

Testimony of Nina Mitchell, Maine Youth Food Council
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 Nina Mitchell. I am a student at Orono High School and a member of the Maine Youth Food Council.

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.

Since School Meals for All began in Maine, the cafeteria has become a more inclusive space where everyone has equal access to nutrition, regardless of their family's financial situation. When every student has the same opportunity to eat school breakfast and lunch, it removes the stigma that was previously attached to receiving free meals. This change in atmosphere benefits our entire school community. The universal nature of School Meals for All reflects the values we want to instill in our educational environment - that all students deserve equal access to the resources they need to learn and thrive.

Maine has the highest rate of child food insecurity in New England, with one in five Maine kids experiencing food insecurity. What's especially troubling is that 40% of these food-insecure children aren't eligible for traditional free or reduced-price meal programs under the old system.

School Meals for All addresses this critical gap while providing benefits that extend far beyond simple nutrition:

- Since implementing universal meals, Maine has seen a 25% increase in school meal participation, with over 100,000 kids now eating school meals daily
- School meals save families an average of \$165 per month per child – significant relief for working families facing inflation
- The program has freed school nutrition staff from administrative paperwork, allowing them to focus on food quality, developing relationships with local farms, and being responsive to students' dietary needs



- During the 2023/2024 school year, Maine schools spent over \$968,000 on local foods, strengthening our state's agricultural economy

LD 577 is especially important now as we face potential federal rollbacks to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and increased verification requirements for meal eligibility. These changes could significantly reduce federal funding for school meals in Maine and increase administrative burdens on schools and families.

At my school in Orono, our nutrition director has been able to introduce more locally sourced ingredients and scratch cooking. There's been an increase in culturally diverse food options that better reflect our student body. These improvements would be threatened without this bill's protections.

I urge this committee to support LD 577 to ensure that Maine continues to lead the way in feeding all students, regardless of income. This isn't just about food – it's about educational equity, public health, and creating school environments where every student can thrive.

Thank you, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and committee members, for your time and commitment to Maine's students.

Nina Mitchell
Maine Youth Food Council