

**Testimony of Rhonda Hart Assistant Director of Nutrition Lewiston Public
Schools , Resident of Buckfield , 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 Rhonda Hart . I am the Assistant Nutrition Director at Lewiston Public Schools .

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'm writing to share my personal experience working directly with elementary and high school students, and to highlight the significant impact that providing free school meals has on their well-being.

Every day, I see the difference it makes when students have access to free, nutritious meals. Through these programs, they are able to receive essential nutrition—protein, milk, fresh fruits, and vegetables—that many of them don't consistently have access to at home. For some, school meals are the only meals they get in a day.

These meals also give students the opportunity to try new foods—items they may never experience otherwise. For many families in Lewiston, access to balanced, nutritious meals is limited, and the school meal program helps bridge that gap in a powerful and meaningful way.

Equally important, providing meals at no cost eliminates stigma. No student has to feel different or singled out based on whether they can afford a meal. Free meals promote equity and create a more supportive, stress-free environment for all students.

School meals for all play a crucial role in supporting students, families, and communities. They reduce the financial burden many parents face, provide the essential nutrition young minds need to thrive, and eliminate food shaming—creating a sense of equality in the cafeteria. These programs also support local jobs and strengthen our broader community.

In my time working with students in Lewiston, I've come to truly understand the importance of providing free meals to all students. I've witnessed firsthand the



difference it makes in their lives. My stories are countless—some will make you smile, like the joy on a student's face when they're excited to receive their meal. Others will break your heart—like when a student shares they don't want school vacation because they won't have food to eat.

One thing is certain: ending access to free meals would lead to far more tears than smiles.

Please continue to support free school meals for all. It's not just food—it's dignity, opportunity, and care for the future learners of our community.

Thank You for your time and consideration. I urge you to support LD 577.

[Rhonda Hart](#)

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