



EXECUTIVE CHAMBERS
KE KE'ENA O KE KIA'ĀINA

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR
KE KIA'ĀINA

House Committee on Education

Thursday, March 19, 2026

2:00 p.m.

State Capitol, Conference Room 309 and Videoconference

In Support

Senate Bill No. 2615, Relating to School Cafeteria Meal Costs

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

The Office of the Governor **supports** S.B. No. 2615, Relating to School Cafeteria Meal Costs. 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.



HIPHI Board

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Community-Based Research &
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Community Health
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Hawai'i Climate Change and Health
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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 17, 2026

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

Re: Support for SB 2615, Relating to School Cafeteria Meal Costs

Hrg: Thursday, March 19, 2026 at 2:00 PM, Conference Room 309

Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI)¹ and the Healthy Eating, Active Living² (HEAL) Coalition **supports SB 2615**, 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/>



SENATE BILL 2615, RELATING TO SCHOOL CAFETERIA MEAL COSTS

MARCH 19, 2026 · EDN HEARING

POSITION: Support.

RATIONALE: The Democratic Party of Hawai'i Education Caucus **supports** SB 2615, relating to school cafeteria meal costs, 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.

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



Date of Hearing: March 19, 2026

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

Subject: **SB 2615**, Relating to School Cafeteria Meal Costs

Aloha,

Hawai'i Food+ Policy is writing in **support of SB 2615**. This bill will reduce the required cost recovery of school meals from 50% of the cost to prepare meals to no less than 25% of the cost to prepare meals, allow DOE to adjust meal prices annually, and allow the governor to modify pricing rules to avoid jeopardizing federal funding.

Food security in Hawai'i is a serious concern. From 2024-2025, 32% of households, and 11% of households went a whole day without food at least once during the year¹. For many low-income children, school meals are the best and only opportunity for a nutritious meal. According to the written comments provided by the Department of Education, the cost of producing a school lunch in fiscal year 2024-2025 was \$9.05, while the student meal price was \$2.50, or approximately twenty-eight percent of the cost. To allow the Department of Education to adhere to state law, reducing the statutory cost-recovery threshold to one-fourth of the meal preparation costs bridges the gaps in affordability and alleviates levying additional costs on our families. This allows our schools to continue providing food to some of our most vulnerable community members.

Keiki are our future. Well-nourished students will be more prepared to learn, and investing early in their futures will create long-term success not just for children, but for the state as a whole. To support families across our state and strengthen food security for our keiki, I respectfully **urge this committee to pass SB 2615**.

Mahalo,
Brandon Kinard & the Food+ Policy Team
#fixourfoodsystem

[1] Pirkle, C. M. (2025). The state of food insecurity in Hawai'i 2024–2025. Hawai'i Foodbank.

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.

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Rep. Justin H. Woodson, Chair

Rep. Trish La Chica, Vice Chair

HEARING: Thursday, March 19, 2026 at 2:00 pm, Conference Room 309 and Via Videoconference

TESTIMONY IN **SUPPORT** OF SB 2615 - RELATING TO SCHOOL CAFETERIA MEAL COSTS.

Aloha Chair Woodson, Vice Chair La Chica, Rep. Amato 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 **strong support of SB 2615**, 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 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 SB 2615 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 SB 2615** as a means to reduce the cost of school meals to families 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