



Valley Unified
Education Service Center

Madawaska School Department
Maine School Administrative District 27
Maine School Administrative District 33

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Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Committee,

My name is Benjamin Sirois and I am the Superintendent of Schools for the Valley Unified Education Service Center serving Maine School Administrative District No. 27 (Fort Kent, New Canada, St. John, St. Francis, and Wallagrass), Maine School Administrative District No. 33 (Frenchville and St. Agatha), and the Madawaska School Department. Our three rural Maine School Administrative Units have a combined enrollment of 1402 students in St. John Valley.

Today, I testify in strong support of LD 577 — *An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program*.

In our rural area of the St. John Valley, the need in our districts is undeniable. According to our 2024 October 1st Enrollment data reports:

- In Madawaska, 46% of students are economically disadvantaged.
- In MSAD 27, 41% of students live in economic hardship.
- And in MSAD 33, 39% of our students face similar challenges.

Aroostook County has one of the highest child food insecurity rates in the state — over 23%. For many of our students, school meals are not supplemental — they are essential.

Rural communities like ours face unique challenges:

- Fewer grocery stores and long travel distances make food access difficult.
- High heating and fuel costs stretch already tight household budgets.
- Stigma in small schools is real — and universal meals help remove it.
- We also lack the administrative resources to fully leverage federal meal programs without additional support.

As Superintendent of Schools, I have witnessed a substantial increase in student participation in both our breakfast and lunch programs since universal meals were implemented. Our local food service director has built incredible partnerships with local farms, food processing centers, and even coastal fishermen, ensuring our students are not only fed — they are nourished with a wide variety of high-quality, Maine-grown and harvested foods. This program has not only supported students, but it has helped strengthen our local food economy.

This bill ensures:

- Full funding of the School Meals for All program by adding the \$6 million needed on top of the \$58 million baseline.
- That eligible schools participate in CEP and other provisions to maximize federal reimbursements.
- That the Department of Education provides critical support to help small and rural schools navigate complex program requirements.

Universal school meals work. They nourish, they uplift, and they equalize. LD 577 will protect and strengthen one of the most effective educational tools we have. I urge you to support this bill — for the health, dignity, and success of every student in Maine.

Thank you for your time and commitment to Maine's children.

Sincerely,



Benjamin Sirois
Superintendent of Schools
Valley Unified Education Service Center