



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

**Date:** 02/10/2026

**Time:** 02:15 PM

**Location:** 309 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

**Committee:** EDN

**Department:** Education

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

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

**Purpose of 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.

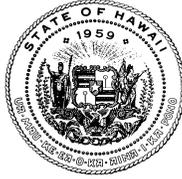
**Department's Position:**

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) supports the intent of HB 1779 but cannot support this bill in its current format given the fiscal constraints facing the state today. However, we look forward to working with the Legislature to find a way forward. 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 if the bill continues to advance 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 fund this legislation is at minimum, \$50,393,332 at the current meal participation rates, but ranges due to several variables we cannot account for at this time. These variables include reimbursement rate changes, meal participation and labor increases, as well as food and supply cost increases. For example, currently, lunch participation is approximately 50%. If that were to increase to 60%, the fiscal need would be at minimum \$111,445,939.

The Department appreciates this proposal but asks that if funding appropriate for this bill that it not affect our Department's Board of Education approved budget requests. Thank you for the opportunity to testify with comments on this measure.



**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**  
**RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS**

REPRESENTATIVE JUSTIN H. WOODSON, CHAIR  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Hearing Date: February 10, 2026, 2:15 PM      Room Number: Conference Room 309  
and Videoconference

1    **Fiscal Implications:** The Department of Health (DOH) defers to the Department of Education  
2    (DOE) for fiscal implications of implementation.

3    **Department Position:** The DOH offers comments on House Bill 1779 (H.B. 1779) which requires  
4    the DOE to provide free meals to all students enrolled in department schools.

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

10            The National School Lunch program is vital but currently fails to reach every food  
11    insecure child in need in Hawaii. One in three families in Hawaii is food insecure, and one in five  
12    households had members who were hungry but did not eat because there was not enough  
13    money for food.<sup>1</sup> Hawaii's current eligibility threshold for participation in the free school

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<sup>1</sup> The State of Food Insecurity in Hawai'i 2024-2025. Hawai'i Foodbank. Accessed January 26, 2026.  
[HawaiiFoodbank\\_FoodInsecurityReport\\_2025-25.pdf](#)

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

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

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

15 **Offered Amendments:** None

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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](https://www.auw.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2024_ALICE-Report_Facts-and-Figures_v-25-01-09.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> 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.



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

**Osa Tui, Jr.**  
President

**Logan Okita**  
Vice President

**Cheney Kaku**  
Secretary-Treasurer

**Andrea Eshelman**  
Executive Director

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

**Item: HB 1779 – Relating to School Meals**

**Position: Support**

**Hearing: Tuesday, February 10, 2026, 2:15 pm, Room 309**

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

Dear Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, and members of the committee,

The Hawai'i State Teachers Association (HSTA) **strongly supports** H.B. 1779, 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.



## CATHOLIC CHARITIES HAWAII

### **SUPPORT FOR HB 1779: RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS**

TO: House Committee on Education

FROM: Tina Andrade, President and CEO, Catholic Charities Hawaii

Hearing: Tuesday, February 10, 2026, 2:15 p.m.; CR 309 or Videoconference

Aloha Chair Woodson, Vice Chair Le Chica, and Members, Committee on Education:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in **support of HB 1779**, 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.

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 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.





## HIPHI Board

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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: February 9, 2026

To: Rep. Justin Woodson, Chair  
Rep. Trish La Chica, Vice Chair  
Members of the House Committee on Education

RE: Support for HB 1779, Relating to School Meals

Hrg: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 2:15 PM, Conference Room 309

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Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI)<sup>1</sup> and the Healthy Eating + Active Living (HEAL) Statewide Coalition<sup>2</sup> are in **support of HB 1779**, which expands free school meals to all Department of Education 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 total budget and provide a 15% increase in test scores, a 15:1 return on investment.<sup>3</sup>

### Hungry Students Face Increased Health Risks

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>5</sup> ["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.<sup>6</sup> 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**

In addition to ineligibility, the current system requires families to fill out paperwork that can be a barrier to enrollment.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

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

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

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

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

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



The American Heart Association stands in **strong support** of HB1779 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 be a stylized name.

