

Testimony of Chelsea Marshall, LLM, PhD, Resident of Westbrook 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 Chelsea Marshall. I am the Director of Special Projects at the [National Right to Food Community of Practice](#) and am writing in my capacity as a resident of Westbrook.

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.

This week, I had the pleasure of hearing Mary Emerson, the School Nutrition Director for the Westbrook School Department, speak at the Farm to Institution New England summit about the work she and her staff have been doing to bring more culturally important foods into the school meals program. Along with other partners in the [Halal School Meals Network](#), she described how this work was essential to ensuring that the school meal program reflects the student population in Westbrook schools. Working with students and partners to develop the meals has contributed to a sense of shared belonging and inclusivity in the cafeteria.

Ms. Emerson explained that Maine's School Meals for All program has been a vital part of improving the school meal program in our district. Participation in the school lunch program has increased, lunch lines are faster and there is less stigma and shame in the cafeteria setting. Importantly, the School Meals for All program removes the administrative burden of determining students' eligibility for free, reduced price, or paid meal categories. This has freed up valuable time for school nutrition staff to focus on what matters - continuing to improve the meal service for all of our students.

This experience in Westbrook is consistent with [research](#) from the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) that shows School Meals for All programs increase school meal participation, reduce stigma in cafeterias, advance racial equity and allow school nutrition staff to focus on serving high-quality, nutritious meals. These programs also provide a platform for staff to integrate local and culturally relevant foods as part of their work to build a shared sense of community through food.

There are difficult decisions to make as we try to address any budget pressures that may come as a result of changes to federal funding. Maine has an opportunity now to ensure our children do not bear the weight of these costs.

We have the privilege of living in the only state in the country with the right to food enshrined in our State Constitution. The School Meals for All program is an important part of delivering on that promise because it provides a platform for staff, students and partners to work together towards a meal service that meets the needs of all of our children. Reducing the administrative burden and stigma of eligibility programs means our school nutrition staff can work instead to deliver a service that reflects the cultural diversity in our schools and integrates local foods from Maine's farmers and food producers.

LD 577 will help protect the progress we have made towards realizing the right to food for children in our state through the School Meals for All program. Our children, families and school nutrition staff deserve the certainty this bill will provide, and I am happy to answer any questions that you have.

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