

**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, RELATING TO EDUCATION.

BEFORE THE:
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

DATE: Tuesday, February 4, 2025 **TIME:** 2:00 p.m.

LOCATION: State Capitol, Room 309

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

Chair Woodson 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 3 through 8, 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 subsection 302A-C(b) on page 5, lines 3 through 8.

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



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

Date: 02/04/2025

Time: 02:00 PM

Location: 309 VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Committee: House Education

Department: Education

Person Testifying: Keith T. Hayashi, Superintendent of Education

Bill Title: HB 0620 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.

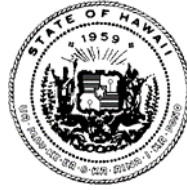
Department's Position:

The Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) respectfully provides comments on HB 620, which establishes state policy to promote braille literacy for eligible low-vision and blind students, requires their individualized education programs (IEP) and Section 504 plans to include assessment and evaluation of their reading and writing abilities, instruction of braille, and provision of braille instructional materials under certain circumstances, and establishes a Braille Literacy Resource Center.

The Department recommends replacing the text of HB 620 with the text of SB 530 in its entirety, as SB 530 more accurately reflects the Department's ongoing collaboration with the National Federation of the Blind and aligns closely with the legislative intent. The language in SB 530 provides a clear and comprehensive framework for effectively implementing initiatives to support braille literacy for eligible low-vision and blind students. This approach ensures that we are advocating for and establishing a strong foundation for braille literacy, ultimately enhancing opportunities for students with vision impairments. By adopting the language in SB 530, we can better meet the needs of these students and empower them to achieve academic success and independence.

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

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR
KE KIA'ĀINA



RYAN I. YAMANE
DIRECTOR
KA LUNA HO'OKELE

JOSEPH CAMPOS II
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
KA HOPE LUNA HO'OKELE

STATE OF HAWAII
KA MOKU'ĀINA O HAWAI'I
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
KA 'OIHANA MĀLAMA LAWELAWE KANAKA
Office of the Director
P. O. Box 339
Honolulu, Hawaii 96809-0339

TRISTA SPEER
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
KA HOPE LUNA HO'OKELE

February 3, 2025

TO: The Honorable Representative Justin H. Woodson, Chair
House Committee on Education

FROM: Ryan I. Yamane, Director

SUBJECT: **HB 620 – RELATING TO EDUCATION.**

Hearing: February 4, 2025, 2:00 p.m.
Conference Room 309 & Videoconference, State Capitol

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: The Department of Human Services (DHS) appreciates the intent of this measure as it provides expanded educational and employment opportunities for students who are blind or low vision. DHS defers to the Department of Education (DOE) on the impact this proposal may have on its resources and services.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this measure is to require the DOE to include the instruction of Braille and provision of Braille instructional materials under certain circumstances. It also requires the DOE to establish and maintain a Braille literary resource center, and makes an appropriation.

Ho'opono Services for the Blind, a branch of the DHS Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), recognizes that reading and writing skills are essential for blind individuals who are seeking higher education and competitive, integrated employment. Notably, technology is not a replacement for literacy.

Ho'opono Services for the Blind works with blind and low vision individuals to teach many skills, such as orientation and mobility, home management, Braille, technology and other

February 3, 2025

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independent living skills, to prepare them for vocational training, higher education, and employment. Building skills and confidence in these areas contributes to our consumers' sense of independence and empowerment to become contributing members of their families and communities.

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

National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii testimony
Submitted by James Gashel

House Education (EDN) Committee
Thirty-third Legislature, 2025 regular session

February 4, 2025, 2:00 pm, hearing on HB620

Good afternoon chair, vice chair, and members. I am James Gashel, National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Hawaii legislative chair, proudly supporting HB620, also requesting an amendment. Thank you for considering this important bill and for scheduling this hearing.

HB620 declares a pro-active Braille literacy approach and policy for our state, which is much needed and long overdue. Thank you Chair Woodson for sponsoring this bill.

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 affirms this understanding.

You held a hearing on a similar bill last year on February 6, and recommended the bill be passed. It got to the Senate in March but was not then considered, 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 this committee left off. This discussion led to many meetings in the summer and fall, finally resulting in text we're offering as an amendment to HB620. DOE should speak for themselves, but NFB of Hawaii is convinced that passing HB620 with the requested amendment will lead to improved Braille services in K-12 education in Hawaii.