Lauren Simpson-Gomez

Hawai'i Government Relations Director



## HOUSE BILL 1779, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS

FEBRUARY 10, 2026 · EDN HEARING

**POSITION:** Support.

**RATIONALE:** The Democratic Party of Hawai'i Education Caucus **supports** HB 1779, which expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all HIDOE 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 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](mailto:educationcaucusdph@gmail.com) · 808-679-7454**

To: House Committee on Education  
Re: **HB1779 – Relating to School Meals**  
Hawai'i State Capitol & Via Videoconference  
February 10, 2026, 2:15 PM

Dear Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, and Committee Members,

On behalf of Hawai'i Children's Action Network Speaks!, I am writing in **SUPPORT of HB1779**. This bill expands free school meal coverage, beginning with the 2029-2030 school year, to all Department of Education (DOE) 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,<sup>1</sup> 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**.<sup>2</sup>

The nutrition and health benefits of universal free school meals is well documented,<sup>3</sup> and currently **111 DOE schools are already providing universal free meals**,<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session/archives/measure\\_indiv\\_Archives.aspx?billtype=SB&billnumber=1300&year=2025](https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session/archives/measure_indiv_Archives.aspx?billtype=SB&billnumber=1300&year=2025)

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

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

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



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

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**Maile Miyashiro**, C&S Wholesale, *Immediate Past Chair*

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

DATE: February 10, 2026  
TIME: 2:15pm

RE: HB1779 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.



## 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](http://hawaiihungeraction.org)

## House Education Committee

Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 2:15PM

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

Dear Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, 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 HIDOE students.

For many keiki, school meals are the most nutritious meals they receive all day. 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. By implementing UFSM, the burden on teachers to provide snacks out-of-pocket is also reduced.

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.<sup>1</sup> UFSM has even proven to improve academic performance in other states by ensuring children receive proper nutrition necessary for healthy development and learning.<sup>2</sup>

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

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

<sup>2</sup> 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](https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/docs/default-source/research/cpr/working-papers/wp-203-let-them-eat-lunch.pdf?sfvrsn=efae783d_8)



# 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 Education  
Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 2:15PM

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Dear Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, 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) students regardless of whether the student is eligible beginning with the 2029-2030 school year.

In Hawai‘i, 34% of children experience food insecurity, up from 29% in 2023.<sup>1</sup> In fact, for many children in Hawai‘i, school breakfast and lunch are the most nutritious meals they eat in a day. School meals are one of the government’s most powerful tools for addressing this epidemic.

We were very pleased with the legislature’s passage of SB 1300 (now Act 139) last session, and this bill builds upon that success. While Act 139 will expand the income threshold from 130% to 300% of the FPL, the truth is that some students will still fall through the cracks. These remaining gaps can be easily addressed by implementing free school meals for all keiki under this bill. Governor Josh Green has even stated his commitment to strengthening food security for all students through a 5-year-plan which would achieve Universal Free School Meals by 2030.<sup>2</sup>

**Providing free school meals to all students does more than just address food insecurity.** Studies of universal free school meals (UFSM) 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 1779. We are pleased that the Hawai‘i legislature is paying attention to this important issue. Thank you for your consideration of this bill.

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<sup>1</sup> Hawai‘i Foodbank, “[The State of Food Insecurity in Hawai‘i](#),” 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Hawaii News Now, “Gov. Green Revisits Hawai‘i’s Tsunami Preparedness, Food Security, His Future in Politics,” August 4 2025, [www.hawaiinewsnow.com/video/2025/08/04/gov-green-revisits-hawaiis-tsunami-preparedness-food-security-his-future-politics/](http://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/video/2025/08/04/gov-green-revisits-hawaiis-tsunami-preparedness-food-security-his-future-politics/)

<sup>3</sup> 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](https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/docs/default-source/research/cpr/working-papers/wp-203-let-them-eat-lunch.pdf?sfvrsn=efae783d_8)



# Parents And Children Together

BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIPS  
THAT MATTER MOST

ParentsAndChildrenTogether.org

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1779 RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS

**TO:** Chair Woodson, Vice-Chair La Chica, & Members,  
House Committee on Education  
**FROM:** Trisha Kajimura, Vice-President of Strategy and External Affairs  
**DATE:** February 10, 2026 at 2:15 PM

**Parents and Children Together (PACT) supports HB 1779 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/8/2026 10:46:01 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Sonia Blackiston	Hawaii Youth Services Network	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair Woodson and Vice Chair La Chica,

Hawaii Youth Services Network supports HB 1779 which would expand free school meal access to all public-school youth whose family income is no more than 300 percent of the federal poverty level. All youth deserve the opportunity to focus on learning and ensuring youth are fed supports their ability to focus on their education.

