



**TESTIMONY OF
THE DEPARTMENT OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
KA 'OIHANA O KA LOIO KUHINA
THIRTY-THIRD LEGISLATURE, 2025**

ON THE FOLLOWING MEASURE:

H.B. NO. 620, H.D. 1, RELATING TO EDUCATION.

BEFORE THE:

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

DATE: Wednesday, February 26, 2025 **TIME:** 10:50 a.m.

LOCATION: State Capitol, Room 308

TESTIFIER(S): Anne E. Lopez, Attorney General, or
Anne T. Horiuchi or Randall M. Wat, Deputy Attorneys General

Chair Yamashita and Members of the Committee:

The Department of the Attorney General (Department) provides the following comments.

The bill: establishes State policy to promote Braille literacy for eligible blind students; requires the individualized education programs (IEPs) and section 504 plans of eligible blind students to include the assessment and evaluation of eligible blind students' reading and writing abilities, instruction of Braille, and provision of Braille instructional materials under certain circumstances; requires the Department of Education to establish a Braille Literacy Resource Center; and appropriates funds.

New section 302A-C(b) on page 5, lines 1 through 6, of the bill states:

(b) Every individualized education program or section 504 plan for an eligible blind student shall include an assessment of an eligible blind student's reading and writing ability and needs for braille educational services, including the student's current and future needs for instruction in braille or the use of braille.

Eligible student assessments are determined by an IEP team, including parents. Mandating yearly assessments in those areas is contrary to federal law, which leaves that determination to the IEP teams. See 34 C.F.R. § 300.324(a)(1)(iii) (in developing each child's IEP, the IEP team must consider, amongst other things, the results of the initial or most recent evaluation of a child), and 34 C.F.R. § 300.324(a)(2)(iii) (in the case of a child who is blind or visually impaired, provide for instruction in Braille and the

use of Braille unless the IEP team determines, after an evaluation of the child's reading and writing skills, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media (including an evaluation of the child's future needs for instruction in Braille or the use of Braille), that instruction in Braille or the use of Braille is not appropriate for the child.). Consequently, the Department recommends removing new section 302A-C(b) on page 5, lines 1 through 6.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on this bill.



HAWAI‘I CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION **KOMIKINA PONO KĪWILA O HAWAI‘I**

830 PUNCHBOWL STREET, ROOM 411, HONOLULU, HI 96813 · PHONE: (808) 586-8636 · FAX: (808) 586-8655 · TDD: (808) 586-8692

Wednesday, February 26, 2025
10:50 a.m.

Conference Room 308 & Videoconference
State Capitol, 415 South Beretania Street

To: COMMITTEE ON FINANCE
Rep. Kyle T. Yamashita, Chair
Rep. Jenna Takenouchi, Vice Chair

From: Dr. William J. Puette, Chair
and Commissioners of the Hawai‘i Civil Rights Commission

Re: H.B. 620 H.D. 1 Relating to Education **Testimony in STRONG SUPPORT**

The Hawai‘i Civil Rights Commission (HCRC) carries out the Hawai‘i constitutional mandate that no person shall be discriminated against in the exercise of their civil rights. Art. I, Sec. 5. HCRC enforces laws protecting the people of Hawai‘i from discrimination in the areas of housing, employment, public accommodations, and in state and state-funded services.

The purpose of H.B. 620 H.D. 1 is to create a Braille literacy resource center and provide Braille services for low vision and blind students attending department of education schools. Promoting literacy and opportunity for low vision and blind students through the provision of Braille educational services will serve to provide them with equal opportunity to participate in education and all of the positive benefits of literacy including life-satisfaction and self-esteem. Hawai‘i has long been a refuge of linguistic diversity and literacy. Higher rates of Braille literacy will serve to increase independence, inclusion, and diversity benefiting our whole community.

HCRC strongly supports H.B. 620 H.D. 1.



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

Date: 02/26/2025

Time: 10:50 AM

Location: 308 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Committee: House Finance

Department: Education

Person Testifying: Keith T. Hayashi, Superintendent of Education

Bill Title: HB 0620, HD1 RELATING TO EDUCATION.

Purpose of Bill: Establishes state policy to promote braille literacy for eligible blind students. Requires the individualized education programs and section 504 plans of eligible blind students to include the assessment and evaluation of eligible blind students' reading and writing abilities, instruction of braille, and provision of braille instructional materials under certain circumstances. Requires the Department of Education to establish a Braille Literacy Resource Center. Appropriates funds. Effective 7/1/3000. (HD1)

Department's Position:

The Hawai'i Department of Education (Department) supports HB 620, HD1, which establishes state policy to promote braille literacy as well as a Braille Literacy Resource Center and respectfully provides comments.