Speaking on behalf of NFB of Hawaii and our blind keiki members too, I am proud to ask you to support and pass HB620, amended by the text submitted below. I should say that this text is consistent with Senator Kidani's bill on Braille literacy, SB530, which seems to show we're coming to an agreement. 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.

Requested amendment to HB620

Offered by National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Hawaii

Submitted to EDN Committee 2/04/2025

Purpose: To present text for a bill consistent with provisions for a bill on Braille literacy developed by NFB of Hawaii and DOE Exceptional Support Branch, special needs section administrator and staff

Explanation: This amendment proposed to HB620 is written and requested to enact a Braille literacy law developed by advocates and Department of Education staff responsible for administration and delivery of Braille services. Our agreement reflects our view that a new law on Braille literacy is needed to strengthen the Department's efforts in this important service support area.

Requested amendment: Strike and replace all text of HB620, beginning with Section 1 on page 1, through Section 7 on page 8 with the following:

" SECTION 1. The legislature finds that literacy skills are fundamental to success in education, employment, and life for all members of society, including individuals with low vision and blindness. Braille is a tactile writing system that allows low vision and blind individuals to read by touch using a system of raised dots that represent letters, numbers, and symbols. Braille literacy skills are widely understood as essential for low vision and blind students to actively learn, seek and maintain remunerative employment, engage in cultural enrichment and hobbies, and access opportunities in life regardless of disability.

According to a 2018 study conducted by the Journal of Blindness Innovation and Research, "individuals who were primary Braille readers since childhood had greater life satisfaction, self-esteem, and job satisfaction than individuals who reported not using Braille as their primary reading medium during childhood." Additionally, the study found that "findings support the premise that Braille literacy is key to life satisfaction and self-esteem in addition to academic and job success" and that those who are Braille literate are more likely to gain high-quality employment."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than twenty-four thousand people statewide report low vision or blindness. The department of education exceptional support branch supports complex areas to support students with disabilities, including low vision or blindness. Presently, one hundred sixty students in kindergarten through twelfth grade are registered with the American Printing House for the Blind to receive special education materials. However, only seventeen students have Braille services in their special education programs, creating a significant gap for students to receive equitable educational opportunities. With limited resources contingent upon individual student needs, a proactive approach is imperative to ensure equity for students with low vision or blindness to succeed in the classroom and prepare for future careers and life goals.

The legislature further finds that it is in the interest of the State to make Braille literacy educational services available to all students and members of the greater educational community. Therefore, it is necessary for the State to promote Braille instruction and timely access to Braille instructional materials for low vision or blind students, parents, teachers, and other school personnel.

Accordingly, the purpose of this Act is to:

- (1) Establish requirements for access to Braille instructional materials;
- (2) Require Braille educational services for students with low vision or blindness to assess individual student abilities and needs; and
- (3) Establish a Braille literacy resource center within the department of education.

This Act shall be known and cited as the Hawaii Braille Literacy Education Act.

SECTION 2. Chapter 302A, Hawaii Revised Statutes, is amended by adding a new part to be appropriately designated and to read as follows:

"Part . Braille Services

§302A- Purpose. It is a policy of the State to promote Braille literacy and support the provision of Braille educational services needed for eligible low vision or blind students to participate fully in school and prepare students for life beyond the classroom.

§302A- Definitions. As used in this part:

"Braille" has the same meaning as defined in section 302A-442.5.

"Braille educational services" means any of the following:

- (1) Assessment of an eligible low vision or blind student to evaluate the student's reading and writing ability, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media, including an evaluation of the student's current and future needs for instruction in Braille or the use of Braille;
- (2) Instruction in Braille reading and writing; and
- (3) Provision of Braille instructional materials.

"Braille instructional materials" means print instructional materials as defined in section 302A-442.5, that are produced in Braille.

"Eligible low vision or blind student" means an eligible student as defined in section 302A-442.5, who has low vision or blindness.

"Individualized education program" or "IEP team" have the same meanings as defined in section 614(d) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, title 20 United States Code section 1414(d).

"Section 504 plan" or "section 504 plan team" means the documentation of needs and provision of services developed by a team assembled to ensure equal educational opportunity to a student with a disability pursuant to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended.

§302A- Low vision or blind students; Braille instructional materials; educational services.

