



EXECUTIVE CHAMBERS
KE KE'ENA O KE KIA'ĀINA

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR
KE KIA'ĀINA

House Committee on Education

Tuesday, February 10, 2026

2:15 p.m.

State Capitol, Conference Room 309 and Videoconference

In Support

House Bill No. 2296, Relating to School Meals

Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, and Members of the House Committee on Education:

The Office of the Governor strongly supports H.B. No. 2296, Relating to School Meals. This measure reduces the Department of Education's minimum revenue requirement from school meal sales from one-half to one-quarter of meal preparation costs, helping make school meals more affordable for families.

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: 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: HB2296, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS.

Purpose of Bill: Reduces the minimum revenue requirement that the Department of Education must recover through school meal charges in department schools.

Department's Position:

The Hawai'i State Department of Education (Department) appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB2296.

HB2296 would amend Hawai'i Revised Statutes (HRS) § 302A-405 by reducing the minimum amount the Department is required 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.

As a practical matter, HB2296 would result in the Department meeting its statutory obligations without having to raise the cost of meals for families. 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.

The Department recognizes that the cost of school meals represents an additional financial burden for families and supports efforts to improve affordability.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this measure.



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

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

RE: HB2296 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.



HIPHI Board

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Coalition for a
Tobacco-Free Hawai'i

Community-Based Research &
Evaluation

Community Health
Worker Initiatives

COVID-19 Response

Environmental Health

Hawai'i Drug & Alcohol-Free Coalitions

Hawai'i Farm to School Network

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 2296, Relating to School Meals

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

Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI)¹ and the Healthy Eating, Active Living² (HEAL) Coalition **supports HB 2296**, 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 removing 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 increasing prices 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. Removing the cost provision will expand access to nutritious meals, helping students receive the nourishment they need to grow, learn, and thrive.

Please support removing this cost requirement, 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/>



HAWAII APPLESEED
CENTER FOR LAW & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Testimony of the Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice
Support (with amendments) for HB 2296 – Relating to School Meals
House Committee on Education
Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 2:15PM

Dear Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, and members of the Committee:

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

While we wholeheartedly support any measure that would expand access to free school meals, this bill does not adequately address the statutory limitation in section 302A-405(a), Hawaii Revised Statutes. This bill only reduces the required percentage of meal costs required by parents. If our eventual goal is to make free meals available to all students—or even to have more flexibility in parent co-pay prices, it would make more sense to eliminate this statute entirely.

Instead, we would like to encourage that the committee consider amending the bill to repeal 302A-405, subsection (a) entirely, eliminating this statutory barrier and clearing the way for universal free school meals for all students.

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.

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.

To: House Committee on Education
Re: **HB2296 – 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 HB2296**. This bill reduces the minimum revenue requirement that the Department of Education (DOE) must recover through school meal charges in department schools.

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, RELATING TO SCHOOL MEALS

FEBRUARY 10, 2026 · EDN HEARING

POSITION: Support.

RATIONALE: The Democratic Party of Hawai'i Education Caucus **supports** HB 2296, which reduces the minimum revenue requirement that the Department of Education must recover through school meal charges in department schools.

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



February 8th, 2026

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

Subject: HB2296, Relating to School Meals

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

We support HB2296, 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.

Economic Necessity and the ALICE Gap Hawaii’s food costs are among the highest in the nation, with the USDA “Thrifty Food Plan” estimated to be 52% higher in Honolulu than on the mainland. Consequently, 32% of Hawaii households—and 34% of our children—experience food insecurity. Notably, 45% of Hawaii households live below the ALICE threshold, earning too much to qualify for federal meal subsidies but not enough to afford basic needs like nutritious food. School meals are often the most nutritious food these keiki receive in a day.

There are also peer reviewed studies supporting the argument for increasing access to school meals as a cost-saving mechanism as well as a means for increasing/improving academic performance.

By reducing the financial barrier for students to participate in meals, HB2296 enables schools to facilitate an environment more conducive to learning.

I urge you to pass HB2296. Mahalo for your consideration.

Brandon Kinard and the Hawai’i Food+ Policy Team
#fixourfoodsystem

[1] Schwartz, A. E., & Rothbart, M. W. (2020). Let them eat lunch: The impact of universal free meals on student performance. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 39(2), 376–410. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam>

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.

February 8th, 2026

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

From: Madison J Barker, Kailua

Subject: HB2296, Relating to School Meals

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

Please support HB2296. This bill is a vital step toward supporting Hawaii's working families who are currently facing significant economic challenges, including the rising cost of living and inflationary pressures that limit affordable options for basic needs.

Recent data from the Hawaii Foodbank reveals that 34% of Hawaii's children live in households experiencing food insecurity. For many of these keiki, the breakfast and lunch provided at school are the most nutritious meals they receive in a day. These meals serve as a critical buffer against hunger, yet the cost of school meals has created a barrier that contributes to lower student participation.

By reducing the minimum revenue requirement from one-half to one-quarter of the preparation cost, this bill allows the Department of Education to make these essential meals significantly more affordable and accessible. This is particularly important for the 45% of Hawaii households living below the ALICE threshold who often have to choose between paying for food or other basic necessities like medical care.

Making school meals more accessible is crucial for promoting equity and ensuring that every student has the healthy food they need to thrive. When we reduce the financial burden on families, we directly mitigate the impacts of economic hardship and foster a school environment that is truly conducive to learning. Access to these nutritious meals is essential for our students' academic success and overall well-being.

Please support HB2296.

Mahalo for your consideration!

Madison J Barker

References

- Hawaii State Legislature. (2026). *H.B. No. 2296: A bill for an act relating to school meals...*
- Hawaii State Legislature. (n.d.). *House Committee on Education*. <https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/legislature/committeepage.aspx?comm=EDN>.
- Pirkle, C. M. (2025). *The state of food insecurity in Hawai'i 2024-2025*. Hawaii Foodbank. https://hawaiifoodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/HawaiiFoodbank_FoodInsecurityReport_2025-25.pdf,...
- Schwartz, A. E., & Rothbart, M. W. (2020). Let them eat lunch: The impact of universal free meals on student performance. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 39(2), 376–410. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam>

HB-2296

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 8:49:36 AM

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

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

Comments:

Writing in strong support. Mahalo.