



EXECUTIVE CHAMBERS  
KE KE'ENA O KE KIA'ĀINA

JOSH GREEN, M.D.  
GOVERNOR  
KE KIA'ĀINA

**Senate Committee on Ways and Means**

Wednesday, April 1, 2026

10:03 AM

State Capitol, Conference Room 211 and Videoconference

**In Support**

**House Bill No. 2296, HD1, SD1, Relating to School Meals**

Chair Dela Cruz, Vice Chair Moriwaki, and Members of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means:

The Office of the Governor **supports** H.B. No. 2296, HD1, SD1, Relating to School Meals. This measure requires the Department of Education to charge not less than one-quarter of the cost of preparing a school meal for each school meal.

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

**LATE**

**Date:** 04/01/2026

**Time:** 10:03 AM

**Location:** CR 211 & Videoconference

**Committee:** WAM

**Department:** Education

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

**Title of Bill:** HB2296, SD1, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS.

**Purpose of Bill:** Requires the Department of Education to charge not less than one-quarter of the cost of preparing a school meal for each school meal. Effective 7/31/2055. (SD1)

**Department's Position:**

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 2296, HD 1, SD 1 and is grateful that the bill was reverted back to its original form.

HB 2296, HD 1, SD 1 would amend Hawaii Revised Statutes § 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 twenty-eight percent of the total cost. Under the SD 1 version of this bill, the Department can maintain the amount it is currently charging for lunch rather than increasing the cost to families or putting further financial burden on the State.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this measure.

To: Senate Committee on Ways and Means  
Re: **HB2296 HD1 SD1 – Relating to School Meals**  
Hawai'i State Capitol & Via Videoconference  
April 1, 2026; 10:03 AM

Aloha Chair Dela Cruz, Vice Chair Moriwaki, and Committee Members,

On behalf of Hawai'i Children's Action Network Speaks!, I am writing in **SUPPORT of HB2296 HD1 SD1**. This bill requires the Department of Education to charge no less than one-quarter of the cost of preparing a school meal for each school meal.

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,<sup>1</sup> while the ALICE household survival budget to afford the "bare-minimum costs of basic necessities" for that same family is nearly \$108,000.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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 year<sup>4</sup> to levels that would put Hawai'i at or above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of school meal prices in the nation.<sup>5</sup>

**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](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, SD1, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS**

APRIL 1, 2026 · WAM HEARING

**POSITION:** Support.

**RATIONALE:** The Democratic Party of Hawai'i Education Caucus **supports** HB 2296, HD1, SD1, which requires the Department of Education to charge not less than one-quarter of the cost of preparing a school meal for each school meal.

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](mailto:educationcaucusdph@gmail.com) · 808-679-7454**



**LATE**

**HIPHI Board**

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Retired, Hawai'i State Department of  
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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: March 30, 2026

To: Sen. Donovan M. Dela Cruz, Chair  
Sen. Sharon Y. Moriwaki, Vice Chair  
Members of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means

Re: Support for HB 2296 HD1 SD1, Relating to School Meals

Hrg: April 1, 2026 at 10:03 AM, Conference Room 211

Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI)<sup>1</sup> and the Healthy Eating, Active Living<sup>2</sup> (HEAL) Coalition **supports HB 2296 HD1 SD1**, 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.

<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.



### Health Risks

Students experiencing food insecurity face a higher risk of stress, depression, and chronic disease.<sup>3</sup> 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

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



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**Eddie Asato**, Pint Size Hawaii, *Advisor*  
**Gary Okimoto**, Safeway, *Advisor*  
**Maile Miyashiro**, C&S Wholesale, *Immediate Past Chair*

TO: Committee on Ways and Means  
FROM: HAWAII FOOD INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION  
Lauren Zirbel, Executive Director

DATE: April 1, 2026  
TIME: 10:03am

RE: HB2296 HD1 SD1 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-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/30/2026 2:36:20 PM

Testimony for WAM on 4/1/2026 10:03:00 AM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
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 WAYS AND MEANS  
Senator Donovan M. Dela Cruz, Chair  
Senator Sharon Y. Moriwaki, Vice Chair

**LATE**

HEARING:

Wednesday, April 1, 2026 at 10:03 am, Conference Room 211 & Videoconference

COMMENTS ON HB 2296, HD1, SD1 - RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS.

Aloha Chair Dela Cruz, Vice Chair Moriwaki, Senator Hashimoto for my district, Senator DeCoite 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 with **comments on HB 2296, HD1, SD1**, Relating to School Meals, which requires the Department of Education to charge not less than one-quarter of the cost of preparing a school meal for each school meal.

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 the original intent of HB 2296 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. While I appreciate that the offering of free school meals has expanded recently, I no longer support **HB 2296, HD1, SD1** as the changes in SD1 make the bill effectively meaningless as a means to reduce the cost of school meals in the absence of legislative commitment to the evidence-based policy of free school meals for all. I respectfully request that the original language and intent of the bill, to cap pricing of meals for students, be reinstated.

Mahalo,

Christine Andrews, JD