

Column: Tap more child nutrition, school-lunch subsidies for isle keiki

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By Paula Adams, Daniela Spoto and Nicole Woo

For students in families facing economic hardships, school-provided breakfasts and lunches are often the most sustaining and nutritious meals of the day. For some, they are the only meals of the day.

Yet, a report that our organizations published in May details how Hawaii has inexplicably missed out on more than \$221 million in federal funding over the past 20 years to cover costs for the state's school meal programs.

The report, *Feed Our Keiki, Support Our Schools, Help Our Farmers*, documents how the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reimburses schools and others operating qualifying child nutrition programs for each meal served and how these federal reimbursements have not kept up with food costs in Hawaii (see hiappleseed.org/publications/feed-our-keiki).

Despite Hawaii's skyrocketing food costs over the decades compared with the rest of the country, the USDA reimbursement rate for Hawaii has not been revised since 1979, except for standard inflation. The *Feed Our Keiki* report finds that the federal school meal reimbursement rates for Hawaii currently should be 62% higher than other states, but it has been stuck at only 17% higher since 1979.

As a result, our state now subsidizes school meals with more than \$20 million per year, which means less state funding is available to cover other essential education costs ranging from funding for afterschool programs to pay for teachers.

Other states do not need to fund school meals at such a high level because the federal free school meal reimbursements cover an average of 85%-90% of school meal production costs. But in Hawaii, the federal reimbursements cover only about 55% of such costs for Hawaii's statewide public school district.

Our students are not the only ones who lose out. Legislation that passed last year requires our state Department of Education (DOE) to increase local food sourcing incrementally to at least 30% by 2030. The inadequate federal reimbursements short-change our entire community because a portion of those funds would go to Hawaii's food producers, with that percentage growing each year as the DOE makes progress toward its 30% goal.

The significance of all this was not lost on Hawaii's congressional delegation. Upon reading the report, U.S. Sens. Mazie Hirono and Brian Schatz, joined by U.S. Reps. Ed Case and Kai Kahele, drafted a joint statement calling on the USDA to increase the school meal reimbursement rates for Hawaii, which is well within the USDA's authority.

The delegation stressed its concern "that the state and its students are currently being negatively impacted" and urged that the USDA exercise its authority to increase the average payment rate to Hawaii to at least equal to that of Alaska's, which has been over 60% higher than the national average since 1979. This adjustment would be temporary, until the USDA completes its School Nutrition Meal Costs Study II to determine if reimbursement rates for Hawaii need a drastic increase. The USDA has indicated that any permanent adjustment may not go into effect until at least 2027!

We thank our congressional delegation for taking action now on behalf of our keiki and their willingness to work with the USDA on finding an immediate solution to this long-standing issue.

We call on the Hawaii DOE to do its part by taking a hard look at how our state can be more proactive — and ready with necessary data for the USDA study — to make the best case for Hawaii, so that our students, our schools and our farmers no longer miss out.

Paula Adams is executive director of the Hawaii Afterschool Alliance; Daniela Spoto is director of anti-hunger initiatives at Hawaii Appleseed; Nicole Woo is director of research/economic policy at the Hawaii Children's Action Network. Also contributing to this piece is Jesse Cooke, director of investments/analytics at Ulupono Initiative.

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