(a) To ensure equal educational opportunities in accordance with section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794), as amended, and section 614(d) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1414d), as amended, the section 504 plan or individualized education program, as appropriate, for a low vision or blind student shall provide each student the opportunity to receive Braille educational services in accordance with this part.

(b) Any section 504 plan and individualized education program, prepared for a low vision or blind student shall include results of assessments of the student's reading and writing ability, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media, including an evaluation of the student's current and future needs for instruction in Braille or the use of Braille.

(c) Braille educational services that include Braille instruction and Braille instructional materials shall be provided under an individualized education program prepared for the student, and shall document the services, schedule, duration, and expected outcomes and identify the Braille instructional materials, including assurance that the materials will be provided at the same time the corresponding print instructional materials are provided to all other students in accordance with section 302A-442.5(e); provided that if original Braille instructional materials are not available or have not arrived at the student's school, substitute Braille instructional materials shall be provided concurrent with the distribution of print instructional materials for all other students in accordance with section 302A-442.5(e).

(d) Braille educational services that include Braille instructional materials, but not Braille reading and writing instruction, shall be provided under a section 504 plan or an individualized education program, as appropriate, including documentation of the materials and assurance that the materials, or substitute Braille instructional materials when original materials have not arrived, shall be provided concurrent with the distribution of print instructional materials for all other students in accordance with section 302A-442.5(e).

(e) The section 504 plans or individualized education programs, as appropriate, prepared for low vision or blind students shall provide Braille instruction and Braille instructional materials in accordance with subsections (c) and (d); provided that, on an individual basis, the assessments required under subsection (b) support a determination by the plan or IEP team that Braille instruction or Braille instructional materials are not appropriate for the student. Supporting documentation shall include:

(1) The student's visual functioning behaviors and skills in school, including ocular motor function, near and distance vision, and field of vision;

(2) Results of the reading and writing skills and media assessments, identifying the assessment tools and methods used;

(3) Evaluation results of the student's current and future needs for Braille instruction and the use of Braille;

(4) Identification of all accommodations and services provided to meet the student's reading and writing needs resulting from the student's low vision or blindness; and

(5) The date of the next assessments to be made under subsection (b).

§302A- Braille literacy resource center; establishment.

(a) The department shall establish and maintain a Braille literacy resource center that shall be available for students with special needs. The Braille literacy resource center shall:

(1) Advocate for Braille educational services to be provided to eligible low vision or blind students;

(2) Obtain Braille instructional materials as needed to fulfill section 504 plans or individualized education programs in effect for eligible low vision or blind students; provided that preference shall be given to in-state suppliers when possible;

(3) Acquire, maintain, and make available studies, reports, and other authoritative information about the efficacy of Braille educational services;

(4) Cooperate with the department of human services when requested to submit information necessary to maintain a register of the blind in the State pursuant to section 347-6;

(5) Provide eligible low vision or blind students' parents or legal guardians, and the students, as appropriate, with comprehensive information about Braille literacy services, assistive technology devices, and assistive technology services, including tools and options available to assess the student's literacy needs and educational programming options; and

(6) Participate in the development of section 504 plans and individualized education programs when requested.

(b) The department shall designate an individual from the Braille literacy resource center to serve as the ex officio member of the board of trustees of the American Printing House for the Blind pursuant to the federal Act to Promote the Education of the Blind (20 U.S.C. 101 et seq.), as amended.

(c) The department may adopt rules pursuant to chapter 91 to carry out the purposes of this section."

SECTION 3. There is appropriated out of the general revenues of the State of Hawaii the sum of \$ _____ or so much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2025-2026 and the same sum or so much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2026-2027 for the establishment and operation of the Braille literacy resource center.

The sums appropriated shall be expended by the department of education for the purposes of this Act.

SECTION 4. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2025."

HB-620

Submitted on: 2/3/2025 10:17:07 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/4/2025 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Stan Young	Hawaii State Committee of Blind Vendors	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Thank you for hearing this bill. For many of our citizens who are blind or visually impaired, this will provide training and services that will give them options to move forward in life, to be able to progress and find solutions and options to be able to find a career path, to become self-sufficient and productive. So, it's a means to become a whole person and to earn a living. It's a gift of life for one with visual impairment. Thank goodness for the legislature to provide this life-changing training.