The Department requests consideration of replacing the text of HB 620, HD1, with the text of SB 530, SD1, in its entirety, as SB 530, SD1, more accurately reflects the Department's ongoing collaboration with the National Federation of the Blind and better aligns with the legislative intent. The language in SB 530, SD1, offers a clearer and more comprehensive framework for implementing initiatives that support braille literacy for eligible low vision and blind students. Adopting the language in SB 530, SD1, would help strengthen the foundation for braille literacy, ultimately expanding students' educational opportunities and promoting their long-term success and greater independence. Additionally, it would help ensure that the necessary support structures are in place to meet the diverse needs of these students.

If enacted, this legislation would require additional appropriations to sustain the Department's efforts in providing highly specialized experts, instructional materials, financial resources, and dedicated full-time employees to support statewide coordination and guidance in carrying out the Braille Literacy

Resource Center's functions. While the Department is currently funding existing braille services and is committed to these efforts, additional recurring funds in the amount of \$300,000 would be necessary to maintain the center's operations effectively.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this measure.

National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii

Testimony submitted by James Gashel, legislative chair

House Finance Committee (FIN)

Thirty-third Legislature, 2025 regular session

February 26, 2025, 10:50 am, hearing on HB620 H.D. 1

Good morning Chair, Vice Chair, and members. I am James Gashel, National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Hawaii legislative chair, proudly supporting HB620 H.D. 1. Thank you for considering this important bill and for scheduling this hearing. HB620 H.D. 1 declares a pro-active Braille literacy approach and policy for our state, which is much needed and long overdue.

This bill has lots of powerful words, saying blind people, and particularly blind keiki matter to the legislature and our people in the Aloha State. Literacy education is fundamental to success in life. When we're blind, our literacy toolbox must include strong Braille reading and writing skills. HB620 HD 1 affirms this understanding.

You held a hearing on a similar bill last year. That bill passed the House but did not advance in the Senate, so we're back to see you again. What's more important though is what happened after the legislature went home. I'd like to tell you about that.

To her credit, and reflecting her professionalism, Ms. Jamia Green, administrator of DOE's special needs section reached out to our group and said she'd like to pick up discussion of better Braille services where the legislation left off. last year This discussion led to many meetings in the summer and fall, finally resulting in text similar to HB620 H.D. 1. There's a bill in the Senate which DOE prefers over this House version, but, the important point is this: After working together, between last year's session and now, we all agree there should be a new law on Braille literacy in K-12 education, and we also agree on what the bill ought to say. That's real progress.

Speaking on behalf of NFB of Hawaii and our blind keiki members too, I am proud to ask you to support and pass HB620 H.D. 1. Standing up for literacy is never the wrong thing to do. Please affirm this value for the blind people in our state today and tomorrow. Mahalo for your consideration.



S E A C
Special Education Advisory Council
1010 Richards Street Honolulu, HI 96813
Phone: (808) 586-8126 Fax: (808) 586-8129
email: spin@doh.hawaii.gov

February 26, 2025

**Special Education
Advisory Council**

Ms. Martha Guinan, *Chair*
Ms. Susan Wood, *Vice Chair*

Ms. Kathie Awaya
Ms. Virginia Beringer
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Ms. Lisa Vegas
Ms. Jasmine Williams

Ms. Helen Kaniho, *liaison to
the Superintendent*
Ms. Wendy Nakasone-Kalani,
*liaison to the military
community*

Amanda Kaahanui, Staff
Susan Rocco, Staff

Representative Kyle T. Yamashita, Chair
Committee on Finance
Board of Education
Hawaii State Capitol
Honolulu, HI 96813

RE: HB 620, HD 1 - RELATING TO EDUCATION

Dear Chair Yamashita and members of the Committee,

The Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) is in support of HB 620, HD 1 which establishes State policy to promote Braille literacy for eligible blind students; requires the individualized education programs (IEPs) and section 504 plans of eligible blind students to include the assessment and evaluation of eligible blind students' reading and writing abilities, instruction of Braille, and provision of Braille instructional materials under certain circumstances; requires the Department of Education to establish a Braille Literacy Resource Center; and appropriates funds.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that the Department of Education provide instruction in Braille for every student who is blind or visually disabled unless the IEP team determines that instruction in Braille is not appropriate. That determination is based on an evaluation of the student's reading and writing skills, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media, which includes an evaluation of the student's future need for instruction in Braille. This assessment of future needs is important, because many students with congenital eye disease lose vision over time and should be prepared for a lifetime of literacy.

