school last legislative sessions, we need to secure resources to make sure ALL keiki have this access. It truly is an important way for that we demonstrate aloha in action.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

Noel Shaw, Kalāwahine Hawaiian Homestead

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 9:43:29 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
emily gambino	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai'i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai'i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

Mahalo,

Emily Gambino

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 9:52:19 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Kristen Young	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, I strongly support HB1779. It is no secret that food insecurity is rampant in Hawai'i. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

There are so many reasons to support free school meals from increased academic performance (i.e. higher test scores) and improved health outcomes to ending the social stigma of having to return a meal due to insufficient funds in students' school food account. Please listen to the many teachers, students, and community advocates when they share about the importance of free school meals. The benefits for individual students, their teachers, and working families are huge—and what benefits them is ultimately good for the community as a whole.

Even in jail, people are fed. If students are required to be in school and parents/guardians are required to send kids to school, students should be given food while in school.

We cannot expect to provide quality education if we are neglecting to nourish the full person. Equitable education is only possible if we ensure all students are fed. Feeding our keiki today sets them up for success tomorrow. It is an important investment in our shared future.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

Mahalo,

Kristen Young
Honolulu, HI 96813

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 9:52:54 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

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

Comments:

2 March 2026

Aloha Chair and Members of the House Committee,

I am a kumu at Hālau Kū Māna New Century Public Charter School, and I am writing in **strong support of HB 1779**. There are a handful of haumāna at HKM who can not afford to buy food and prepare lunch every day. There are surely a number of students across our pae ‘āina who are in the same situation, and HB 1779 might encourage haumāna to attend school more because they will have something to eat and not have to face the stigma related to food insecurity. Haumāna can also be more successful in the classroom. Mākua will be happy that their keiki have lunch and not have to pay for a pricey school lunch. In the end, food sovereignty will be a step toward greater self-reliance.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify **in support of HB 1779**,

Tiffany Lani Ing

Mānoa, O‘ahu, Hawai‘i

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 10:31:56 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
KEALA FUNG	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha,

My name is Keala and I support HB 1779.

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai'i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai'i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

Keala Fung, Honolulu

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 10:43:56 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Sherry Pollack	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I strongly support HB1779 HD1 that expands free school meal coverage to all Department of Education students regardless of whether the student participates in a federal school meals program. We need to end child hunger and food insecurity. In addition to impacting the ability of a child to learn, students who experience hunger face greater risks of stress, depression, and long-term health issues. They deserve better from us. Hunger in this state and our country is a disgrace.

All children deserve to be fed during the school day, so that they are ready to learn. No child should go hungry. Period. This bill would ensure that anybody can eat for free and a hungry child would not be forced to skip meals.

But why wait until the 2029-2030 school year? This measure should begin as soon as reasonably possible within the current year. Children are going hungry now. We must act!

I urge you to pass HB1779 with the suggested amendment.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this critical measure.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 11:18:54 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Thomas Brandt	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

SUPPORT

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 11:54:47 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
B.A. McClintock	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai'i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai'i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 7:08:46 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Sara Noa	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Representatives,

I am writing in strong support of HB1779.

As a former educator, I have seen the affects firsthand of kids who go through the school day hungry. How can you ask a kid to pay attention during a lesson on fractions knowing that the only thing they're focused on is the gnawing hunger in their empty belly?

Access to nutritious food during the school day is foundational to child health, development, and academic achievement. Expanding free school meals is an evidence-based strategy that reduces food insecurity, supports health equity, and strengthens educational outcomes.

HB1779 is an important investment in Hawaii's children and future. I respectfully urge you to pass this measure.

Mahalo nui loa for your time in reading this testimony.

Sara N.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 7:43:37 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Nanea Lo	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Hello Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

My name is **Nanea Lo**, and I am writing in strong support of HB 1779 HD1.

One in three households in Hawai‘i report food insecurity, and nearly half (46%) of ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) households experience food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state remain ineligible for free school meals under current federal guidelines. This gap leaves thousands of keiki without reliable access to nutritious food during the school day.

Up to one in four children in Hawai‘i regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. For many of these students, school breakfast and lunch are the most substantial and nutritious meals they receive all day. When students are hungry, their ability to concentrate, retain information, regulate emotions, and fully participate in class is significantly diminished. Nutrition is not a luxury — it is foundational to academic achievement, physical development, and overall well-being.

Implementing universal free school meals ensures that every student, regardless of income or household circumstances, has consistent access to healthy food. It removes the stigma associated with “Free/Reduced Lunch” programs and eliminates administrative barriers that prevent families from qualifying due to technical income thresholds. Just as importantly, it eases the financial burden on working families who are already struggling with Hawai‘i’s high cost of living.

Food security for our keiki is an investment in educational equity, public health, and long-term community stability. When we ensure that all students are nourished, we are strengthening Hawai‘i’s future.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to support HB 1779 HD1.