Testimony of Donald Sakamoto

House Education (EDN) Committee

Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session

February 4, 2025, 2:00 pm, hearing on HB620

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair, and members. I am Donald Sakamoto, strongly supporting HB620, promoting Braille literacy for low-vision and blind students in K-12 education.

This bill asks the legislature to pass a pro-active Braille literacy law, beginning with a declaration of state policy “to promote Braille literacy and support provision of Braille educational services needed for eligible low vision and blind students to participate fully in school and prepare for life after school ends. The Braille Literacy Resource Center established in SECTION 4 will provide a focal point within DOE to implement this policy, and better ensure Braille services are more readily available to low vision and blind students.

The legislature emphasizes the importance of literacy for educational, employment, and life success, particularly for individuals with low vision or blindness.

Many years ago a blind friend of mine named Terrence Tom learned how to read braille at a young age and became a successful attorney and served on the Hawaii House of representative 48 District for some many years.

Mahalo, and I urge you all to prepare in having HB620 to be passed and proceed on for this legislative session to enhance our low vision and blind students to insure that they are able to learn braille and enhance their education and beyond. Famous “ by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail” by Benjamin Franklin.

HB-620

Submitted on: 2/2/2025 10:29:00 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/4/2025 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Brett Kulbis	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Chair Woodson and Committee members,

My name is Brett Kulbis, I'm a 26yr Navy Veteran and Retired Civil Servant. I live in Ewa Beach.

I think it's an embarrassment that this bill has to be submitted. You would think our DOE would have done this already.

Respectfully, I STRONGLY encourage you to vote YES on HB-620.

HB-620

Submitted on: 2/2/2025 4:25:36 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/4/2025 2:00:00 PM

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

Comments:

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair, and members,

My name is Marie Kouthoofd, and I am writing to express my strong support for HB620, promoting Braille literacy for low-vision and blind students in K-12 education.

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 Braille Literacy Act ensures that children who are blind or visually impaired receive proper assessment, instruction, and access to Braille materials and resources, providing them with the tools necessary for literacy and independence.

I urge you to support this bill to empower our blind children with the resources they need to succeed.

Sincerely,

Marie Kouthoofd

HB-620

Submitted on: 2/2/2025 4:48:07 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/4/2025 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Rodney Kouthoofd	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Dear Chair, Vice Chair and members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Rodney Kouthoofd, and I am writing to express my strong support for the Braille Literacy Act of Hawai‘i (HB620).

My wife is blind, and for the past thirty years, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges she has faced as her blindness progressed. I’ve seen her struggle with headaches from straining to use her limited vision to read textbooks—both as a student and a professor—and the difficulty she faces simply trying to read labels on food containers.

Over the years, we’ve come to understand that children’s brains are remarkably adaptable. We once believed it was too much for a child to learn multiple languages, but we now know that early exposure actually strengthens their cognitive development. This insight extends to Braille. If we want the best outcomes for our children—both blind and sighted—we must equip them with the tools they need to succeed in an increasingly complex world.

Braille, a tactile system of reading and writing, should be part of every curriculum for blind children or those at risk of blindness. While it may seem daunting, learning basic Braille is not overly difficult, especially when introduced early. In fact, blind children who learn it at a young age are likely to grasp it as quickly as sighted children learn print.

Had my wife had the opportunity to learn Braille early on, her struggles would have been alleviated. But that is a lesson from the past, and now we must look forward. Our children here in Hawai‘i—both those who are blind and those who may face blindness in the future—deserve the best possible start in life.

I wholeheartedly support HB620 and encourage you to join in this important effort to enhance educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their vision.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Rodney Kouthoofd

HB-620

Submitted on: 2/2/2025 5:23:23 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/4/2025 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Keao Wright	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

"Testimony of Keao Wright
House Education (EDN) Committee

Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session
February 4, 2025, 2:00 pm, hearing on HB620

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair, and members. I am Keao Wright supporting HB620, promoting Braille literacy for low-vision and blind students in K-12 education."

When I was going to school back in the mid 90's early 2000's, I had to struggle with getting accessible materials to read braille.

I am a deaf/blind citizen, and I am dependent on braille a lot when I was working, and in my dayley life.

I had to struggle getting my work done by getting sighted people to help me, and I just didn't feel like I was in the class or participating with other students.

I urge you to support this bill for the next general of kids and high school students, to make sure that they don't fall behind as I did.

