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# Auditor's Summary

## Audit of the Department of Education's Efforts to Meet Its Mandate to Incorporate Local Foods in School Meals

Report No. 26-08



PHOTO: DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**In 2021**, the Legislature transferred the Hawai'i Farm to School Program from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Education (DOE) and required DOE to increase the amount of local foods served in public school meals. Under Act 176, Session Laws of Hawai'i 2021, 10 percent of DOE's total food costs was supposed to be spent on locally sourced products by January 1, 2025, with a longer-term goal of 30 percent by 2030. DOE, however, did not meet the 2025 benchmark. In its January 2025 report to the Legislature, DOE reported that just 5.4 percent of its food purchases during School Year 2023–2024 were locally sourced.

Now, with the 2030 deadline approaching, DOE's primary strategy is a sweeping plan to build a statewide network of regional kitchens. DOE contends these centralized production facilities will enable the department to process raw local ingredients at scale and dramatically increase its spending on locally sourced foods.

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## What We Found

We found that DOE's efforts to meet the 10 percent mandate were largely unstructured and without meaningful action. DOE did not develop a strategic plan, policies, or procedures to guide its Farm to School Program. Although the Superintendent said he emphasized the importance of purchasing local foods, he never conveyed that policy in writing. Cafeteria Managers – who are responsible for ordering food – were generally aware of the goal to increase local food usage, but not all were aware of the specific legislative mandates.

We also found that DOE lacked the basic systems needed to track local food purchases. DOE's distributor price lists generally do not identify whether products are locally grown, preventing Cafeteria Managers from making informed purchasing decisions. In addition, DOE had no reliable internal method for recording which purchases were local. The department instead relied on unverified distributor-provided data, which it could not independently confirm.

DOE recently released a plan to increase local procurement to 30 percent by 2030, centered on building a statewide network of regional kitchens. DOE asserts that centralized kitchens will improve efficiency and help local farmers scale production. However, we found the plan lacks essential baseline data, including information on the cost breakdown of school meals, the capacity of local producers to meet increased demand, and how regional kitchens will directly increase the use of local products.

The department's projected timeline assumes annual increases in local purchasing that appear unsupported by evidence. DOE's own benchmarks begin at 10 percent in 2025 – despite DOE reporting only 5.4 percent in that year – and offer no concrete explanation for how progress will occur before regional kitchens become operational.

## Why These Problems Matter

DOE's Farm to School mandate was intended to improve student health and strengthen Hawai'i's agricultural economy. However, DOE's failure to establish structure, guidance, and accountability has left the program operating as business as usual. Without reliable data and a coordinated strategy, DOE cannot demonstrate progress toward meeting legislative goals or ensure that local purchasing decisions are deliberate rather than happenstance.

If DOE is to meet the 30 percent mandate by 2030, it must first develop the foundational systems necessary to understand what local products are available, what foods offer the best opportunity for substitution, and how procurement and menu planning can be aligned with Hawai'i's agricultural capacity.

Until DOE has that information, there isn't sufficient baseline data about what local products are available, in what quantities, during which seasons, and at what cost. Instead, the department expects that given enough lead time farmers, ranchers, and distributors will scale up operations to meet the increased demands. Unless DOE develops a data-driven, cost-informed strategy grounded in agricultural capacity and fiscal reality, the 30 percent mandate risks becoming not only another unmet benchmark, but a costly one.



Link to the complete report  
<https://files.hawaii.gov/auditor/Reports/2026/26-08.pdf>

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