

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR



KEITH T. HAYASHI
SUPERINTENDENT

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

Date: 02/08/2024

Time: 02:00 PM

Location: 309 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Committee: House Education

Department: Education

Person Testifying: Keith T. Hayashi, Superintendent of Education

Title of Bill: HB 1656 RELATING TO SCHOOL BUS SERVICES.

Purpose of Bill: Appropriates funds to the Department of Education to assist individuals in obtaining a commercial driver's license for the purpose of becoming school bus drivers.

Department's Position:

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) is in support of HB 1656.

The Department's school bus contractors have taken a number of actions in order to ensure continued levels of student transportation in the face of the bus driver shortage. Bus contractors have instituted financial incentives such as hiring bonuses, higher hourly pay rates, and daily differentials. The Department's current bus contracts were accordingly amended in 2023 to include additional funds for pay differentials and benefits for bus drivers, in order to attract applicants seeking to become CDL drivers, and eventually, bus drivers. Non-financial incentives offered by bus contractors include compensated CDL training and licensing. Overall, financial incentives have been largely successful in recruiting and retaining bus drivers.

An additional appropriation would allow the Department to continue to respond to the marketplace's demands, and to continue transporting students to school. However, this appropriation is not currently included in the priorities of the Department's Board-approved budget.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to provide its support for HB 1656.



HOUSE BILL 1656, RELATING TO SCHOOL BUS SERVICES

FEBRUARY 8, 2024 · EDN HEARING

POSITION: Support.

RATIONALE: The Democratic Party of Hawai'i Education Caucus **supports** HB 1656, relating to school bus services, which appropriates funds to the Department of Education to assist individuals in obtaining a commercial driver's license for the purpose of becoming school bus drivers.

The Department of Education currently provides regular bus service for qualified public school students to facilitate compliance with the state's compulsory attendance, as well as with federal law relating to the provision of a free and appropriate education. According to the DOE, there are approximately 12,000 student riders on O'ahu and 13,000 on the neighbor islands.

School bus service is essential for getting students to and from school, particularly for students who lack other transportation options or face hardship in obtaining school transportation services due to economic difficulty. Yet, chronic bus driver shortages have led to the cancellation or consolidation of many school bus routes, especially in West O'ahu and in rural and remote areas of the neighbor islands, reducing transportation options for local families. **At the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, department officials reported that they were short by roughly 225 drivers out of a total of nearly 650 positions, or over one-third of the total number of bus driver positions in existence statewide.**

In July 2023, the department cancelled or suspended school bus service for fourteen schools statewide, which impacted nearly 1,400 students across O'ahu and Kaua'i. Moreover, the bus driver shortage has severely impacted Hawai'i Island school communities, where county bus services do not operate as frequently as on O'ahu and where many students face commutes that can exceed one and a half hours each way.

A lack of adequate school bus transportation options exacerbates chronic absenteeism. Rates of chronic absenteeism are highest in rural, remote, and socioeconomically disadvantaged school communities. In the 2021-2022 school year, more than a third of Hawai'i students were chronically absent from school, meaning they missed fifteen or more days of class. That was a significant jump from the year before, when only eighteen per cent of students were counted as chronically absent. Numerous studies show that chronic absenteeism significantly worsens student achievement and lowers graduation rates.

Governor Josh Green announced an emergency proclamation related to the school bus shortage on August 17, 2023, which allows the department of transportation to grant exemptions for the use of vehicles other than school buses to transport students and allows commercial driver's license holders with a "P" endorsement for driving passenger vehicles to operate student transportation vehicles. More needs to be done, however, to sustain critical bus service programs for Hawai'i's public school students and their 'ohana.

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HB-1656

Submitted on: 2/6/2024 3:21:25 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/8/2024 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Scott Kidd	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I support this measure and believe the state hiring drivers should also provide the required training for said position.