



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

**Date:** 02/13/2026

**Time:** 01:05 PM

**Location:** CR 229 & Videoconference

**Committee:** EDU

**Department:** Education

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

**Title of Bill:** SB2615, RELATING TO SCHOOL CAFETERIA MEAL COSTS.

**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.

**Department's Position:**

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 2615.

The current statute in section 302A-405(a), Hawaii Revised Statutes, would force the Department to increase school meal prices to meet the existing language in the statute that mandates charging half of the cost of preparing the meals.

The cost of producing a lunch in 2024-25 was \$9.05 while the student price was \$2.50, approximately 28% of the total cost. Reducing the required meal cost amount to one-quarter would prevent the Department from increasing the price of school meals on parents. The Department recognizes fee increases would place additional financial burdens on families and could cause less students to purchase school meals, and is balancing that with the fiscal responsibilities of running a statewide school meals program.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this measure.



## **SENATE BILL 2615, RELATING TO SCHOOL CAFETERIA MEAL COSTS**

FEBRUARY 13, 2026 · EDU 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](mailto:educationcaucusdph@gmail.com) · 808-679-7454**



Date of Hearing: February 13, 2026

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

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

Aloha,

I am writing in **support of SB 2615**. This bill will reduce the required cost recovery of school meals by 50%, allow DOE to adjust meal prices annually, preserve the requirement to offer free or reduced-price meals based on economic need, 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 year<sup>1</sup>. For many low-income children, school meals are the best and only opportunity for a nutritious meal. This bill would bridge gaps and alleviate costs on our families, providing food to some of our most vulnerable.

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

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[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.