

**Testimony of Tasha Higgins Mount Desert Elementary School, Northeast Harbor
Maine
In Support of LD 577**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Tasha Higgins. I am the Chef at Mount Desert Elementary School part of AOS 91 in Hancock County, Maine.

I am a chef at a small school that serves Prek-8th grade, these are 4- to 14-year-olds in their critical growing years. There are many studies connecting the importance of nutrition and learning.

School meals have been at no charge to families since 2022/23 school year and since that time our Breakfast and Lunch programs have doubled. We proudly serve 80% of our student body. This is incredible and is a help in combating the Maine statistic of 1 in 5 children experiencing food insecurity.

Meals at no charge has given all children access to fresh food, food choice, and wholesome meals. It also gives student exposure to food they might not ever have tried. We are held to strict guidelines and actively strive to promote child Health. All stigma is removed, and all students are the same with meals for all. There is also an educational aspect where students connect the food they eat to where it comes from, and basic understanding of nutrition.

Through local support from our State our program has strengthened these past few years as has our quality of our offerings. We are making more from scratch items, we are offering a full salad bar, and we are working with local farms, and organizations to implement Maine Grown products into our menus. This accelerates our commitment to this state and our local economy, residents, families and the children of Maine.

I am fully committed to feeding our children and prioritizing their health and wellbeing. It would be such a shame and disservice to Maine students to have to walk this positive program backwards.

Thank you so much for hearing me out on this important Bill that benefits all of Maine.

I'm submitting this testimony in support of LD 577 "An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program". I'd like to thank Senator Tipping for his commitment to school meals in Maine.

Tasha Higgins , Mount Desert Elementary School, AOS 91 ,Northeast Harbor, ME

