

Testimony in Support of LD 577: An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program

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Maine State Legislature

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Amanda Caruso and I live in Wilton, Maine. I'm a mother of four children who attend public schools. I'm also a member of the Board of Directors of Mt. Blue Regional School District (RSU 9). The opinions expressed below are solely my own; this testimony should not be considered an official statement on behalf of RSU 9.

I'm writing to express my strong support for the proposed amendment to Senator Tipping's bill, **LD 577: An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program**. I also want to thank Senator Tipping for his leadership on this important issue.

I've been proud to say that Maine was one of the first states in the nation to provide universal school meals to all public-school students, regardless of family income. This program has been both popular and highly successful in my community; it has improved student nutrition and health, reduced socioeconomic stigma and worry in the school cafeteria, and eased the financial burden on families. The proposed amendment to LD 577 will protect this vital program long-term and ensure that it continues to benefit children and families across our state.

As a mother of four school-age children, I know how important it is that kids have healthy meals to eat at school. Students need to have their basic needs met in order to learn; school meals are directly tied to school readiness. We know that Maine has the highest rate of childhood food insecurity in all of New England.¹ Free school meals for all have already proven to be an effective solution. These meals fill students' bellies and support their learning, attendance, and behavior at school.² School meals are also among the healthiest some Maine children receive, with many school nutrition programs – including our own in RSU 9 – sourcing fresh, healthy ingredients locally from Maine farms and producers (it's worth noting that the federal government has unfortunately ended USDA's Local Food Purchase Assistance Program, which had helped enable districts to purchase local ingredients).

¹ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/child/maine>

² <https://www.fullplates.org/s/HSMFA-Report-2024.pdf>

As a school board member, I'm very concerned about the proposed federal adjustment to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and proposed 100% household income verification requirement for free and reduced-price school meal eligibility. These two changes are likely to substantially reduce both eligibility and program participation, meaning that many children in my school district, RSU 9, will need to pay for their school meals if Maine does not take action to protect our universal school meals program.

Maine's free school meals program saves families an average of \$165 a month per child³ – a substantial savings to families in a community like mine where roughly half of our students are considered economically disadvantaged and between 16-20% of children are living in poverty.⁴ If the program does not continue – or is not *fully funded* – families in my community will be faced with adding the cost of school meals to their household budgets at a time when groceries and consumer goods cost more and times are tough. This burden will be heaviest for the families who struggle the most, and I worry that struggling families whose income status may qualify them for the free and reduced-price meals program will decline to participate in the proposed 100% household income verification process on account of privacy concerns or simply because the paperwork required is too overwhelming.

I'm likewise concerned that proposed federal changes and an end to Maine's free school meals program will result in increasing costs borne by our local school nutrition programs. RSU 9, like most districts throughout Maine, is committed to feeding hungry students. No child should be expected to learn on an empty stomach. However, if the universal school meals program comes to an end and our school nutrition program is faced absorbing the costs of unpaid meals and outstanding school lunch account balances, this school meal debt will ultimately be paid for by the taxpayers of RSU 9. In this way, looming federal and state cuts to the school meals program have the potential to directly impact not only local students and local families, but local taxpayers too.

I urge you to support the proposed amendment to LD 577 and to pass this critical legislation in order to protect and fully fund Maine's universal school meals program. Thank you for your time and for your commitment to the health and well-being of Maine children and families.

³ <https://www.pressherald.com/2025/02/07/advocates-say-cutting-funding-for-school-meals-would-be-dire-for-maine/>

⁴ <https://datacenter.aecf.org/>