



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

Date: 02/12/2026
Time: 02:00 PM
Location: 309 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE
Committee: EDN

Department: Education

Person Testifying: Keith T. Hayashi, Superintendent of Education

Title of Bill: HB1780, RELATING TO STUDENT TRANSPORTATION.

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

Department's Position:

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) appreciates the opportunity to express its concerns on HB 1780, which proposes to expand and prioritize free school bus access for students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The Department cannot support HB 1780 in its current form but looks forward to working with the Legislature to find a way forward.

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

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

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

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

The Department supports the intent of HB 1780 and shares the goal of improving equitable access to school transportation; however, compliance with federal privacy rules, unique circumstances at CEP schools, and capacity limitations require a balanced approach to ensure fairness for all students who depend on bus transportation.

The Department thanks the Committee for the opportunity to comment on HB 1780.



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TESTIMONY TO THE HAWAI'I HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Item: HB 1780 – Relating to Student Transportation

Position: Support

Hearing: Thursday, February 12, 2026, 2:00 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 **supports** H.B. 1780, which establishes the Hawai'i Free School Bus Access for Low-income Students Act. This measure is a critical step toward ensuring that every child in Hawai'i has a reliable way to get to the classroom. By codifying the requirement for free bus passes into Hawaii Revised Statutes, this bill provides the long-term stability that families need. It ensures that transportation remains a protected component of a student's right to education rather than a policy that could be modified without legislative oversight.

This legislation is particularly vital following the passage of S.B. 1300 (Act 139, 2025), which significantly expanded free school meals in our state. While that law correctly addresses student hunger by expanding free meal eligibility to families earning up to 300% of the federal poverty level—well beyond standard U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines—a gap remains in our transportation policy. Currently, there is no reciprocal benefit for transportation, meaning many students receiving free meals are still required to pay for school bus passes. H.B. 1780 closes this gap by ensuring that any student qualifying for free or reduced-price meals receives a free bus pass.

Beyond the financial benefits, H.B. 1780 addresses systemic barriers created by the current reservation-based system. Many low-income families struggle to secure seats due to limited internet access or inflexible work schedules. By requiring the Department of Education to prioritize these students and streamline the application process to avoid duplicative paperwork, this bill removes the hurdles that lead to chronic

absenteeism. We urge committee to pass H.B. 1780 and ensure that our progress in fighting student hunger is matched by our commitment to student mobility.

Mahalo.



HIPHI Board

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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 11, 2026

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

Re: Support with Amendments for HB 1780, Relating To Student
Transportation

Hrg: February 12th, 2026 at 2:00 PM in Conference Room 309

Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI)¹ and the Healthy Eating + Active Living² (HEAL) Statewide Coalition are in **support with amendments of HB 1780**, which takes an important step toward improving educational access by requiring the Department of Education (DOE) to establish a student bus fare rate system that includes free bus passes for students whose households qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Transportation is a critical factor in school attendance, academic success, and family stability. For many families, even modest transportation fees create barriers that impact students' ability to arrive at school consistently and on time. By providing free bus passes to students facing financial hardship, this bill promotes fair access, reduces absenteeism, and supports the State's commitment to ensuring every child has meaningful access to public education.

Provide Free Bus Passes for All Students

While HIPHI strongly supports the intent of HB 1780, we respectfully urge the Committee to amend the bill to extend free student bus passes to all DOE students, rather than limiting eligibility to only those who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch

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.



Universal access to student transportation would:

- Remove stigma and administrative barriers tied to income-based eligibility,
- Ensure students from working families just above the free school lunch thresholds are not excluded,
- Increase overall attendance, retention, and educational opportunity statewide³
- Reduce traffic vehicle crashes, air pollution, and associated respiratory illnesses, and increase physical activity levels⁴
- Simplify implementation and reporting for the Department of Education.

Transportation should function as a basic educational support service, not a financial obstacle. Expanding this program to all students would create a more equitable, efficient, and inclusive system that benefits families, schools, and communities across Hawaii.

For these reasons, HIPHI supports HB 1780 and respectfully requests that it be amended to provide free bus passes for all DOE students who utilize school transportation services.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify and for your continued commitment to Hawaii's keiki.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patti Hatzistavrakis".