Sincerely,

Sonia Blackiston, Executive Director, HYSN



February 6, 2026

To: Chair Justin Woodson, Vice Chair Trish La Chica and the House Committee on Education

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

Aloha,

Hawai'i Food+ Policy submits testimony in strong support of HB1779, which expands access to free school meals for students across the State beginning with the 2029-2030 school year. HB 1779 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.

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

Mahalo,

Brandon Kinard & the Food+ Policy Team

#fixourfoodsystem

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**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.

Date: February 10, 2026

To: Representative Justin Woodson, Chair  
Representative Trish La Chica, Vice Chair  
Members of the House Committee on Education

From: Early Childhood Action Strategy

Re: House Bill 1779, Relating to School Meals

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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 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.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 10:29:58 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Edmar Castillo	Edmar Castillo Photography	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

My name is Edmar Castillo. I am a Hawai‘i resident and the owner of a small business. I am writing in strong support of this measure (HB1779) to expand free school meal coverage to all Department of Education students, beginning with the 2029–2030 school year, regardless of participation in a federal school meals program.

Access to consistent, nutritious meals is foundational to a **child’s ability to learn, focus, and succeed in school**. When students are hungry, academic performance suffers, behavioral challenges increase, and the overall learning environment is affected. Ensuring that every student has access to meals during the school day supports not only individual children, but entire classrooms and school communities.

Universal school meals also promote dignity and fairness. By making meals available to all students, schools **remove the stigma** that can be associated with income-based eligibility and eliminate administrative barriers that may prevent families from enrolling in federal programs, even when they qualify. This approach ensures that no child falls through the cracks.

From a practical standpoint, universal meal programs **simplify operations for schools and provide families with greater stability**, particularly in Hawai‘i, where the cost of living continues to place pressure on working households. Even families who do not qualify for federal assistance may struggle with food costs, and this measure offers meaningful support without requiring families to navigate additional paperwork.

As a small business owner and community member, I believe investing in student nutrition is an investment in Hawai‘i’s future workforce, public health, and educational outcomes. Beginning implementation in the 2029–2030 school year allows the state and the Department of Education the time needed to plan responsibly, align resources, and ensure long-term sustainability.

This bill reflects Hawai‘i’s shared values of caring for keiki, supporting families, and creating school environments where all students are ready to learn. I respectfully urge the committee to support this measure.

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide testimony and for your consideration.

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 11:42:21 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Tasman Kekai Mattox	50501 Hawaii and General Strike Hawaii	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

We are submitting this testimony in support of HB1779 and free meals for all of our keiki. Our children are our future, and they will not have the energy to achieve academic and developmental goals without consistent access to food. Considering the high cost of food on our islands and the long hours worked by many parents, it is schools' responsibility to ensure consistent and quality food access for children. Mahalo in advance for supporting the health of children in Hawai'i.



LAMBDA LAW HAWAI'I  
WILLIAM S. RICHARDSON SCHOOL OF LAW

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF [HB1779](#)

House Committee on Education  
February 10th, 2025

Aloha Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, and Members of the Committees,

**Lambda Law Hawai'i, a Law Student Association** at the William S. Richardson School of Law, at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, **strongly supports HB1779** to establish universal free school meals for public school students.

Members of our organization are proud recipients of free school meals at public schools, and we recognize that **if we want more equitable outcomes in legal developments, we need to ensure that all students can attain educational success, regardless of socioeconomic status.** It should be a top priority of this legislature to ensure that all keiki in Hawai'i are fed at school.

**Please support HB1779.** Mahalo for the opportunity to testify,

**Lambda Law Hawai'i**, a Law Student Association at the William S. Richardson School of Law  
*Mission: To advance equal rights for LGBTQIA+ individuals at WSRSL and beyond.*



## House Committee on Education

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

Tuesday, February 10, 2025 at: 2:15 p.m.; Conference Room 309

Aloha Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica and members of the Committee,

HAPA supports HB1779 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.

One in three households in Hawaii report food insecurity,<sup>1</sup> and almost half (46%) of ALICE households reported food insecurity<sup>2</sup>. Yet two out of three financially vulnerable families in our state are ineligible for free school meals<sup>3</sup>. 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 to reduce food insecurity for our keiki!

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anne Frederick', written in a cursive style.

Anne Frederick

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

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

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



Executive Director

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 8:55:07 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Chalsie Ann Agustin	Individual	Support	Remotely Via Zoom

Comments:

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Chalsie Ann Agustin, and I am a junior at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa majoring in Social Work. I am writing in strong support of the Department of Education proposal to expand free school meal coverage to all DOE students, regardless of participation in a federal school meals program, beginning in the 2029–2030 school year.

