

## Testimony of Chef Andrew Hutchins, School Nutrition Director RSU 9

Good Afternoon, esteemed members of the committee, lawmakers, and fellow Mainers. My name is Andrew Hutchins, School Nutrition Director for RSU 9. I submit this testimony as a passionate advocate for our state's children, urging you to continue and fully fund Maine's School Meals for All program by supporting LD577. This program is not just a policy—it's a lifeline, a promise to our children, and an investment in the future of our communities.

Maine has always prided itself on taking care of its own. We're a state of hardworking families, resilient kids, and tight-knit towns. But for too many of our children, hunger is a daily reality that dims their potential. Before universal school meals became a reality, thousands of Maine students arrived at school each day with empty stomachs—unable to focus, unable to learn, and unable to thrive. Studies consistently show that hunger impairs cognitive development, lowers academic performance, and increases health risks like obesity and diabetes later in life. No child should face those odds simply because their family struggles to put food on the table. Because of Maine's School Meals for All program, parents - many of whom work long hours at jobs that still don't cover all the bills - have one less burden weighing them down.

Opponents might argue that this is too expensive, that we should scale back or means-test the program. But consider this: cutting universal meals doesn't save money—it simply shifts the cost elsewhere. Hungry kids become sick kids, struggling students, and, too often, adults who never reach their full potential. That is a price tag Maine cannot bear. Fully funding this program is fiscally responsible because it's preventative—it's cheaper to feed a child today than to fix the problems hunger creates tomorrow. This isn't a handout—it's a hand up.

Let's talk numbers for a moment. Feeding every student in Maine's public schools costs money, yes—but it's a cost we can't afford *not* to pay. The Economic Policy Institute found that for every dollar spent on school meal programs, up to \$3 is returned in economic benefits through better health outcomes, reduced healthcare costs, and improved educational attainment. In Maine, where rural poverty rates hover above the national average and food insecurity affects nearly 1 in 5 households, this program is a proven tool to break cycles of disadvantage. Fully funding it ensures that every child—from Fort Kent to Kittery—gets the same shot at success.

Universal school meals have significantly enhanced the ability of our district to invest in the quality of our meal programs by providing a stable, predictable funding stream and increasing overall participation. Schools no longer rely solely on fluctuating federal reimbursements tied to income-based applications, which often left budgets tight and unpredictable. This financial consistency has allowed us to upgrade kitchen equipment, hire skilled nutrition staff, and source higher-quality, locally grown ingredients like fresh vegetables from Maine farms or fish from Maine's coast. We have been able to offer students tastier, more

nutritious meals while supporting local agriculture. By removing the administrative burden of tracking eligibility and boosting participation across the board, universal meals have freed up resources and time, allowing us to do what we do best: serve children quality meals.

And it's not just about the kids who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Universal meals eliminate the stigma that keeps far too many eligible families from applying. No child should feel ashamed to eat, and no parent should have to navigate a maze of paperwork to prove they need help. When every student eats, we build community, not division. We teach our kids that in Maine, we look out for each other.

I'll close with a story from a teacher from Farmington I spoke with recently. She told me about a third-grader named Sam, who used to come to school sluggish and distracted. You see, Sam was like thousands of kids around the state. Mom and dad were both working but they made just enough money that they did not qualify for free or reduced price meals at school. Instead, lunch was brought from home to avoid yet another bill to pay. Unfortunately, Sam's lunch, which he often prepared himself, was nothing more than some crackers, granola bars, or other snacks of minimal nutritional value. He would often ask his classmates to share their lunches with him, scrounging what he could and even stowing some things for later. Since universal meals have been in place, Sam is a dramatically different kid—alert, curious, and proud to lead his class in discussions. He interacts with his peers in the lunchroom just like any other student. Multiply Sam's story by the thousands of students across our state in similar situations, and you'll begin to see why this matters so very much. These are our kids—Maine's kids—and they deserve to grow up strong, healthy, and ready to lead.

Please, continue and fully fund Maine's School Meals for All program. It's the right thing to do—for our children, our economy, and our future.

Respectfully Yours,

*Chef Andy*