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My name is Cathie Gignac. For the past 14 years I have worked in the greater Bangor area providing Behavioral Health services to children and their families. For the past 10 years I have worked as a case manager supporting children with behavioral and developmental challenges. I support these children and their families in identifying and accessing services to support in addressing these challenges. These services are provided to children through MaineCare.

During the pandemic, the federal government provided funding directed to provide free lunches to all school children. After this funding ended, the Maine State Legislature, with bipartisan support, passed LD 1679 which continued this funding in 2021. In August 2024, my fellow case managers and I were made aware that the Maine Department of Education had decided that this funding did not apply to Special Purpose Private Schools. Per the state of Maine website “special purpose private schools approved in Maine, as out-of-district placements to provide educational programming and crisis stabilization for students who are unable to access their education in a less restrictive setting”. So, after a school has attempted to meet the behavioral and/or developmental challenges of a student and finds that they are not able to meet those needs, the student is referred to a special purpose private school. The student remains a registered student in the sending school department and the sending school pays a tuition for the student to attend. It is often not a choice but a necessity to send a student to these programs. There are 28 special purpose private schools in Maine.

At the start of school in 2024, at one particular school, parents were informed there would be a cost of \$5.00 per day for lunch and an additional \$2.50 if they were to have breakfast as well. This could total up to \$150 a month for the family. Another school required students to provide their own meals. This school often had food, at the expense of the school, when students didn't have appropriate food to sustain them through the day. Another program I'm familiar with purchases food through the school district of the town they are located in.

As placement in special purpose private schools is often not a choice, I would like for you to consider extending the funding for free meals in schools to cover students at these schools as well.