I support this proposal because it addresses the real and ongoing challenges faced by working families who are often overlooked by current eligibility guidelines. Many families earn too much to qualify for federal assistance but still struggle to afford daily school meals, especially in Hawai‘i where the cost of living is exceptionally high. Universal free school meals recognize that food insecurity exists on a spectrum and that many families fall into this gap.

As a social work student, I am learning how economic stressors such as food insecurity directly affect children’s well-being, academic performance, and long-term outcomes. Even modest meal costs can become a significant burden for families with multiple children. When families are forced to choose between food, rent, or utilities, children are often the ones most impacted.

Providing free school meals is not only a matter of nutrition, but one of educational equity. Students who are hungry have difficulty focusing, participating, and succeeding in school. Ensuring that all students have access to free, nutritious meals supports better attendance, improved behavior, and stronger academic outcomes. When students’ basic needs are met, they are better positioned to learn and thrive.

This proposal also helps reduce the stigma associated with school meal programs. When meals are available to all students, no child is singled out based on their family’s income. Universal access promotes dignity and inclusion while also reducing administrative burdens on schools related to eligibility verification and unpaid meal balances.

Expanding free school meals to all DOE students is a compassionate, preventative, and practical investment in Hawai‘i’s children and families. It aligns with the values of social work by promoting equity, dignity, and overall well-being. For these reasons, I respectfully urge your support for this proposal.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

Sincerely,  
Chalsie Ann Agustin  
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa  
Social Work Student

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/10/2026 9:39:28 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
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, Kaua‘i, and I am a small business owner, the Kaua‘i community outreach coordinator for HCAN, and a strong advocate for families in rural communities. I am testifying in strong support of HB1779.

In rural Kaua‘i, many of our keiki attend charter schools or programs that are not federally funded for school meals. I see firsthand how working families fall through the cracks—parents who don’t qualify for federal assistance but still struggle to put food on the table every day.

When keiki are hungry, it affects their ability to learn, focus, and feel safe at school. No child should be left out or stigmatized because of where they go to school or how their meals are funded.

HB1779 is about dignity, equity, and making sure all keiki have access to nutritious meals so they can succeed. This bill would make a real difference for families in communities like mine.

I respectfully urge your support.

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 12:37:37 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Kathryn Braun	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

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

My name is Kathryn Braun, and I am a long-term educator in the Hawai'i school system.

I am writing to express strong support for HB 1779, 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.

This is an important 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.

I am always shocked when I read that a third of our school children are food insecure. How can we, as a state, allow this to happen? Food banks are trying to help families, but food banks are not enough. It will be really helpful for all children to have access to free school lunch. This will not only help alleviate hunger but hopefully increase students' ability to pay attention and learn in school.

Mahalo for your leadership and for your consideration of HB 1779.. This bill is essential to building a thriving, food-secure Hawai'i, which ensures our keiki are fed.

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/6/2026 8:31:36 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Glen Kagamida	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

SUPPORT!!!

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/7/2026 4:08:46 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Keoni Shizuma	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha

I am testifying in support of this bill.

This is a no-brainer. We are all distracted when we are hungry, and children who are not yet old enough to have their own jobs depend on their parents to provide the financial stability to afford meals at schools or by preparing a lunch to bring from home. With the high costs of living and enormous strain already felt on parents in Hawaii, the likelihood of a student not having a proper meal is increasing as time goes on.

Another challenge is the filing of paperwork that needs to be submitted to qualify for a free meal, not all parents are capable or interested in doing this. Sometimes it's a form a guilt or ego, but whatever the case, the child is the one that suffers.

This bill will protect those children who's parents are a not able to, or willing to, provide sufficiently for their children. This protects our next generation and helps them to concentrate in schools and hopefully become a better person than if they hadn't had access to regular school meals.

Mahalo for your consideration,  
Keoni Shizuma

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION  
Rep. Justin H. Woodson, Chair  
Rep. Trish La Chica, Vice Chair

HEARING:

Friday, February 6, 2026 at 2 pm  
Via videoconference  
Conference Room 309  
State Capitol  
415 South Beretania Street

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

Aloha Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, Rep. Amato 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**, 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 Ruckerfeller 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.**

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

Christine Andrews, JD  
Wailuku, Maui

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 8:50:25 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Emma Waters	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Writing in strong support. Mahalo.

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 9:32:35 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Lina Liu	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

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

My name is Lina Liu, I am writing to express strong support for , a pivotal piece of legislation that has the potential to improve access to free school meals, ultimately strengthening our state's food security landscape.