Me ke aloha ‘āina,

Nanea Lo, 96826

Sierra Club of Hawai‘i Member

Hawai'i Workers Center Board Member

Clean Elections Hawai'i Member

Honolulu Tenants Union Member

350 Hawai'i Member

Carbon Cashback Hawai'i Member

Hawai'i Tax Fairness Coalition Member

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 8:09:52 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Tamra Hayden	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai‘i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai‘i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

Tamra Hayden, Waianae

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 8:30:30 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Joell Edwards	Individual	Support	Remotely Via Zoom

Comments:

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Joell Edwards. I live in Wainiha on the North Shore of Kaua‘i. I am a small business owner, conduct community outreach for HCAN, and advocate for families in rural communities. I am testifying in strong support of HB1779 HD1.

HB1779 HD1 takes the next essential step toward universal free school meals in Hawai‘i by expanding access to all public school students, including those in public charter schools, with full universal implementation beginning in the 2029–2030 school year. This ensures that access to nutrition is not dependent on federal eligibility categories or the funding structure of a child’s school.

In rural communities like mine, these distinctions matter. Many of our keiki attend charter schools that have historically not had the same access to federally funded meal programs. Families who are working hard — sometimes multiple jobs — may not qualify on paper for assistance, yet still struggle under Hawai‘i’s extraordinary cost of living. Food costs on Kaua‘i are significantly higher than the continental U.S., and families routinely spend a disproportionate share of their income on groceries.

At the same time, financial eligibility does not tell the full story of a child’s lived experience. Just because a family may technically have the financial means to pay for lunch does not negate the reality of neglect, instability, or food insecurity within the home. Across our islands, many keiki rely on school meals not only for nutrition, but for consistency, predictability, and safety. For some children, school breakfast and lunch are the most reliable meals they receive each day.

Universal school meals remove stigma. They eliminate the administrative burden of income verification. They ensure that no child is singled out, no child accrues meal debt, and no child is left hungry because of paperwork or household circumstances beyond their control.

Hunger directly impacts a child’s ability to learn, regulate emotions, and engage academically. If we are serious about educational equity and long-term outcomes, nutrition must be treated as foundational infrastructure within our public education system.

HB1779 HD1 strengthens dignity, equity, and public health statewide. In rural communities like Wainiha — where access to services is already limited — this support is not supplemental, it is essential.

I respectfully urge your support.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 8:58:20 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Jocina Alani	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I, Jocina Alani, support bill HB1779 because all school students should have free meals provided. As a former teacher, food insecurities are real. Students that dont qualify for free food due to higher income normally is the ones who go without because they do not get government assistance. Please pass this bill. Mahalo

Me ke Aloha,

Jocina Alani

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:08:53 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
pamela burrell	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Members of the House,

Please support free meals in our schools. Nutrition is good for the brain..give kids a chance.

Maholo for standing up for the Keki's!

Pamela Burrell, Kalihiwai, Kaua'i

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:17:04 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Susan Douglas	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai'i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai'i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:27:57 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Makayla Holt	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha mai ‘O Kaleikaumaka Holt ko‘u inoa. I‘m a student from Hālau Kū Māna. I am testifying in favor of HB1779.

The most important reason I support HB1779 is because no student should have to learn while they are hungry. When students don’t have access to healthy school meals, it directly affects their focus, energy, and ability to succeed in class. School is already challenging, and hunger just makes it harder.

Many families in Hawai‘i struggle with the high cost of living. Groceries are expensive, and sometimes families have to choose between paying rent, utilities, or buying enough food. Free or expanded school meals would make sure students get at least one or two balanced meals every school day. Studies have shown that students who eat regular, nutritious meals perform better academically, have better attendance, and are less likely to have behavior problems. When students are fed, they can concentrate, participate, and do their best work.

From a student’s perspective, it can also be embarrassing when classmates have to worry about whether they qualify for free lunch or if they have money in their account. Expanding school meals can reduce stigma because everyone has equal access. It creates a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

HB1779 would positively impact students by improving academic performance, supporting mental and physical health, and reducing food insecurity across the state. In the long term, healthier students mean better graduation rates and stronger communities. Investing in school meals is really investing in Hawai‘i’s future.

