

Hawaii

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Kitchen take back: Students, community seek equipment prepare school food on-site

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At Keaukaha Elementary School, students are full of anecdotal lunchtime stories. There's the raw, doughy pizza, rock-hard breakfast bagels — even overcooked lasagna which arrived on Chazz Agpoon's cafeteria tray one day with a burnt, blackened coating.

"I'm just irritated," said the 11-year-old Chazz, who is Keaukaha student body president. "I'm frustrated because, I feel like we need our kitchen back."

Agpoon, along with fellow sixth-grader Aukai Chu-Hing, 12, are among hundreds in the Keaukaha community pushing for change. The students, accompanied by Principal Stacey Bello and Breeani Lee, owner of Keaukaha General Store, flew to Oahu this week to ask lawmakers to help fund a full-service, conventional kitchen at the elementary school.

The half-million-dollar addition would allow food to be cooked and prepared on-site rather than trucked in each day from Hilo, which supporters of the kitchen say makes quality control, quantity control and on-time arrival tricky.

“Usually sixth-graders are in the back of the line so we experience most of the delays,” Agpoon said. “We come in last and that’s when they always run out of food.”

The students were floored when the resolution — introduced concurrently in the House and Senate — cleared its first committee readings on Wednesday. More than 250 community members signed a petition in support and nearly 100 people submitted written and verbal testimony favoring the idea.

“Just speaking in front of (lawmakers) (was my favorite part),” Hing said. “It was a once-in-a-lifetime thing for me.”

Meals were historically prepared on campus, Keaukaha officials said, but several years ago, construction of the school’s \$8 million cafeteria began and cooking moved off-site. The cafeteria opened last summer and includes a kitchen for serving but lacks preparation and cooking equipment.

The kitchen would be a roughly \$500,000 capital improvement project, said Democrat Sen. Kai Kahele, who introduced the Senate resolutions. Rep. Clift Tsuji introduced the House resolutions.

Kahele would push for a 2017 opening and seek any additional personnel expenses — four full-time staff members — in the following year’s budget.

The full-service kitchen was added in 2011 into the cafeteria plan, but the state Department of Education ultimately didn’t include it for what appear to be cost reasons. In submitted testimony this week, DOE Superintendent Kathryn S. Matayoshi continued to oppose the kitchen idea largely for the cost.

“This is a time when the Department has been asked to look for efficiencies and reduce costs,” her testimony read. “Additionally, there are new food regulations that if breached can jeopardize the placard status of a kitchen, potentially leading to its closure.”

Kahele still thinks the idea should be vetted.

Adding a kitchen also makes sense logistically he said, because there’s only one road in and out of the school from town. In event of an emergency, Keaukaha, which also houses lunch for two nearby charter schools, could potentially be cut off from its meal source, he said.

“There’s just a bunch of different reasons why this makes sense,” Kahele said. “... In the end, this is a marathon, not a sprint. (Wednesday’s) hearing was the first of several more. But we got the attention of the DOE and have support of members in the Legislature.”