



## Maine Education Association

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### Testimony

#### In Support of

**LD 1002: An Act to Require a Lunch Period of at Least 30 Minutes for Students and Reduce Food Waste**

**Mallory Cook, Director of Training and Early Educator Engagement,  
Maine Education Association**

**Before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs**

**March 22, 2023**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and other esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Mallory Cook (pronouns she/her/hers), and I am the Director of Training and Early Educator Engagement at the Maine Education Association. I am a certified English teacher and Building Administrator. I am writing to provide testimony on behalf of the MEA in support of LD 1002: An Act to Require a Lunch Period of at Least 30 Minutes for Students and Reduce Food Waste.

MEA represents approximately 24,00 educators across the state. In 2020, delegates to our Representative Assembly, our largest democratic body, resolved to support a 30-minute lunch and 30-minute recess for pre-k-12 students, with additional resolutions to afford all staff with duty-free lunch periods of 30 minutes.

In the United States we have manifested a culture that celebrates a fast-paced, busy lifestyle, with reliance on convenience and efficiency; this is especially evident when we look at the time we reserve for students and staff to eat in our public schools. In my experiences as a public-school educator, I cannot recall ever having more than 23 minutes to make my way to the lunchroom, eat, and prepare myself for my afternoon responsibilities. So, it is no surprise that when I took my students abroad in 2017, we were all shocked to learn lunch would be 2-3 hours. Because we were so unfamiliar with reserved time to eat, rest, reflect, and converse, we didn't know what to do with ourselves, but a few days in, we learned the power of this time. We were replenished, recharged, reinvigorated, and ready to proceed with our day.

While slowing down and reserving time for our staff and students to prepare for their afternoons will help with focus and productivity, it will also help address an essential need – the social and emotional needs of our students and staff. While educators are working to embed these opportunities in their curricula, it is essential we build time into our days for organic connections and conversations. In the hustle and bustle of modern-day American schools, there is very little time allocated for relationship building, which is essential in building productive, empathetic community members. Organic

35 Community Drive, Augusta, ME 04330 | 1349 Broadway, Bangor, ME 04401  
7 Hatch Drive, Suite 220, Caribou, ME 04736 | 29 Christopher Toppi Drive, South Portland ME 04106

207-622-5866 | 207-888-2070 fax | [www.mainea.org](http://www.mainea.org)



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conversations have the capacity to increase compassion, happiness, and resiliency. As for our staff, it allows time to connect around the challenges and victories they are experiencing in the classroom, building stronger connections with their colleagues, some of whom are isolated during normal school hours.

This bill also addresses the challenges schools experience around food waste. In my experience as an educator, I witnessed the requirement that all students create a balanced plate if they opt for school lunch. USDA requires a school to offer five components for each lunch. Students must select at least three to purchase their meal. Even if a student refuses one of these options, they must put three on their plate to make it through checkout. I saw many apples and bags of carrots finding their way to the trash. In addition to this, if a student wishes to obtain free milk, they must choose three components, even if they just want the drink. The idea proposed in this bill to add a table or container for unopened or unconsumed foods would allow us to share those healthy options with our families who need them most. At Hermon High School, a student organization put together snack boxes for every classroom. This destigmatized accessing free food and was used by all. Providing a space for this in all schools would likely have the same impact and would significantly reduce the amount of food waste happening in our schools.

If the committee chooses to pass this bill, we understand there might be logistical challenges for districts; as written, the bill provides a process by which districts can opt out of the thirty-minute requirement so long as they put the decision to their governing body. This language is important to ensure we do not create additional scheduling challenges; however, we do hope districts will make every effort to meet the thirty-minute lunch period, which will have positive impacts on students and staff alike.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and I welcome you to reach out with questions.