

Heather Arvidson
Brunswick

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Heather Arvidson, writing today as a concerned citizen who also works at Mid Coast Hunger Prevention Program (MCHPP) in Brunswick and volunteers as a mentor for Big Brothers Big Sisters in support of LD577 “An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine’s Universal School Meals Program.”

I support Universal Free Meals because food is most simply a basic human right, one that many families in Maine struggle to afford. According to the United Way’s ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) data, in 2022 42% of Maine households fell below the ALICE threshold. Which means they live above the federal poverty level but cannot afford the basic cost of living in their communities, many of these families do not qualify for public assistance and their children are not eligible for school meals. When I speak with members of MCHPP’s Client Council, living on those margins means making the difficult decision between food and other basic needs like heating oil, medications, and car repairs.

Anecdotally, families tell me about the relief of not having to make meals each day for their kids to take to school, and though school meals are not perfect they are much healthier options than some families can provide on their own. Additionally, families tell me that the universality of the meals is de-stigmatizing and caretakers see more positive results in their childrens’ education. Personally, I hope to have children one day, but I constantly weigh the many factors that make child rearing economically difficult. I see first hand the struggles of my friends, Littles and their families, and the people I serve at MCHPP to make ends meet. I’m advocating for Universal Free Meals because it is one of the many ways that make raising a child more economically viable. According to Full Plates Full Potential, we know that on average, school meals save families \$165 a month per child - that’s money that can now go towards other basic necessities. We also know that school meals boost child development and learning, improve behavior and attendance, and promote child nutrition. I strongly believe that Maine should continue to lead the nationwide effort to improve child well-being through Universal School Meals.

Thank you to the co-chairs and committee for your time and commitment to Maine’s children and families.

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