For these reasons, I strongly support HB1779 relating to school meals.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:29:56 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Avyanna	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

2 March 2026

TO: Aloha Chair and Members of the House Committee

SUBJECT: In STRONG support of HB 1779

Aloha ‘O Avyanna McPeek- Batlin Ko’u inoa

O Hālau Kū Māna Ka’u kula,

I am testifying in favor of HB 1779. I think that all kids should be able to receive free school lunch. I think this because not all kids have enough money to buy school lunch, and sometimes it's their only meal. School lunches also provide nutrients for our growing minds and bodies to help us excel in school. Research also shows that getting free or reduced-price school lunches reduces food insecurity, obesity rates, and poor health. I feel school lunches are helpful because my parents often don't have time to make lunch because of work. Lunch is also one of the most important meals of the day for me because after school, I usually have extracurricular activities, which causes me to not have time to eat until very late at night. School lunches encourage students to eat more fruits and vegetables to stay healthy. This bill will give more kids a healthier option for meals, give them nutrients, and give them the energy they need to power through the day. In conclusion, free school lunches will give kids nutrients, food security, energy, and a healthy, delicious meal. Mahalo for this opportunity to testify in agreement with bill HB 1779.

I hope you take this into consideration

Mahalo,

Avyanna Kamelealohaho'opōmaika'i McPeek-Batlin

Mo'ili'ili 'Oahu, Hawai'i

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:31:27 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Kawaakauahi Bruce	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

2 March 2026

Aloha Chair and Members of the House Committee

'O au o Kawaakauahi Bruce. No Oahu mai au. Noho au ma Kaneohe

I am in STRONG favor of HB 1779

Content

I am in favor of this bill because I really want free food for the future haumana of my school and all others even though it ends the year after I graduate high school

I am in favor of HB 1779 and mahalo chair and members of the house committee for reading my testimony

Me ke aloha

Kawaakauahi Bruce

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:32:01 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Makanamaikalani Dudoit	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

3 March 2026

Aloha Chair and Members of the House Committee

In STRONG favor of HB 1779

As a kumu, I witness every day how many of our keiki across Hawai‘i go without lunch and how deeply it affects their bodies, focus, and ability to learn. With the high cost of living in our islands, many families are doing their very best but still struggle to provide consistent meals for their children.

Food is essential for our keiki to grow strong, stay healthy, and succeed in school. When they are hungry, it impacts not only their physical well-being but also their confidence and academic progress. Too many of our keiki are trying to learn on empty stomachs.

This bill will help ensure that our keiki are nourished, supported, and given the opportunity to thrive.

Mahalo for taking the time to read and consider this.

Makanamaikalani dudoit

Pālolo, O‘ahu, Hawai‘i

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:36:37 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Mahie Heanu	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, ‘O Māhie Heanu ko‘u inoa. No Papakōlea mai au. I am in ninth grade at Hālau Kū Māna. I am testifying in favor of HB 1779. I support this because it will reduce pollution and our natural resources. Research from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) shows that similar regulations have reduced emissions by up to 30%, significantly improving air quality and public health. It will also reduce the burden on those who have financial struggles. Studies show that similar measures have improved financial stability for thousands, allowing families to focus on health and education instead of constant financial stress. In summary, HB 1779 is important for the health of Hawai‘i and the financial hardships in our community. I strongly support this bill. Mahalo

Māhie Heanu

Makiki, O‘ahu, Hawai‘i

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:36:57 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Huakaʻimaikalani Relacion	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, my name is Huakaʻimaikalani Relacion, and I am a haumana at Hālau Kū Māna Public Charter school in Makiki, Oʻahu. I am sending this message in support of HB1779, which according to your text says will give free lunches to all DOE and charter school students. I think that giving DOE and charter schools free lunches can help those kids that may not have the money to afford food and not giving keiki any chances to eat, when kids don't eat they could end up eating unhealthy food and it will ruin eating habits. Students grades may start to drop because of lack of concentration due to unhealthy eating, and skipping lunch meals. This offer can help ʻohana save money for more of the important needs in life, like shelter, food, and water!

Mahalo, Huakaʻimaikalani Relacion

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:37:02 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Auriel Judith Lanakamana'o'onohipulelehuaululani Tsutsui-Keuma	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, my name is Auriel Tsutsui-Keuma, I'm a 6th grader at Hālau Kū Māna Public Charter school in Makiki, O'ahu. I am writing in support of HB1779, which will give free lunches to all DOE and charter school students. I feel that charter schools aren't able to get free food often, I don't exactly think that's fair towards the kids. All haumana should be available to get free food, what about those haumana who can't afford it? Home lunch is an option, but you always have to figure out what food you need to get and how much money you need. DOE schools get free food all the time, what's the difference with a charter school? Students are able to have higher energy for the day when they eat better, they'll focus more, participate, get better understanding to things in school. If students aren't able to eat daily they get hungry, starved, moody and so much more. They have a better life style when eating 3 whole meals a day, you know what could help? If charter schools got 1 free whole meal, I don't think it's that hard, honestly. Why put a price on food when people are unfocused throughout the day, hungry, pleading, maybe they're parents can't afford 3 whole meals a day? It'll take weight of the students' family's backs because they're saving money from one free meal. But you just want them to waste money, don't you?