SEAC defers to this Committee and the Department of Education to decide whether it is appropriate to substitute the language of HB 620 with language from a similar bill--SB 530--also known as the Hawaii Braille Literacy Education Act.

Respectfully,

Martha Guinan, Chair

HB-620-HD-1

Submitted on: 2/24/2025 11:46:45 AM

Testimony for FIN on 2/26/2025 10:50:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Marie Kouthoofd	Individual	Support	In Person

Comments:

Testimony of Marie Kauthoofd

House Finance Committee (FIN)

Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session

February 26, 2025, 10:50 am, hearing on HB620 HD 1

Dear Chair, Vice Chair and Committee Members,

My name is Marie Kouthoofd. Please accept my testimony for HB 620 H.D. 1: Supporting Braille literacy for blind and low-vision K-12 students.

Diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa at age seven, doctors informed my parents that my vision loss would begin with night blindness, followed by a loss of peripheral vision, and progressively worsen over time. Despite this prognosis, I was not offered Braille instruction because I retained some vision—a decision that left me unprepared as my sight diminished.

By age 24, my vision had deteriorated significantly. I could no longer drive and faced the challenges of blindness without the essential tool of Braille literacy. Despite seeking assistance, I was repeatedly told Braille wasn't necessary until complete vision loss—a misconception that hindered my adaptation.

Had I learned Braille at an early age, even though I may not have needed it immediately, I could have transitioned between visual and tactile reading modalities as my vision declined. This flexibility would have allowed me to maintain a competitive edge alongside both my sighted and blind peers. It also would have spared me from immense visual strain, pain, and frustration. Without Braille, I was forced to work significantly harder just to keep up, creating unnecessary gaps in my education. These gaps didn't stem from a lack of ability but rather from a lack of access to the right tools at the right time, making it more difficult for me to progress at the same pace as my peers. Learning Braille early is crucial, as it takes advantage of the brain's neuroplasticity, facilitating more effective learning. Moreover, Braille assists in proper spelling; while sighted individuals visualize words in their minds, Braille readers use their fingers to feel the words, reinforcing correct spelling through tactile engagement.

Now, at age 60, I recognize the struggles and gaps in my education that resulted from not learning Braille and as a retired psychology professor, I understand firsthand how critical early learning is to long-term proficiency. Although I eventually learned Braille later in life, I fear I will never be as proficient as those who had the opportunity to start at a young age. The difference in fluency is a stark reminder of why Braille instruction should never be delayed.

The decision made by others in my early life to deny me the opportunity to learn Braille has had a lasting impact, continuing to affect me throughout my life. I don't want to see any other child go through what I have, especially when we have the power to change it today for the future. Please help us ensure no other child will have to face these challenges.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony.

Sincerely,

Marie Kauthoofd

Testimony of Donald Sakamoto

House Finance Committee (FIN)

Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session

February 26, 2025, 10:50 am, hearing on HB620 H. D. 1

Good morning Chair, Vice Chair, and members. I am Donald Sakamoto, testifying to support HB620 H.D. 1, in promoting Braille literacy for low vision and blind students in K-12 education.

HB620 H. D. 1, declares a” pro-active Braille literacy approach and policy for our state, which is much needed and long overdue.

This bill has lots of powerful words, saying blind people, and particularly blind keiki matter to the legislature and our people in the Aloha State. Literacy education is fundamental to success in life. When we're blind, our literacy toolbox must include strong braille reading and writing skills. HB620 H. D. 1 truly affirms this understanding.

I urge you all to prepare in having this bill to proceed on for this legislative session not later on. Famous “by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail” by Benjamin Franklin.

Thank you so much for allowing me to testify on this important bill.

Brandon Young

2/24/2025

Testimony of Brandon Young

House Finance Committee (FIN)

Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session

February 26, 2025, 10:50 am, hearing on HB620 HD 1

Good morning Chair, Vice Chair, and members. I am Brandon Young, testifying to support HB620 H.D. 1, promoting Braille literacy for low vision and blind students in K-12 education. As a blind adult who did not receive proper braille training while a part of the Hawaii educational system, I am in strong favor of this bill. I hope you know of how important braille training is in the life of a blind child. It can determine the success of the blind child as they become an adult. We want the best for our blind children and they need all of the educational tools that they can get in our state. I would hope that your committee would pass this bill to help blind children in Hawaii to get the best skills that they can get while in our educational system. I thank you for your time and effort on this matter. I look forward to speaking with you soon.