



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

LATE

Date: 03/25/2026

Time: 01:12 PM

Location: CR 229 & Videoconference

Committee: EDU

Department: Education

Person Testifying: Keith T. Hayashi, Superintendent of Education

Title of Bill: HB2296, HD1, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS.

Purpose of Bill: Reduces the amount the Department of Education is authorized to charge for school meals to all students enrolled in department schools to no more than one-quarter of the cost of preparing the meals. Effective 7/1/3000. (HD1)

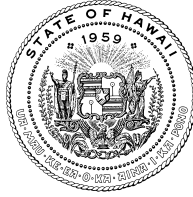
Department's Position:

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on HB 2296 HD 1 and request that the bill revert back to its original form.

HB 2296 HD 1 would amend Hawaii Revised Statutes (HRS) § 302A-405 by reducing the minimum amount the Department is authorized to charge for a school meal from fifty percent to twenty-five percent of the cost of preparing the meal. The bill does not alter the Department's existing obligation to provide reduced-price or free meals to students based on economic need.

Under current law, the Department already subsidizes a significant portion of meal costs. For the 2024–2025 school year, the average cost to produce a lunch was \$9.05, while the student price was \$2.50, approximately 28% of the total cost. If the HD 1 version of this bill passes, the Department would have to reduce the amount it is currently charging for lunch resulting in a larger financial burden for the state.

The Department recognizes that the cost of school meals represents an additional financial burden for families and supports efforts to improve affordability but requests that the bill revert back to HB 2296.



EXECUTIVE CHAMBERS
KE KE'ENA O KE KIA'ĀINA

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR
KE KIA'ĀINA

Senate Committee on Education
Wednesday, March 25, 2026
1:12 PM
State Capitol, Conference Room 229 and Videoconference

In Support
House Bill No. 2296, HD1, Relating to School Meals

Chair Kim, Vice Chair Kidani, and Members of the Senate Committee on Education:

The Office of the Governor **supports** H.B. No. 2296, HD1, Relating to School Meals. This measure reduces the amount the Department of Education is authorized to charge for school meals to all students enrolled in department schools to no more than one-quarter of the cost of preparing the meals.

Research consistently shows that well-fed students perform better academically, have improved concentration and behavior, and experience better long-term health outcomes. Rising meal costs, however, can pose financial challenges for families and discourage participation in school meal programs. By reducing the required level of cost recovery, this bill provides the Department of Education with greater flexibility to offer meals at more affordable prices, ensuring that more students have access to nutritious food during the school day.

Investing in school meals is an investment in Hawaii's future. The Office of the Governor believes this bill is an important step in supporting students and the families who strive to meet their children's needs despite economic hardships.

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide testimony on this measure.



HIPHI Board

May Okihiro, MD, MS
Chair
John A. Burns School of Medicine,
Department of Pediatrics

Jennifer José Lo, MD
Vice Chair
Hawai'i Health Partners

Titimaea Ta'ase, JD
Secretary
Taase Law Office

Jonathan Ching
Kaiser Permanente

Tammy Ho
The Queen's Medical Center

Carissa Holley, MEd
Hale Makua Health Services

Joyce Lee-Ibarra, MS
JLI Consulting

Misty Pacheco, DrPH
University of Hawai'i at Hilo

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 22, 2026

To: Sen. Donna Mercado Kim, Chair
Sen. Michelle N. Kidani, Vice Chair
Members of the Senate Committee on Education

RE: Support for HB 2296 HD1, Relating to School Meals

Hrg: March 25, 2026 at 1:12 PM, Conference Room 229

Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI)¹ and the Healthy Eating, Active Living² (HEAL) Coalition **supports HB 2296 HD1**, which reduces the minimum revenue requirement that the Department of Education must recover through school meal charges in department schools.

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 reducing this provision and providing free school meals for all students.

Meal Revenues Make Up Only a Tiny Fraction of the Education Budget

The Department of Education has an annual budget of over \$2 billion, with meal revenues totaling around \$20 million per year, or just 1% of the overall budget. Collecting meal prices from students is not necessary to keep the Department of Education functioning. Students receive free education regardless of income level and the nutrition they need to learn should be free too.