Thanks for your time, I hope you really think about this suggestion on actually giving public charter schools a chance of free food instead of just mentioning it.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:37:03 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
addison millan	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, my name is Addison Millan, and I am a haumana (student) at Halau Ku Mana Public Charter School in Makiki. I am writing in support of HB1779 which will give free lunches to all DOE and charter students. I think this bill is so important because every single kid should be able to eat three meals a day. All the haumana should be able to get free lunch, especially the haumana that cannot afford it. Having free lunches for all haumana can help them eat better and do better in school. In addition, help it will kids still grow their brain. When haumana get hungry the get lack of concentration, no energy and throws off eating schedule.

Mahalo,

Addison Millan

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:37:05 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Zavier Makana Campania	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, my name is Makana, and I am a student at Hālau Kū Māna Charter School. I am writing this testimony in support of HB1779, which will give free lunches to all DOE and charter school students. Some reasons why I am supportive of this bill are one, it makes it fair for students that can't afford lunch. Two, it also helps that students parents economical situation by letting them save money by making the parents not buy their kids lunch. Lastly, it helps the students eat better, and this is good because it can lead them to a healthier lifestyle, and students need good food for the body's development and brain development. Thank you for your time.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:37:11 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
kuamu maka'iwi pelekai	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, my name is Edward Kuamu Maka'iwi Ho'okano Pelekai Jr. I'm a student at Halau Ku Mana public charter school in Makiki, O'ahu. I am writing in support of HB1779 which will give free lunches to all DOE and charter school students. This we'll be good to the students that can't afford lunch and if they do this the students will get better energy and it would lead them to a better life styles. It we'll make them grow better, and living in Hawai'i it's really high and having free food it's really saving money, thank you for using your time for this.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:37:14 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Isla Grace Saifoloi	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha! My name is Ku'ulei Saifoloi and is a haumana in 6th grade of Halau Ku Mana Pulic Charter School. I absolutely support bill HB1779, which gives free lunches to all DOE schools and charter schools. I support this bill because of fairness. In most schools they allow haumana who can't afford food to have free lunches. We think this should include all schools to have free lunches. Another reason is Health concerns. If hamana can't afford lunch, it will mess with the haumana's concentration during class, and will mess up the haumana's eating habits. This is unhealthy because kids need to grow, and need brain development so without that second meal (lunch) it will affect student growth, and grades in school due to lack of concentration. This bill can also help our makua (parents) because they don't need to pay for lunch. Living in Hawaii, it's expensive so we need your help to help the families who pay for lunches. Again, I agree with bill HB1779 and hope this bill applies to DOE and charter schools in 2029 or 2030.

Mahalo, Ku'ulei Saifoloi

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:37:30 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Jada Akana	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, my name is Mahina Akana and I am a 6th grade student at Hālau Kū Māna Public Charter School. I am writing in support of HB1779, which will give free lunches to all DOE and charter school students. I feel it is super important of this act to give free lunches to keiki across the pae ‘āina to ensure that all keiki are eating three meals a day. If they do not eat three meals it can give lack of focus, concentration, and will lower their energy. The main priority at school is to help kids reach their highest potential and thrive to reach above and beyond. If kids are not focused, not energized, and not eating three meals a day, it will result to not striving and thriving to do their best. Futhermore, having free school lunches will help their families economic situations. They will avoid spending money to try and get a meal for their kid even when they are suffering in the tragic high expensive state of Hawai‘i. To conclude, having free school lunches for students will provide not worrying for anything the night before, spending anything before school starts, but will help the students live a healthier lifestyle.

Sincerely, Mahina Akana

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:38:44 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Lana	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

2 March 2026

Aloha Chair and Members of the House Committee

SUBJECT: In STRONG in support of HB 1779

Introduction

Aloha ‘O Lana Masterson ko’u inoa. No Hakipu’u mai au. I am in 9th at Halau ku mana pcs.

I am testifying in favor of of HB 1779

I support this bill because all kids in school should have free lunch so no kids go hungry if they can't afford it. If kids' parents can't afford the school lunch the kids should not have to go hungry. Because it's not the kids fault.

Thank you. I strongly push this bill to pass so all schools have free lunch.

Lana Masterson

Hakipu’u, oahu, Hawai‘i

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:40:17 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Michaela Williams	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I am in agreement with the passing of the law with free school lunches. Not many keiki have the ability to bring school lunches everyday and its a very important thing for human beings

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:44:03 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Jackie Keefe	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the House Committee on Finance,

My name is Jackie Keefe, and I am **in strong support of HB1779 HD1**, which would establish free school meals for all public school students—at both DOE and charter schools—by School Year 2029-2030.

No child in Hawai‘i should be expected to learn while hungry. Access to nutritious food is a basic need and a matter of dignity, not something students or families should have to qualify for or be stigmatized by.

