

**Testimony of Mary Emerson - Westbrook School Department, Westbrook ME  
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 Mary Emerson. I am the School Nutrition Director for the Westbrook School Department. I am submitting 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.

I have worked as a School Nutrition Director for 19 years in Maine school districts with district populations over 50% of the student population qualifying for school meals. The importance of school meals can not be overstated. I have seen first hand how important meals are to struggling families. Families are struggling to provide warm homes for their children and nourishing meals. In Westbrook rents have continued to rise putting a large burden on families. The higher cost of living due to new tariffs and rising food prices continue to burden our working families in Westbrook.

Students' ability to come to school and have breakfast in their classrooms sets the stage for learning. Taking part in universal school meals at lunch allows all students to sit down together enjoying healthy nutritious foods that they choose with no stigma attached is amazing!! We have seen our participation in our programs rise across the state. When I visit cafeterias at lunch time I look for the students who are not eating. I know these students will have the hardest time learning. We have seen school administrators reporting less need for behavioral interventions as more students are eating and able to learn!!!

I strongly support Senator Tipping’s bill, LD 577- An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine’s Universal Meals Program as feeding our students makes sense. We do not charge for the bus ride, we don’t charge for the science experiment, we should not be charging for school meals!!! Thank you to Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs and your service to our Maine students.

Mary Emerson, MS,LDN,RDN,SNS - Westbrook School Department