Patti Hatzistavrakis
Active Transportation Specialist

³ U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Transportation, Fact Sheet: Bolstering Daily School Attendance Through Safe, Accessible, Reliable Transportation. (2024).
<https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2024-09/Fact-Sheet-Bolstering-Daily-School-Attendance-Through-Transportation.pdf>

⁴ CDC. (2026, January 14). Improving Health Through Transportation Policy.
<https://www.cdc.gov/transportation/php/about/index.html>



Hawai'i Children's Action Network Speaks! is a nonpartisan 501c4 nonprofit committed to advocating for children and their families. Our core issues are safety, health, and education.

To: House Committee on Education
Re: HB 1780-Relating to Student Transportation
Hawai'i State Capitol room 309 & Via Videoconference Friday,
February 12, 2026, 2:00 PM

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

On behalf of Hawai'i Children's Action Network (HCAN) Speaks! I am submitting this testimony in **SUPPORT of HB 1780**, which would provide free school bus transportation to students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

At its core, this bill is about educational access. When students cannot reliably get to school, every other investment we make in curriculum, teachers, and student supports is undermined. Attendance is directly tied to academic achievement, and transportation challenges remain a persistent and often overlooked cause of chronic absenteeism.

In Hawai'i, many working families live paycheck to paycheck. A significant share fall into the ALICE category, earning above the federal poverty level yet still unable to consistently cover basic expenses. For these households, transportation costs add up quickly. When families must choose between groceries, rent, childcare, and bus fees, something gives. Too often, it is consistent school attendance.

HB 1780 recognizes that students who qualify for meal assistance are already identified as facing financial hardship. Aligning bus access with that eligibility is both efficient and equitable. It reduces administrative burdens for families and schools while ensuring that those most likely to need support receive it without unnecessary barriers.

The bill's emphasis on proactive outreach and prioritization is particularly important. Systems that rely solely on first-come, first-served distribution can unintentionally disadvantage families with limited internet access, language differences, or inflexible work schedules. An equity-centered approach ensures that students are not left behind because of logistical hurdles.

Reliable transportation supports more than just attendance. It helps stabilize family routines, reduces stress on caregivers, and allows parents to maintain employment without scrambling for daily transportation solutions. For students in rural areas and on neighbor islands, where alternatives may be limited, access to a bus can be the determining factor in whether they arrive at school ready to learn.

If we are serious about closing opportunity gaps and strengthening long-term outcomes for Hawai'i's keiki, we must address the practical barriers that stand in their way. Providing free bus access to income-eligible students is a smart, targeted investment that promotes equity and strengthens our public education system. Please pass HB 1780

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify in **STRONG SUPPORT of HB 1780**.

HB-1780

Submitted on: 2/10/2026 9:19:01 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/12/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Johnnie-Mae L. Perry	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I, Johnnie-Mae L. Perry Support

1780 HB RELATING TO STUDENT TRANSPORTATION.

HB-1780

Submitted on: 2/10/2026 6:37:51 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/12/2026 2:00:00 PM

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

Comments:

Aloha Chair and Committee Members

I 100% SUPPORT HB 1780.

Cheryl Burghardt

Nuuanu Oahu

HB-1780

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 8:35:23 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/12/2026 2:00:00 PM

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

Comments:

I suport the intent of this bill but am asking for amendments to make free bus fare available to all students. Mahalo.

HB-1780

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 1:21:02 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/12/2026 2:00:00 PM

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

Comments:

Aloha,

I KĀKO‘O this bill.

Mahalo,

M. Leilani DeMello

‘Ōla‘a, Puna, Hawai‘i

HB-1780

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 6:54:09 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/12/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Dawn Morais Webster Ph.D.	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Free bus passes for students who are already struggling with poverty is a wonderful idea. Our minimum wage does not allow families to meet even their basic needs. Please pass this bill.

Mahalo

HB-1780

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 7:10:35 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/12/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Deanna Espinas	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Please support this measure to provide free bus passes to students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Thank you.

HB-1780

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 10:16:06 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/12/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Larry Veray	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I am total support of HB1778. Please pass this bill. Thank you.

HB-1780

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 11:28:20 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/12/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Ted Meehan	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Please support HB 1780 which provides a free bus pass to students who qualify. Thank you.

Ted Meehan