Many Struggling Families are Currently Ineligible for Meal Subsidies

The current federal and state free school meals programs fail to support all students in need. Eligibility will be increased to 300% of the Federal Poverty Level, but that doesn't include all students who need support. Last year, the Department of Education proposed nearly doubling the price for school meals which, if adopted, would burden these families even more.

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.



Health Risks

Students experiencing food insecurity face a higher risk of stress, depression, and chronic disease.³ By failing to ensure they have access to meals during the school day, we are undermining their health, development, and future success. Reducing the cost provision to be no more than one-quarter of the cost of preparing meals will expand access to nutritious meals, helping students receive the nourishment they need to grow, learn, and thrive.

Please support this measure and pave the way for free school meals for all keiki.

Mahalo,

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

Nate Hix
Director of Policy and Advocacy

³"Food Insecurity and Psychological Distress: A Review of the Recent Literature". Candice A. Meyers.
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7282962/>



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

DATE: March 25, 2026
TIME: 1:12pm

RE: HB2296 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 free school meals for all keiki.

As this measure notes, encouraging more students to participate in school meal programs is crucial for promoting equity, ensuring students have access to healthy food, and fostering an environment conducive to learning. By reducing the financial burden on families, the State can help mitigate the impacts of economic hardship and support the health and academic achievement of Hawaii's keiki. If it is not feasible at this time to have free school meals for all Hawaii keiki we support reducing the minimum revenue requirement for the department of education from the sale of school meals from one-half to one-quarter of the cost of preparing the meals, thereby making school meals more affordable for families and encouraging greater student participation in school meal programs.

We urge the Committee to pass this measure, as a step to move towards free school meals for all keiki and we 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

Senate Committee on Education

Wednesday, March 25, 2026, at 1:12PM

RE: Support for HB 2296, Relating to School Meals

Dear Chair Kim, Vice Chair Kidani, 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 **support for HB 2296**, which would reduce the minimum revenue requirement that the Department of Education must recover through school meal charges.

Our network wholeheartedly supports any measure that would expand access to free school meals, and this bill would reduce one significant statutory obstacle to that goal. Building on the legislature's passage of SB1300 last year, this bill would reduce the current revenue requirement to one quarter, which gives DOE the flexibility to extend free meals for all students, aligning with Governor Green's commitment to universal free school meals within five years.

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

School meals should be treated as any other school supply, and we urge the Committee's support of HB 2296. Mahalo for your consideration.

With aloha,
Hawai'i Hunger Action Network membership

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

To: Senate Committee on Education
Re: **HB2296 HD1 – Relating to School Meals**
Hawai'i State Capitol & Via Videoconference
March 25, 2026, 1:12 PM

Dear Chair Kim, Vice Chair Kidani, and Committee Members,

On behalf of Hawai'i Children's Action Network Speaks!, I am writing in **SUPPORT of HB2296 HD1**. This bill reduces the minimum amount that the Department of Education (DOE) is authorized to charge for school meals to all studentd enrolled in department schools to no more than one-quarter the cost of preparing the meals.

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.

Many families who have incomes above the cutoff still can't make ends meet. For example, a family of four that makes \$70,000 per year is above the 185% eligibility limit,¹ while the ALICE household survival budget to afford the "bare-minimum costs of basic necessities" for that same family is nearly \$108,000.² If that family pays full price for two students eating breakfast and lunch at school, it would cost them about \$1,300 per year for those meals.

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,³ which is just about the ALICE income level.

This bill addresses **a problematic provision in current state law that the DOE cited to justify raising school meal prices even higher** at a Board of Education meeting last year⁴ to levels that would put Hawai'i at or above the 90th percentile of school meal prices in the nation.⁵

There is NO federal mandate about the full price level for school meals, yet current state law sets that level at not less than one half of the cost of preparing the meals. Rather than further burden students and their families with higher school meal prices, it makes sense to simply remove the state school meal price mandate altogether or at least reduce that level to one quarter, as this bill would do.

