



EXECUTIVE CHAMBERS
KE KE'ENA O KE KIA'ĀINA

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR
KE KIA'ĀINA

House Committee on Finance
Wednesday, March 4, 2026
10:00 AM
State Capitol, Conference Room 308 and Videoconference

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

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

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.



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

Date: 03/04/2026

Time: 10:00 AM

Location: 308 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Committee: FIN

Department: Education

Person Testifying: Keith T. Hayashi, Superintendent of Education

Title of Bill: 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.



HIPHI Board

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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 2, 2026

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

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

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

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/>

To: House Committee on Finance
Re: **HB2296 HD1 – Relating to School Meals**
Hawai'i State Capitol & Via Videoconference
March 4, 2026, 10:00 AM

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

On behalf of Hawai'i Children's Action Network Speaks!, I am writing in **SUPPORT of HB2296 HD1**. This bill reduces the minimum amount that the Department of Education (DOE) is authorized to charge for school meals to all students 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>



HOUSE BILL 2296, HD1, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS

MARCH 4, 2026 · FIN HEARING

POSITION: Support.

RATIONALE: The Democratic Party of Hawai'i Education Caucus **supports** HB 2296, HD1, which reduces the amount the Department of Education is authorized to charge for school meals to no more than one-quarter of the cost of preparing the meals.

Hungry children can't learn.

Currently, under HRS §302A-405, the DOE is required to set school meal prices at an amount that covers half of total student meal costs. This led the department to propose significant increases in student meal prices earlier last year (along with proposals to increase a range of other student fees). HIDOE requested approval from the Board of Education to nearly double the cost of school meals over the next four years. School lunches would have increased from \$2.50 for elementary and middle school students and \$2.75 for high school students to \$4.75 and \$5.00 by the 2028-2029 school year. This would be tremendously harmful for working families, who already face one of the highest costs of living in the nation.

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. As we repeal the statutory provision that compels the DOE to raise student meal prices, we should also build 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 supporting legislation to create a statutory mandate to extend free school meals to all students. 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.

As the National Education Association has stated, through universal free school meals programs, “We can grow generations of healthy eaters and save our country billions.” School meals cost less per student when more students participate in a free meal program. An article in *Nutrients* entitled “Universal Free Meals Associated with Lower Meal Costs While Maintaining Nutritional Quality” found that schools that participated in a universal meal program spent 67 and 58 cents less per lunch and breakfast, respectively, while maintaining the same nutritional quality.

Nutrition is essential to academic success. This bill will help to ensure that Hawai’i’s keiki are healthy and ready to reach their full potential.

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



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
House Committee on Finance
Wednesday, March 4, 2026 at 10:00AM

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

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

We wholeheartedly support any measure that would expand access to free school meals, and this bill would remove one significant statutory obstacle to that goal.

Beyond removing this statutory limitation, we hope that the legislature will make the bold move to provide universal free meals for all students, as also considered today by this committee in HB 1779. This is because school meals are one of the government's most powerful tools for delivering good nutrition to children and supporting families. In Hawai'i, three in ten households with children face food insecurity.¹ While some of these children qualify for free meals, any family of four that makes at least \$47,000 does not,² leaving two-thirds of the families over this threshold still struggling to cover their food costs.³ For some Hawai'i children, school meals are the only balanced, nutritious meals they receive in a day.

Research consistently links proper nutrition to better educational and health outcomes and conversely, students who miss meals tend to perform poorly in school.⁴ Meals are more than just nutrition—they are an essential school supply. Ensuring that every student has access to the nutrients necessary for optimal learning is a critical step in helping to close achievement gaps.

School meals are one of the government's most powerful tools for delivering good nutrition to children and supporting families, and we are pleased that the legislature is acknowledging this important issue, and considering this first step in the right direction. Thank you for your consideration.

¹ Hawai'i Foodbank, "The State of Food Insecurity in Hawai'i," 2023.

² Hawai'i State Department of Education, "Free and Reduced Price Meals Program," 2025.

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

³ United for ALICE, "ALICE in the Crosscurrents: An Update on Financial Hardship in Hawai'i," 2024.

⁴ 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.



2026 Network Members

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

hawaiihungeraction.org

House Committee on Finance

Wednesday, March 4, 2026, at 10:00AM

RE: Support for HB 296, Relating to School Meals

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

The Hawai'i Hunger Action Network, a coalition of more than twenty local organizations with the mission to advocate for food security for Hawai'i households, would like to express 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 remove one significant statutory obstacle to that goal. **Beyond changing this statutory limitation, we hope that the legislature will make the bold move to provide universal free meals for all students, as is proposed by another bill the committee is considering today, HB 1779.**

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

Mahalo for your consideration of HB 2296.

With aloha,
Hawai'i Hunger Action Network membership

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

² Amy E. Schwartz & Michah W. Rothbart, "Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance," Maxwell School Center for Policy Research, July 2019.

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



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

DATE: March 3, 2026

TIME: 2pm

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.

HB-2296-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/3/2026 9:51:57 AM

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

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

Comments:

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

My name is Jackie Keefe, and I am **in strong support of HB2296 HD1**, which reduces the Department of Education's minimum revenue requirement for school meals from 50% to 25% of the preparation cost. This technical adjustment allows for lower meal prices, directly addressing the significant “economic challenges” and “inflationary pressures” currently facing Hawaii’s working families which leave many families and their children food insecure.

Please pass this bill.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.

Jackie Keefe, Lahaina

HB-2296-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 1:37:55 PM

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

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

Comments:

I support this legislation.

Davd Ball,

Waiialae-Kahala

COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

Rep. Chris Todd, Chair

Rep. Jenna Takenouchi, Vice Chair

HEARING:

Wednesday, March 4, 2026 at 10:00 am

Conference Room 308 and Via Videoconference

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

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

My name is Christine Andrews and I am a long-term resident of Wailuku, Maui. I write to you today in **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

HB-2296-HD-1

Submitted on: 3/2/2026 3:31:48 PM

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

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

Comments:

In support of. Thank you.