Braille is a very important tool for us, and how would we live with out it.

It's used for reading, taking notes, and other important tasks.

I am submitting this testimony to you to get our kids as well as adults to learn the importants to braille.

Brandon Young

2/2/2025

Testimony on HB 620

"Testimony of Brandon Young

House Education (EDN) Committee

Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session

February 4, 2025, 2:00 pm, hearing on HB620

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair, and members. I am Brandon Young, supporting HB620, promoting Braille literacy for low-vision and blind students in K-12 education."

AS a blind student who graduated from the Department of Education, I know the hardships that blind students face in our educational system. Blind students are not getting the proper amount of braille training and are falling behind their sighted peers. This will hurt them in the future. I believe that this is a sound bill and will help blind students in the Department of Education. I urge that you pass this bill so that we can improve the lives of blind students in our state. Thank you for your time in this matter.

"Testimony of Katie Keim

House Education (EDN) Committee

Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session

February 4, 2025, 2:00 pm, hearing on HB620, House conference room 309

Good afternoon, Chair, Vice Chair, and members. My name is Katie Keim, a leader in the National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii, proudly supporting HB620, promoting Braille literacy for low-vision and blind students in K-12 education.

Mahalo for considering this important bill and for scheduling this hearing. I stand in strong support of the testimony submitted by James Gashel, National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii legislative chair.

Although I was print literate until I became blind as an adult, I realized early on in my blindness training that without braille I would struggle, be reliant on sighted help, and not be able to reenter the workforce at the level of professional competence I had prior to becoming blind or was hoping for again. Braille is an essential tool in my success both professionally and personally.

All blind and low vision children have the right to the same quality of education I had growing up as a sighted child. For a period of time upon reentering the workforce, I worked with blind youth and have seen the difference in the success and quality of learning in a low vision or blind child who learns braille compared to those who do not. It is a tragedy when the child cannot keep up in class merely because they do not have the tools and materials needed to participate fully. Maintaining excellent reading and writing skills equal to their sighted peers is a critical factor through-out their education and can cause limitations and even secondary disabilities if not given the tools at the beginning of their educational development. If a child is given braille reading and writing skills later on, it can be much harder for them to ever catch up. Every child who is blind or low vision needs to begin their educational journey with all the learning tools at their finger tips. Receiving their educational material at the same time as their sighted peers can make or break their ability to keep up in class. Imagine receiving your material at the end of a committee meeting or even the end of the legislative session merely because the material is inaccessible or not available to you at the same time as your colleagues? You could not effectively do your job. Too often blind and low vision students do not receive their material until weeks if not months later than the rest of the class. Setting them back, undermining fragile confidences, causing challenges in more than education, making friends your own age, and the differences become too great and isolates the blind child.

Please seriously consider passing HB620 with the amendments as written in James Gashel's NFB of Hawaii testimony.

HB-620

Submitted on: 2/3/2025 9:09:20 AM

Testimony for EDN on 2/4/2025 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Ann Lemke	Individual	Comments	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Hello Committee Chair, Vice chair, and members,

I strongly support HB620 which represents a very positive collaboration between the National Federation of the Blind and the Department of Education.

My name is Ann Lemke and I retired from Windward Community College after almost 50 years working in student services in higher education. My career would not have been possible at all or as successful as it was without my knowledge of and ability to use Braille whenever I needed it.

Our recent power outage in Kaneohe gave me the perfect opportunity to use Braille to read a magazine and to study some technical material that I had been postponing.

Please make the study and use of Braille more available to our blind and low-vision population.

Respectfully,

Ann Lemke, a proud Braille user

"Testimony of Virgil Stinnett

House Education (EDN) Committee

Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session

February 4, 2025, 2:00 pm, hearing on HB620, House conference room 309

Good afternoon, Chair, Vice Chair, and members. My name is Virgil Stinnett, President of The National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii, supporting HB620, promoting Braille literacy for low-vision and blind students in K-12 education.

Mahalo for considering this important bill and for scheduling this hearing.

I stand in strong support of the testimony submitted by James Gashel, National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii legislative chair.

Please seriously consider passing HB620 with the amendments as written in James Gashel's NFB of Hawaii testimony. Mahalo.