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

Sincerely,

Nicole Woo
Director of Research and Economic Policy

¹

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

² <https://www.auw.org/about/alice-initiative/alice-reports/>

³ https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session/archives/measure_indiv_Archives.aspx?billtype=SB&billnumber=1300&year=2025

⁴ <https://www.civilbeat.org/2025/01/hawai%ca%bbi-families-could-face-big-price-hike-for-school-meals/>

⁵ <https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024-Trends-Report.pdf>



HAWAII APPLESEED
CENTER FOR LAW & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Testimony of the Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice
Support for HB 2296 – Relating to School Meals
Senate Committee on Education
Wednesday, March 25, 2026 at 1:12PM

Dear Chair Kim, Vice Chair Kidani, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit in **support of HB 2296**, which would reduce the minimum revenue requirement that the Hawai‘i Department of Education (HIDOE) must recover through school meal charges in department schools.

We are so grateful for the legislature’s passage of SB1300 (now Act 139) last year, which extends free school meals to children under 300% of the federal poverty level. However, this goal is still hampered by language in Section 302A-405(a), Hawai‘i Revised Statutes, which currently requires that the HIDOE charge parents at least half the cost required to produce meals.

This bill would amend that language, so that parents can be charged no more than one-quarter of the cost. Given the rising and unpredictable costs of HIDOE’s school lunch program, we believe this is a much fairer way to set pricing requirements. This also provides HIDOE the flexibility to extend free meals to any student going forward, aligning with Governor Josh Green’s stated commitment to achieving free school meals for all students in the next five years.¹

School meals are one of the government’s most powerful tools for delivering good nutrition to children and supporting families. But they provide more than just nutritional benefits; they are consistently linked with better educational and health outcomes.² If we want to give Hawai‘i’s students the best chance at success, we should consider school meals just as essential as any other school supply.

With recent numbers showing three in ten Hawai‘i households with children face food insecurity,³ expanding access to free school meals to all students makes sense, and this bill takes us one more step closer to that goal.

We are pleased that the legislature is acknowledging this important issue, and considering this next step in the right direction. Thank you for your consideration.

¹ 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/

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.

³ Hawai‘i Foodbank, “The State of Food Insecurity in Hawai‘i,” 2023.

HB-2296-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/20/2026 5:30:57 PM

Testimony for EDU on 3/25/2026 1:12:00 PM

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

Comments:

Aloha Chair and Committee Members

I Support HB2296 HD1. It seems that we should be giving all students free meals at our schools but in the meantime this is a chance to help many of our families.

Cheryl Burghardt

Nuuanu Oahu

HB-2296-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/21/2026 11:52:10 AM

Testimony for EDU on 3/25/2026 1:12:00 PM

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

Comments:

I, Johnnie-Mae L. Perry, Support w/COMMENT

IRAN WAR IS COSTING TAXPAYERS 1BILLION \$ A DAY. HOW WILL FEDERAL FUNDING IMPACT THE SOH BUDGET?

2296 HB RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS.

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
Senator Donna Mercado Kim, Chair
Senator Michelle N. Kidani, Vice Chair

HEARING:

Wednesday, March 25, 2026 at 1:12 pm
Conference Room 229 & Videoconference

TESTIMONY IN **SUPPORT** OF HB 2296, HD1 - RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS.

Aloha Chair Kim, Vice Chair Kidani, Senator Hashimoto for my district, 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 **support of HB 2296, HD1**, Relating to School Meals, which reduces the amount the Department of Education is authorized to charge for school meals to all students enrolled in department schools to no more than one-quarter of the cost of preparing the meals.

As indicated in my testimony on HB 1779, HD1, I am a strong supporter of free school meals for all students. I appreciate and support HB 2296, HD1 only as a step in the direction of making free school meals accessible to all students. 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 respectfully request that you **vote in support of HB 2296, HD1** as a means to reduce the cost of school meals only in the absence of legislative commitment to the evidence-based policy of free school meals for all.

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

Christine Andrews, JD
Wailuku, Maui