



**Testimony of Anna Korsen, Full Plates Full Potential
In Support of LD 210**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs, I'm Anna Korsen, Policy and Program Director with [Full Plates Full Potential](#), a statewide non-profit working to address childhood food insecurity in Maine by maximizing access to federally funded USDA Child Nutrition Programs like school breakfast and lunch.

We want to thank Governor Mills for her continued commitment to feeding Maine's children with the allocation for universal school meals in this budget proposal. We applaud this investment, and want to provide you with some updated results that make clear the impact of protecting this investment for both our children and our local economies.

Maine is leading the nation in feeding kids at school, and unfortunately we are also first in New England with the **highest rates of food insecurity**. At least **1 in 5 Maine kids**¹ lack consistent access to reliable nutrition and school meals are one important tool we have to fulfill Maine's historic commitment to Ending Hunger by 2030. We know that a hungry child can't learn, and that consistent access to nutritious food supports school readiness, improves behavior and academic outcomes, and overall mental and physical health. School meals are often the only reliable source of nutrition for food insecure children, and Maine's School Meals for All policy has eliminated the stigma of receiving "free" lunch. School meals are now a valued part of the day for all students and **meal participation is at a record high**.

Maine leads in school meal participation, with a 25% increase in students eating breakfast and lunch since pre-pandemic times.² **Maine schools served a total of 29,757,082 meals** during the 2023-2024 school year,³ making Maine's collective cafeteria the largest restaurant in the entire state. We're hearing reports from schools that more students with full bellies has caused a reduction in hunger related visits to the school nurse and fewer behavior disruptions in classrooms. And **school meals can save families \$160/month per child**, helping to stretch already tight grocery budgets.

School cafeterias are often the only food serving institution in a rural community and can have an important impact on local businesses and the local economy. Thanks to School Meals for All, school nutrition professionals no longer need to spend a significant amount of time chasing lunch money and processing paperwork, and can turn their attention to sourcing ingredients from local growers, producers, and processors. **Nearly \$720,000 were spent on local foods** and directly benefited the local

¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics#children>

²

<https://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/meal-participation-continues-to-rise-in-states-after-two-years-of-healthy-school-meals-for-all>

³ <https://www.maine.gov/doe/schools/nutrition/CNDatareports>



economy and food system during SY24.⁴ This increase in local purchasing was bolstered by Maine’s Local Food Fund and the federal Local Food for Schools funding. School Meals for All has also spurred **an additional investment of \$10 million** through USDA’s Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative, and **\$8.5M has gone directly to schools and organizations** across our state to increase local procurement and scratch cooking in Maine schools.

There is no other restaurant that feeds our most important Mainers for **only \$4.50 per lunch**, which is not enough to cover the cost of food, labor, equipment, and supplies in school kitchens. Too many schools use old, faulty equipment and often lack key pieces of equipment. To address this challenge, we worked together last session to establish The School Meal Equipment and Improvement Fund that totalled \$385,000, and those funds were depleted in just 10 days. There remains a big need for funding to support school kitchen infrastructure, and we recommend an additional investment in this fund.

Maine is making great strides in maximizing federal funding to support School Meals for All with the use of MaineCare data to automatically identify students eligible for free and reduced school meals. Full Plates is working alongside the Maine Department of Education on further solutions to ensure Maine gets its fair share of federal funding, with the aim of reducing the state’s contribution.

We thank you for your continued support of this important policy, and urge the committee to pass this budget that includes full funding for School Meals for All. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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⁴ <https://www.maine.gov/doe/schools/nutrition/programs/farmtoschool>