

Testimony of Leslie Oster of Portland, 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 Leslie Oster and I was one of the first members of the Full Plates Full Potential team. I have also volunteered throughout my 24 years in Maine for many organizations that promote local food, farmers, growers and to end food insecurity.

Today, I'm 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 spent my entire career in Maine focused on many aspects of our food system, such as a caterer, a private chef, a fundraiser, a board member of institutions and initiatives such as Cultivating Community, Maine Fare and Cooking for Community. As a volunteer for Full Plates in the early days of its inception I then had the opportunity to come on as a full-time team member under the mentorship of its co-founder, John Woods.

In my tenure there, I became fully aware of the devastating toll child hunger was taking on our kids. It is one thing to raise money to help and a very different one to see what the statistics mean on the face of a hungry child, a frustrated food service director or a parent who must choose between heat or cereal. 1 in 5 is a VERY real number ... not just a "selling" point. That's 20% of our youth. Maine has the highest percentage of Child Food Insecurity in New England, and it is estimated that the number is higher as there are families out there that are not able to be tracked.

John Woods, along with Justin Alford, did a very brave thing in 2015. They broke from the national No Kid Hungry/Share Our Strength program to start Full Plates. At that time, the Maine chapter was raising considerable funds but seeing little return in our own state. The national program administered the funds, rightly so, to areas where it could be most effective, places like Boston and New York City where the number of hungry children is astounding. But they believed Maine could serve as its own success story.

The Maine State House and the Governor's Administration have gone to great lengths since then to help move the needle on this very real and urgent situation. In July of 2021, Governor Mills signed into law Maine's Universal School Meals Program. Maine became the second state (only one day after California) to pass this law. The work being done across the aisles of these chambers and in the Governor's office is brave, bold and right. Please see that Maine schools and Maine children do not lose access to this vital program.

Good, fair and healthy food is a human right, not a commodity. I only wish that, before John Woods passed, he could have seen how far Maine has and will continue to move the needle. We will not go back. We will be that success story when every child in Maine has a full belly and a fair chance of a full life.

Thank you to the members of this committee for your continued commitment and hard work.

Respectfully submitted,

Leslie Oster | Portland, Maine