

**Testimony of Dr. Patrick J Tolosky, Family Physician, Resident of Freeport Maine
In Support of LD 577**

Esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Dr. Patrick Tolosky. I am a licensed family medicine physician who lives in Freeport Maine, a preventive medicine fellow at one of our hospital systems in Maine, and also a father.

Today I am submitting testimony in support of LD 577 “An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine’s Universal School Meals Program”.

One of my favorite parts of being a family doctor is the conversations I get to have with patients and families. I remember doing a physical with a 7 or 8 year old girl, I’ll call her Emily. I asked, “what’s your favorite food?”. When she answered “I love salad”, I was so surprised by her response I stumbled for a moment. Her mom laughed and said “Yea, we have salad when we can”. I had noticed the positive food insecurity screener at the beginning of the visit and asked about it. Mom said “Some weeks are better, some are harder... we get by”. I finished the visit, told Emily to keep up the good work, and got mom in touch with our social worker.

I’ve thought of Emily often since then. This, sadly, was not a unique visit. Doctors know how important food is for health, and yet sometimes it feels as though when we are encouraging a patient to eat healthy we are asking them to walk up a vertical wall with their hands tied behind their backs because we know all the barriers, often financial, that prevent them from following our advice. We know malnutrition is correlated to a plethora of diseases including diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, delays in early childhood development and mental health disorders.^{1,2} We also know that school meals reduce malnutrition and food insecurity, reduce obesity rates, improve child development, and often might be the healthiest meal a child gets that day.^{3,4,5,6} There is also a financial case. The Maine Ending Hunger by 2030 plan cites a total estimated cost of food insecurity (for the entire population) at over \$700 million per year from lost productivity, increased need for special education services, and preventable health conditions among other drivers.⁷ We need upstream efforts, preventing disease from ever occurring in the first place, rather than reacting to it once it arrives. I can’t think of a more fundamental way to promote good health than investing in the food our kids are eating every day, and making sure our kids can actually eat in the first place. The people of Maine agree with me, as evidenced by Article 1 section 25 of our state’s constitution which states, “all individuals have a natural, inherent, and unalienable right to food”.⁸ I see it as our duty and honor to uphold that right.

Some people may be wondering why I am here as a physician, and you would be right to say I am no expert in the law, or in legislative affairs, but I do consider myself an expert in how to keep my patients healthy. I see LD 577 as a small piece of the puzzle, but a crucial golden opportunity to invest in the health and well-being of our children. Kids like Emily should not have to just “get by” when we can empower them to thrive. I urge you to support LD 577 for all of these reasons, and thank you again for your service to our great state.

Sincerely,

Patrick J. Tolosky, M.D.

References:

1. Wells JC, Sawaya AL, Wibaek R, et al. The double burden of malnutrition: aetiological pathways and consequences for health. *Lancet*. 2020;395(10217):75-88. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(19)32472-9
2. Seligman HK, Laraia BA, Kushel MB. Food insecurity is associated with chronic disease among low-income NHANES participants [published correction appears in J Nutr. 2011 Mar;141(3):542]. *J Nutr*. 2010;140(2):304-310. doi:10.3945/jn.109.112573
3. Liu J, Micha R, Li Y, Mozaffarian D. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Network Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262-e215262. doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.5262
4. Food Research and Action Center. Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning. 2016. Accessed 4.9.25. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf>
5. Cohen JFW, Hecht AA, McLoughlin GM, Turner L, Schwartz MB. Universal school meals and associations with student participation, attendance, academic performance, diet quality, food security, and body mass index: A systematic review. *Nutrients*. 2021;13(3):1-41. doi.org/10.3390/nu13030911
6. Gross SM, Kelley TL, Augustyn M, Wilson MJ, Bassarab K, Palmer A. Household Food Security Status of Families with Children Attending Schools that Participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and Those with Children Attending Schools that are CEP-Eligible, but Not Participating. *Journal of hunger & environmental nutrition*. 2021;16(2):281-296. doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2019.1679318
7. Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. Everyone at the Table: Maine's Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030. 2021. Accessed January 27, 2025. <https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/2023-06/maines-roadmap-to-end-hunger.pdf>
8. Maine. Const. art. I, section. 25. <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/9050>