HB-620

Submitted on: 2/3/2025 12:36:12 PM

Testimony for EDN on 2/4/2025 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Tabatha Mitchell	Individual	Support	Remotely Via Zoom

Comments:

Aloha committee, I am Tabatha Mitchell. I live in Kane'ohe and am the mother of 3 Kalaheo High School graduates. Go Mustangs!

My youngest daughter, and most recent graduate, happens to be blind. She was born with a very rare genetic disorder that cause her to rods & cones to die over time. She was likely born blind; but she was not diagnosed until she was 3 years old. At that time, her vision was already down to 20/800 with corrective lenses. For those that don't know 20/200 vision or worse in their better eye even when wearing corrective lenses is the legal definition of blind. A person may also be legally blind if their visual field is 20 degrees or less. She qualified on that note as well.

Plesse note that no one chooses to be blind. This is the hand that she was dealt, and most importantly, it can happen to anyone. Even you, your children, or your grandchildren. No one in our immediate or extended families have ever been blind.

Hiwever, when she was 3, we discovered that both dad & I were carriers of a single mutated gene that we, nor anyone else, knew about. When those two very tiny little mutated genes came together during reproduction, our offspring had a 1 in 4 chance of being disease-causing. Eme is my 4th child, and she won the genetic lottery.

She won a lifetime of having to prove to everyone in all walks of life - in all places, that she is just another keiki. A little girl that just wanted to sleep in the loft like the other kids in daycare. Denied. She "needed" to stay at ground level. A little girl that just wanted to play on the monkey bars like the other kindergarteners. Denied. "She can't see the bars." A little girl that just wanted to read the same books as the other Kindergarteners in their Reading Room Program. Denied. "We don't have those books in Braille." An elementary school kid that just wanted to learn to use a dictionary like her fellow 2nd graders. Denied. "We don't have that in Braille." I can go on and on and on and on.

We KNEW she could do all of the things. We watched her climb trees & keep up and generally out do her sighted siblings. We all began to recognize that she was using non-visual skills that we could not only not recognize, but that we, her sighted family members, could not teach.

It was a fascinating realization.

After finding successful blind role models - ones that rode the bus and the light rail to work every day - we began to tune in to the art of possible.

Another fascinating realization. We needed the blind to teach the blind. We began to learn & recognize non-visual skills. We began to determine the tools she needed to be one of those tax paying fully independent completely blind citizens - because that was her certain future. We were told that she would likely lose most all of her vision by her late teens. They were right.

Eme is now down to only light detection in a very small section of her best eye. On some days, under just the right conditions, enough cells are still firing that she can catch a glimpse of a flash of light and she can sometimes detect shadows.

We were told to go home and love our child and prepare for her to be blind. We were told that she would likely be "mentally retarded" and would require a lifetime of care.

They were wrong. She's studying to be a Biochemist. Living independently in a dorm with her fellow-Freshman peers. Walking to classes through the heat and the rain. Meeting for meals in the cafeteria and talking about all of their daily woes and wins. Doing homework and writing papers. Discussing the latest book from her book club. She has classes on all floors of buildings. And over Thanksgiving Break, I heard she went to her first frat party.

I'd say she's swinging from the monkey bars.
Great parenting, yea?!

No. It's not great parenting.

It's Braille.

My daughter that happens to be blind graduated with academic honors and with CTE honors, and STEM honors because of Braille, and having accessible materials. Not because of great parenting. My job was just to make sure she had the materials that her classes were using in her language - which is Braille.

This bill helps all blind keiki in Hawai'i. Every island. Every age. Every type of blindness. Every stage of blindness.

HB620 helps the DOE to identify where these kids are in their spectrum of vision loss, no matter when it sets in. HB620 helps DOE to help the parents and guardians of blind keiki by establishing and openly discussing a Braille Resource Center within DOE. Teaching a blind kid is not hard when you have the right tools in their language. Teachers and blind keiki must have their materials in their language at the same time as their peers. HB620 helps make that happen throughout the islands by building up understanding of Braille and the art of possible for kids when they are included and are literate. Listening is not literacy. Remember that. Braille is their tactile method of reading & writing that is the equivalent of print to me & you & your kids. Help us get Braille to the blind keiki throughout Hawai'i by supporting HB620 and moving it forward.

Mahalo for the opportunity to share what I know is possible for every one of the blind keiki. Every single one can be a tax paying citizen that is part of communities of their choice. They simply need the right tools, and that starts with literacy - and that means they need Braille materials & instruction.