Mahalo for your leadership and for your consideration of HB1779. This bill is essential to building a thriving, food-secure Hawai'i, which ensures our keiki are fed.

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 9:34:34 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Shay Chan Hodges	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I support HB 1779.

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 9:45:03 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

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**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 10:18:06 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Younghee Overly	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Thank you for hearing this bill.

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 10:56:02 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

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

Comments:

Aloha Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jackie Keefe and I am writing in **strong support of HB1779**.

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

**To:** Honorable Rep. Justin H. Woodson, Chair  
Honorable Rep. Trish La Chica, Vice Chair  
Members, House Committee on Education

**From:** Kelly Louise Carlile

**Re:** HB1779

**Date:** Tuesday, February 10th, 2026  
2:15 pm, 309 VIA Video Conference

Hello Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, and Members of the Education Committee,

As a concerned resident of Hawai'i with desire to see our children flourish and current Masters of Social Work student from University of Hawai'i at Manoa, I would like to share my testimony with you regarding HB1779 and my **support** for this bill.

Growing up, I was a child of parents who struggled to provide for me and my brother. Most of my childhood we were on welfare programs to ensure we could eat, yet our schools still required my parents to pay for our school lunches. If we were unable to pay, we were only given a PB&J sandwich, which we often called the "shame sandwich" because only the poor kids ate them. It became a public sign of our struggles among our friends and classmates.

Since the current state law, Hawai'i Revised Statutes 302A-1132, requires all children of at least five years of age and not yet arrived at the age of eighteen to attend public or private school as required by law, it is in the best interest of the state to provide meals to all of our students, regardless of their parents income. By ensuring that all students have access to a nutritious meal while attending school, the students can focus on their studies without the fears of food insecurity while simultaneously reducing the impact to their families at home. Education is important for the growth of our children and the future of Hawai'i and we can promote a healthy and successful learning environment by ensuring they have access to meals while being required to attend school.

Providing our keiki with lunch during their schooling as required by law is the bare minimum we can do to ensure a successful future for the children and people of Hawai'i. Please pass this bill with my overwhelming **support** for the keiki of Hawai'i.

Thank you for your time and allowing me to provide my testimony,  
Kelly Carlile

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 11:34:16 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

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

Comments:

I strongly support HB1779 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.

To: Hawaii State House Committee on Education

Hearing Date/Time: Tuesday February 10, 2026, 2:15pm

Place: Hawaii State Capitol, CR 309 & Videoconference

Re: Judith Ann Armstrong supports HB1779 Relating to School Meals

Dear Chair Rep. Justin H. Woodson, Vice Chair Rep Trish La Chica and members of the Committee on Education

I, Judith Ann Armstrong, support HB1779 to provide Universal Free School Meals by 2030

This is 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 as well as improving their ability to learn 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.

This bill is essential to building a thriving, food secure Hawai'i, which ensures our Keiki are fed.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Judith Ann Armstrong

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 11:52:36 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Jessica Kuzmier	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, I am writing in support of HB1779. 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**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 12:00:12 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
gayle goodman	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Free School Meals by 2030 ([SB3058](#), [HB1779](#))

**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.

**HB-1779**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 12:35:46 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/10/2026 2:15:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Molly Mamaril	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica and Members of the Education Committee,

I am writing in strong support of HB1779 which expands access to free school meals and ensures that all students in Hawai‘i have the nutrition they need to thrive.

Research consistently shows that proper nutrition is directly linked to healthy development, improved concentration, and stronger academic performance. Universal free school meals ensure that every student, regardless of background, has access to the nutrients necessary for optimal learning, helping to close long-standing achievement gaps across our state.

Improving nutrition and reducing food insecurity

For many students in Hawai‘i, school breakfast and lunch are the only full, balanced meals they receive each day. Recent surveys show that 34 percent of children in Hawai‘i experienced food insecurity, an increase from 29 percent in 2023. Hunger is a known barrier to learning and student well-being, and expanding free school meals is a proven strategy to address this challenge.

Supporting locally grown food

Universal Free School Meals can also increase participation in programs such as Farm-to-School, reducing Hawai‘i’s reliance on imported food and strengthening our local food systems. Supporting local farmers and food producers through school meal programs provides a stable market for their products while building a more resilient and self-sufficient local economy.

For these reasons, I strongly urge the Committee to support HB 1779 Investing in free school meals is an investment in Hawai‘i’s students, families, farmers, and future.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit testimony in support.

Molly Mamaril

Kaimukī, O‘ahu