Hawai‘i’s cost of living places immense pressure on working families, and many students rely on school meals as their most consistent source of food. Research is clear: food insecurity harms students’ mental and physical health and undermines academic success. Universal free school meals are one of the most effective, evidence-based investments we can make in our keiki, improving learning outcomes while reducing stress for families and schools alike.

This bill builds on important progress already made and recognizes a simple truth: means-testing still leaves children behind. Universal meals eliminate administrative barriers, remove stigma, and ensure that every student has what they need to learn, grow, and thrive. The need to qualify places additional barriers on families who barely have time to spend with their 'ohana, nevermind filling out paperwork. Qualification parameters will always keep people who qualify out of the programs, and our priority should be ensuring our keiki are fed.

Providing free school meals to all public school students is a statement of our values. It affirms that Hawai‘i prioritizes children’s well-being, educational equity, and collective care for one another.

I urge you to pass this bill.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify,

Jackie Keefe, Lahaina

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:53:48 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
La'akea Jenks	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

TO: Aloha Chair and Members of the House Committee

SUBJECT: In STRONG agreement of HB 1779

Nana ka maka, ho'olohe ka pepeiao, pa'a ka waha. 'O La'akea Jenks kou inoa, no kapolei mai au. Ke hele nei au i ke kula 'o Halau Ku Mana PCS. Kāko'o au i kēia bila. As a middle child, I have experienced both sides of responsibility. Being cared for and being the caretaker. Today, I stand here to testify on behalf of my younger brother. He is currently a fourth grader at Makakilo Elementary School and is set to graduate in 2035. If this bill is passed, he will have access to free school meals throughout his entire high school education.

This bill applies to all Department of Education schools, including public charter schools like mine. That means my school would finally be provided lunch through the system instead of having to figure it out on our own. The money we currently stretch to cover food access could be redirected toward classrooms, teachers, and student programs. That makes a real difference.

This bill is not just policy, it is personal. It supports my brother. It supports my school. And it supports students across Hawai'i by ensuring we can focus on learning instead of worrying about food.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.

La'akea Jenks

Hono'uli'uli, O'ahu, Hawai'i

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:54:17 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Shannon Rudolph	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

SUPPORT

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 10:09:26 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Robert Justice, M.D.	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

As a resident of Kapolei and as a member of Indivisible Hawaii, I strongly support bill HB1779. This bill upholds the 5-year-plan to get free school meals for all keiki by 2030. Hawaii has until SY2029-30 to plan and phase in funding so this isn't an immediate budget hit. It would eliminate social stigma and would create a more inclusive and supportive school environment. By making school meals universally free, all students can access nutritious meals without fear of judgment or embarrassment, fostering a positive and nurturing school culture. Studies of UFSM in other states have shown large test score improvements and improved academic performance. Research consistently shows that proper nutrition is linked to improved healthy development and academic performance. Universal free school meals would ensure that every student in Hawai'i has access to the nutrients necessary for optimal learning, helping to close achievement gaps. For many students, school breakfast and lunch are the only full, balanced meals they receive a day. Recent surveys show that 34 percent of children experienced food insecurity in Hawai'i, up from 29% in 2023.

UFSM can also help boost participation in meal programs like Farm-to-School which reduces the state's reliance on imported food, fostering a more resilient and self-sufficient community. Supporting local farmers and food producers through school meal programs not only ensures a steady market for their products but also strengthens Hawai'i's economy.

Mahalo for this opportunity to testify.

Robert Justice, M.D.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 10:32:54 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Nora Pollard	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Mahalo for hearing this bill, I fully support free meals for all students.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 10:52:03 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Kathryn Parsons	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

As a public school teacher in Hawai‘i, I support HB1779 because I see firsthand how hunger impacts student focus, behavior, and academic performance. Free school meals ensure that every student has equitable access to the basic nutrition needed to learn and thrive. No student should have to choose between focusing on learning and worrying about whether they will eat that day!

Help remove the stigma and ensure equity for all students across Hawai‘i by supporting free meals.

Kathryn Parsons

Castle High School

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 10:54:50 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Charlotte Frank	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I am writing in strong support of HB1779. Access to nutritious food during the school day is foundational to child health, development, and academic achievement. Expanding free school meals is an evidence-based strategy that reduces food insecurity, supports health equity, and strengthens educational outcomes.

HB1779 is an important investment in Hawai'i's children and future. I respectfully urge you to pass this measure. Thank you.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 11:18:02 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Christine Russo	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Please support this legislation. We must invest in our public school students by ensuring they have all the tools they need to learn. Access to food is the very first tool a student requires to learn. Thank you.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 11:18:02 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

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Christine Russo	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

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HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 11:28:57 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Christopher Egbo	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Testimony in STRONG SUPPORT

HB1779 HD1 – Universal Free School Meals

Submitted by: Christopher Egbo, Community Member

Chair(s) and Members of the Committee,

My name is Chrstopher Egbo, and I am a concerned citizen and member of this community. I am here today because I believe, deeply and without reservation, that no child in Hawai‘i should ever have to sit in a classroom hungry. I urge you to support HB1779 HD1 and amend it to provide full funding for universal free school meals for every student in our state.

