

Hawaii

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Keaukaha school getting full-service kitchen

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Lawmakers last week approved \$600,000 in capital improvement funds to construct a full-service conventional kitchen at the elementary school.

The project was introduced in March as a resolution by state Sen. Kai Kahele, D-Hilo.

Sixth-grade Keaukaha students Chaz Agpoon and Aukai Chu-Hing, accompanied by Principal Stacey Bello and Keaukaha General Store owner Breeani Lee, flew to Oahu earlier this year to tell state leaders firsthand about problems they've experienced with meals.

"We were very proud to stand up for our community," Agpoon said. "I'm very positive that the quality of our food will (now) be consistent, and if we have a delay or a lunch shortage, it will be fixed right away."

Kahele's resolution never moved forward. Instead, Kahele said he met with lawmakers and officials at the state Department of Education and ultimately came to an agreement to fund the project as a line-item budget allocation, contingent on funding being released in July.

Money will not fund kitchen staff. Personnel expenses would be determined next year either by creating new positions or redistributing current employees.

If funding for the kitchen is released, Kahele said construction would hopefully start this summer, and the kitchen would open the 2017-18 school year. The appropriation is roughly \$100,000 more than the project's original, half-million-dollar estimated budget.

"To be honest, I don't think the DOE expected those boys to come with their principal and share the stories they had in front of the Senate committee," Kahele said.

"Sometimes, it just takes something like that to make things happen. Those two boys gave powerful testimony, and their voices were heard."

Keaukaha used to prepare meals on campus, but years ago, when the school began construction of its \$8 million cafeteria, cooking was moved off-site. Meals are trucked in from Hilo each day which supporters of the kitchen idea have said causes quality and quantity issues.

"Hopefully we will get our food cooked well, instead of what's happened in the past," Chu-Hing said. "As a sixth-grader at Keaukaha Elementary, I feel proud of myself and Chaz for (giving) our speeches to the senators, and (we're now) getting our kitchen equipment."

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