

**Testimony of Susan Olcott, Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, Brunswick,
Maine
In Support of LD 577**

April 9, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Susan Olcott. I am the Director of Strategic Partnerships at Maine Coast Fishermen's Association.

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 twin girls who are in the 8th grade who have attended schools in the Brunswick School District since Kindergarten. In the early years, I spent significant time packing their school lunches, trying to select their favorite items, and writing sticky notes to remind myself to take certain things out of the refrigerator each morning. I purchased a variety of special thermoses, spoons, lunch boxes, and insulated bags for transporting lunch each day. I had the time and resources to do this and so they brought "home lunch" most days of the week. But, no matter what I packed from home, getting school lunch was a treat - especially when there was chocolate milk involved. So, I would put money on a lunch card that their classroom teacher handed to them as they lined up for lunch. Students bringing home lunch went straight to the lunch tables, while those getting school lunch had to wait in line, often separating one group of students from another. It was understood that many of the students getting school lunch were those who couldn't afford to bring lunch from home. My girls were aware of this as we had volunteered at the local food pantry packing bags for the "backpack program" for students to take home with them to their families.

Fast forward to now - to a time when this separation no longer exists because lunch is free for every student and when my now 14 year-olds who have told me plainly that, "bringing home lunch isn't cool." At an age where being cool and being included really matters, I love that the lunch program has not only served to provide nutritious meals for all students, but also that it has broken down these divisions between students.

I joined Maine Coast Fishermen's Association (MCFA) after the passage of Maine's "School Meals for All" legislation and it has had a direct impact on the current direction of my work. MCFA started a program during the COVID-19 Pandemic to

donate local fish filets to food banks and schools throughout the state. This program, Fishermen Feeding Mainers, has now served more than 1.5 million meals since its inception. While some districts in the state have the time, capacity and knowledge base to handle and prepare filets, there are many that do not. For that reason, we have been working to develop ready-to-serve products made with local seafood that are especially designed to fit the taste preferences and price points that are workable for Maine's K-12 schools. This is made possible in part by the fact that there is both funding dedicated to supporting the introduction of more local foods into these schools and by the fact that the volume of students served now as a result of "School Meals for All" offers opportunities for both producers and businesses to grow their businesses to provide those options to Maine students. In addition, because all students are taking part in lunch, there are new opportunities to connect what is being served in the cafeteria to what students are learning in the classroom and to build an appreciation for the benefits of eating local healthy options. "School Meals for All" is an investment in the future of Maine in so many ways.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony in support of LD 577 "An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program," an act that supports not only Maine's children, but Maine's economy. Please do not hesitate to be in touch if there is any further information I can provide.

Sincerely,

Susan Olcott
Maine Coast Fishermen's Association
Brunswick, Maine