The System Is Failing Our Keiki

Right now, free and reduced-price lunch is only available to families earning up to 185% of the Federal Poverty Level. But the reality on the ground in Hawai‘i — one of the most expensive places to live in the entire country — is that families need to be earning 300% or more of the poverty level just to cover their basic living expenses. That gap is not a technicality. It is the difference between a child who eats lunch and a child who does not.

Two out of three struggling families in our state are not eligible for free school meals under the current rules. These are working parents — people doing their best — whose children are slipping through the cracks of a system that was designed to help them. That is not acceptable, and we can fix it.

Hunger Has Real Consequences

A hungry child cannot learn. This is not an opinion — it is a fact supported by decades of research. Students who experience food insecurity face significantly higher risks of stress, depression, and chronic disease. They struggle to concentrate. They fall behind. And the effects don’t just disappear when the school day ends — hunger in childhood creates health consequences that follow our keiki for the rest of their lives.

There is also an invisible wound that we don't talk about enough: the shame. Right now, some children are being handed a meal — and then having it taken away because there is no money in their school food account. No child should ever experience that humiliation. Not here. Not in Hawai'i. Not anywhere.

Universal Meals Work — The Evidence Is Clear

When universal free school meals have been implemented in other states and communities, the results have been remarkable. Student test scores rose the equivalent of six additional weeks of school. Academic performance improved across the board. Teachers reported students who were more focused, more engaged, and more ready to learn. The investment pays off — not just in test scores, but in healthier, happier children who grow into healthier, more productive adults.

This Is Within Our Reach

I understand that every budget decision involves tradeoffs. But consider this: funding universal free school meals would require just 1% of the Department of Education's budget — and in return, we would see a 15% improvement in outcomes for our students. That is one of the most efficient investments this legislature could possibly make.

This is not a partisan issue. Feeding children is something we all believe in. I am asking this committee to be bold — to look at the children in our classrooms and say: you will not go hungry on our watch.

Please amend HB1779 HD1 to include full funding for universal free school meals for every student in Hawai'i. No child should go hungry. No child should be turned away from a meal. Our keiki deserve better — and we have the power, right now, to give it to them.

Mahalo for your time and your service.

Respectfully,

Christopher Egbo

670 Prospect Street, 812

Honolulu, HI 96813

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 11:28:57 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Christopher Egbo	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Testimony in STRONG SUPPORT

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Please amend HB1779 HD1 to include full funding for universal free school meals for every student in Hawai'i. No child should go hungry. No child should be turned away from a meal. Our keiki deserve better — and we have the power, right now, to give it to them.

Mahalo for your time and your service.

Respectfully,

Christopher Egbo

670 Prospect Street, 812

Honolulu, HI 96813

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 11:38:35 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Chaya Ilikea Arakaki	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I work for the DOE as a special education teacher. There are so many days that our kids are hungry. Some may not eat because they do not qualify for free or reduced lunch. Why do our high school students also get the same amount of food as elementary school kids? Feed the children, is that so hard to do?

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai'i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai'i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

'Ilikea Tohara

Kamuela, HI



401 Uluniu St. #311 Kailua, HI 96734 | info@hawaiigoodfoodalliance.org

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1779 HD1 – Relating to Free School Meals
House Committee on Finance
Hearing Date: Wednesday, March 4, 2026 at 10:00 AM

Dear Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kat Saneewong, and I serve as the Farmers Market Program Navigator with the **Hawai'i Good Food Alliance**. I am writing in strong support of **HB1779 HD1**.

HB1779 HD1 expands free school meal access to all public school and public charter school students, regardless of federal program eligibility. This measure addresses a persistent gap in food access for ALICE families who earn too much to qualify for assistance but still struggle to afford consistent, nutritious meals.

From a food systems and public health perspective, universal school meals are a practical and equitable solution. This bill:

- Ensures all students have reliable access to nutritious meals during the school day.
- Reduces stigma associated with free and reduced-price meal programs.
- Eases financial pressure on working families facing rising food costs.
- Supports improved academic performance and student well-being through consistent nutrition.

In a state where one in three households report food insecurity, ensuring that every child can eat without barriers is both a moral and economic investment. HB1779 HD1 strengthens educational equity while advancing long-term community health. I respectfully urge the Committee to support this measure.

Mahalo for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Kat Saneewong
Farmers Market Program Navigator
Hawai'i Good Food Alliance



HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 2:10:07 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
ANDREW ISODA	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

What Does This Bill Do?

Expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all public school students, including public charter school students, regardless of whether the student participates in a federal school meals program.

