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HAWAII NEWS

Use federal funds to avoid teacher layoffs, Hawaii legislators say

By [Susan Essoyan](#) • Feb. 13, 2021

The state Department of Education must spend \$104 million in federal pandemic relief to keep teachers and other unionized school staff on the job at full pay or they can't use the money, House and Senate education leaders say.

State Sen. Michelle Kidani and state Rep. Justin Woodson held a news conference with the head of the teachers union Friday to highlight that ultimatum contained in [House Bill 631](#) HD1 and [Senate Bill 270](#). The lawmakers, who chair their respective Education Committees, said the legislation is needed to ensure school employees know their jobs are safe and to avoid further disruption for public school students.

"We need to make sure our students get back on track, and we can't do that if we don't retain our teachers," said Kidani (D, Mililani-Waikele-Kunia). "That's really the driving force behind this, to get our students back on track. We know some of them have been underachieving due to the pandemic. This is a way of hearing and responding to those students and their parents."

The bills would require education officials to pledge to use the federal money only to offset budget reductions that would result in layoffs, furloughs or pay cuts of school staff who are union members. Otherwise, the bills say, such funds "shall not be released or expended."

Schools recently developed plans to cope with a possible 10% cut — \$164 million — to the DOE's budget in the next two fiscal years. But Gov. David Ige later reduced that to 2.5% in order to shield children. The department's base budget, however, already was cut by \$100 million this fiscal year, so there is still a gaping hole.

Schools Superintendent Christina Kishimoto had asked the Legislature to restore that \$100 million and build on it. She recommended using the one-time federal relief money to help students catch up on lost learning through summer school and tutoring, and other pandemic-related needs.

"The Department of Education has been emphasizing to policymakers that the proposed level of cuts to our budget will decimate public schools and negatively impact students," Brian Hallett, assistant superintendent and chief financial officer, said Friday after the legislators' news conference.

"While we appreciate and support efforts aimed at stabilizing our school-level workforce, we need the flexibility to leverage our federal relief dollars to meet a variety of other needs as well, including student needs for online learning, devices, connectivity and provisions for health and safety," he said.

"These federal funds are a temporary, one-time source intended to mitigate the range of impacts the pandemic is having on our public school system," Hallett added. "The allowable uses are broad, and the latest round of ESSER funds specifically expanded uses to include learning-loss mitigation, preparing schools for reopening and improving air quality in school buildings."

ESSER refers to federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds.

HB 631 and SB 270 would require the superintendent and Board of Education to certify the money "shall only be used for salaries and wages of department of education officers and employees who are subject to a collective bargaining agreement ... and who are employed at the school level."



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Hallett said if the DOE is restricted to using those federal funds for salaries, the state would need to cover other pandemic-related needs.

Normally, federal relief funds flow to state and local education agencies, which spend them on purposes outlined by Congress. It's unusual for the Legislature to assert control over the use of such funds.

"For this unique circumstance that is definitely unorthodox, but it is historic; we're saying we want to have direct role in how we spend those funds," said Woodson (D, Kahului- Wailuku-Puunene). Added Kidani, "In the first round of CARES moneys that was provided, the Legislature did allocate the funds, and so I think we've set the precedent to allow us again to direct how the federal funds will be used."

Hawaii State Teachers Association President Corey Rosenlee said it was vital to keep as many teachers on the job as possible, given the chronic shortage of educators. He stressed that they need reassurance now.

"Teachers are already being told about their job loss," he said. "We need to stop the dam from leaking here and make sure that money gets to the schools, and the principals and teachers and other DOE employees know that they have jobs next year."

Rosenlee said if the base budget is not restored, the department could face a \$141 million shortfall in the next fiscal year, which he said could mean about 700 teachers potentially losing their positions.

"The superintendent has suggested using the federal stimulus money for tutors and for summer school, and it makes no sense to fire teachers and hire tutors," he added. "The money should be appropriated to make sure that we can keep as many of our teachers as possible."

Asked whether the \$100 million cut to the department's base budget would be reversed, Kidani said she couldn't say yet.

"That's one of the things we are still looking at," she said. "I have to work with the Ways and Means chair to look at that."

Woodson said he favors restoration, but "ultimately it will be up to the money committees" — House Finance and Senate Ways and Means.

[HB 631](#) is scheduled for a hearing in the House Education Committee at 2 p.m. Tuesday. [SB 270](#), SD1 as proposed, will be heard at 3:15 p.m. Wednesday.

"We have a significant hole in our budget in the Department of Education, and we need to do everything we can to fill that hole," Woodson said. "Ultimately, it comes down to our kids ... and how do we do what we can to protect our kids' future."



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