Why Is This Important? Sample Testimony:

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai'i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai'i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

Andrew Isoda
Lahaina, Mau'i

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 2:15:06 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Pamela Elders	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I was a Head Start Director for nearly 30 years. During those years I saw first-hand how important nutritious meals are for children in low-income families. One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity, and almost half (46%) of ALICE (asset limited income constrained employed) households reported food insecurity. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals. Implementing free school meals for all can provide food security to students who may otherwise not eat at all.

Nutrition is essential to all growing children and teenagers. It has been shown to vastly improve academic outcomes. However, there are still up to one in four children in Hawai'i that regularly go without enough nutritious meals at home. This means that for many children in Hawai'i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they get in a day. Being able to feed all students regardless of need at no cost to the students allows for us to remove the stigma of being on "Free/Reduced Lunch" programs, and also removes a huge burden from parents who will no longer have to worry about making sure their children are able to eat while at school.

Please support HB 1779 HD1.

Pam Elders

Laupahoehoe

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 2:52:36 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Raquel Runnels	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair Yamashita and Members of the Committee,

My name is Raquel Runnels, a kanaka ‘ōiwi born and raised on O‘ahu. I am writing in strong support of HB 1779, HD1, which would expand free school meals to all public school and public charter school students in Hawai‘i beginning in the 2029-2030 school year.

As a community member who not only attended school on O‘ahu but also has a background working in an elementary school, I have witnessed firsthand how food insecurity affects our keiki. Though times have changed significantly since I was a child, the need for reliable, nutritious meals at school has only grown more urgent in our ever-changing economy.

Nutrition is essential for healthy development and academic success. Yet, too many children in Hawai‘i come to school hungry. For up to one in four children in our state, the meals they receive at school may be the only nutritious food they eat all day.

By passing HB 1779, HD1, we can ensure that every child has access to breakfast and lunch—free of charge and free of stigma. No student should feel singled out for receiving meals, and no parent should have to worry about whether they can afford to feed their child during the school day. Universal free school meals remove that burden and create a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all.

I urge this committee to pass HB 1779, HD1 and take a meaningful step toward ending child hunger in Hawai‘i.

‘O au iho nō me ka mahalo,

Raquel S. Runnels

Wahiawā / Island, O‘ahu

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 3:37:34 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Aurora	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha,

My name is Aurora Kaleookalani Naone. I am a school counselor at a DOE school and I am testifying in strong support of HB1779. As a school counselor, I see directly how hunger impacts our students ability to learn and thrive in our schools. Some students are not eligible for free and reduced lunches despite their families' financial struggles. I have spoken to families that have to wait til their next pay check to fill their childs account for them to eat lunch in school. I've personally fed these children with my food and money. Every child should be able to come to school and be fed. This bill would positively impact the keiki of Hawai'i and support their learning for generations to come. Children cannot learn when they are hungry.

Mahalo for this opportunity to submit testimony. Please hear HB1779 and pass this bill to feed our keiki.

Sincerely,

Aurora Kaleookalani Naone

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 5:27:42 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Summer begnaud	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, I am Summer Begnaud and I live in Honolulu, and I strongly support this bill that critically impacts keiki’s health. Many struggling families do not meet the strict income limits for free and reduced-price lunch, which are capped at 185% of the Federal Poverty Level—far below the 300% or more that is actually needed to cover basic living expenses. Students who experience hunger face greater risks of stress, depression, and long-term health issues. Research has shown that providing free school meals leads to improved academic performance, including higher test scores. For just 1% of the DOE budget we can ensure every student gets the meals they need. Please amend this bill to provide funding to make school meals free for **all** students in our state.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 7:49:30 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Tiare Smith	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Committee Members,

My name is Tiare Smith, and I am writing from Kahaluu, Oahu, in strong support of HB 1779, HD1, which would expand free school meal coverage to all public school and charter school students beginning in the 2029-2030 school year, regardless of family income or participation in federal programs.

Hawai‘i is facing a persistent food insecurity crisis. Recent reports from the Hawai‘i Foodbank Hui show that 32% of households statewide experienced food insecurity between mid-2024 and mid-2025, affecting hundreds of thousands of our residents—including many families with children. In households with children, the rate is even higher, with over one-third lacking reliable access to enough nutritious food. Nearly half (46%) of ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) households—those working hard but still struggling to make ends meet—report food insecurity.

Far too many keiki in our public schools rely on school breakfast and lunch as their most reliable, and often only, sources of nutritious meals each day. Yet under current systems, many financially vulnerable families fall just outside eligibility for free or reduced-price meals, leaving children to go without or face the stigma of separate programs. Universal free school meals would eliminate that barrier and stigma, ensure every student has consistent access to healthy food during the school day, and support better focus, attendance, and academic performance—outcomes proven in other states that have implemented similar policies.

As a resident deeply concerned about the well-being of our community’s children, I urge you to support HB 1779, HD1. Providing free school meals to all is a practical, compassionate step toward addressing food equity and giving every keiki the foundation they need to thrive.

Mahalo nui loa for your consideration and for your work on these critical issues.

Sincerely,
Tiare Smith
Kahaluu, Oahu

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 7:58:30 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Lisa DeSantis	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

RE: Support for Bill no. HB1779

Dear Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

I am writing to express strong support for Bill no. HB1779, a pivotal piece of legislation that has the potential to improve access to free school meals, ultimately strengthening our state's food security landscape. This bill will ensure more keiki receive nutritious by:

Eliminating social stigma:

UFSM creates a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

By making school meals universally free, all students can access nutritious meals without fear of judgment or embarrassment, fostering a positive and nurturing school culture.

Improving academic performance:

Studies of UFSM in other states have shown large test score improvements and improved academic performance.

Research consistently shows that proper nutrition is linked to improved healthy development and academic performance.

Universal free school meals would ensure that every student in Hawai'i has access to the nutrients necessary for optimal learning, helping to close achievement gaps.

Improving nutrition & reduce food insecurity:

For many students, school breakfast and lunch are the only full, balanced meals they receive a day.

Recent surveys show that 34 percent of children experienced food insecurity in Hawai'i, up from 29% in 2023.

Supporting locally grown food:

UFSM can help boost participation in meal programs like Farm-to-School which reduces the state's reliance on imported food, fostering a more resilient and self-sufficient community.

Supporting local farmers and food producers through school meal programs not only ensures a steady market for their products but also strengthens Hawai'i's economy.

Mahalo for your leadership and for your consideration of Bill no. HB1779. This bill is essential to building a thriving, food-secure Hawai'i, which ensures our keiki are fed.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:26:32 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Dayva Escobar	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I strongly support this bill.

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 10:01:16 PM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Hi'ilani Nalua'i	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Many struggling families do not meet the strict income limits for free and reduced-price lunch, which are capped at 185% of the Federal Poverty Level—far below the 300% or more that is actually needed to cover basic living expenses. Students who experience hunger face greater risks of stress, depression, and long-term health issues. Research has shown that providing free school meals leads to improved academic performance, including higher test scores. For just 1% of the DOE budget we can ensure every student gets the meals they need. Please amend this bill to provide funding to make school meals free for all students in our state

Mahalo

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/4/2026 9:36:01 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Lori Kizer	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Writing to support HB1779, I hope you all will also. Mahalo.

Lori Kizer, Kapaa

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/4/2026 9:40:30 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
colleen EVERETT	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha,

I am writing to you today as a constituent and a firm believer in the future of our community's children. I urge you to support legislation that provides universal, no-cost school meals for all students in Hawai'i.

While we treat textbooks and bus transportation as essential infrastructure for education, we often treat nutrition as an "extra." However, the data is clear: a hungry child cannot learn. Providing universal meals isn't just a social service; it is a direct investment in the academic success of our state.

By implementing a universal program, we can address three critical issues:

- Eliminating Stigma: When meals are free for everyone, we remove the "poverty trap" and the social stigma associated with "reduced-price" programs. No child should feel ashamed in the lunch line.**
- Supporting Working Families: Many families who don't technically qualify for federal assistance are still living paycheck to paycheck. This policy provides immediate, tangible economic relief to the middle class.**

We have a unique opportunity to ensure that every student, regardless of their household income, starts their school day on an even playing field. I ask that you prioritize the health and education of our children by sponsoring or voting in favor of universal school meal legislation.

Mahalo,

Colleen Everett

HB-1779-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/4/2026 10:02:54 AM

Testimony for FIN on 3/4/2026 10:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Jennifer Nicole Sapp	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I, Jennifer Sapp, a Hawaii constituent (96746), testify that I am in full support of HB1779 HDI.

Food insecurity, is a result of poverty and inequities, that is hindering children at school from succeeding to learn and thrive. One angle to create food security is to expand free school meal coverage and create pathways to reach equality.

Schooling is mandatory. Parents struggle to earn enough to cover true costs of living, and meet increasing living expenses.

Taxation and inflation have real affects on available discretionary or disposable household income. Taxes fund national public services and programs. Money is allocated to feed children at school because it is already identified as critical, ethical, and moral. Taxes pay for the expensive construction of the schools, cafeteria's, and thier operational programming. A critical need has been identified, and a reasonable soultion to meet the gap need is to expand school lunch coverage and create equality, and a fair chance for all to succeed. No child left behind is a national recognized position. Schools are not a buisness, they are a critical public service. Food is not privilege, it is an essteial need that should available to all children, despite their socio-economical status, identity, or financial circumstances.

Thank you for hearing my testimony,
Jennifer Sapp