



Testimony of Savannah Mirisola-Sullivan, Portland Public Schools, Portland, ME 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 Savannah Mirisola-Sullivan, and I am a fourth grade teacher in Portland 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've worked in public schools for eighteen years. When people bring to mind an elementary classroom, I imagine they see messy, joyful hands engaged in cutting, typing, gluing, playing, rearranging, digging, reading, experimenting, writing, and exploring. What is often invisible is the behind the scenes work to ensure students have their basic needs met so that this academic learning can take root. They may not see me stuffing bananas and crackers into a students' backpack at the end of the day as they wait for the bus, knowing that their next meal will be breakfast at school the following day. They may not picture me sliding a granola bar into small hands before math because a student was late that day and missed breakfast. They may not see a student snagging an apple from our communal snack bin before writing so they can quiet their rumbling belly in order to hear their thoughts. At our school, half of our students come from low-income backgrounds; we see each day that Maine has the highest rate of food insecurity in New England. Yes, our students come to our classrooms to learn, grow, and discover who they are, but increasingly, they also come to school in order to meet their basic needs including healthy food.

Maine's School Meals for All Program, enacted in 2021 and a model for other states, ensures all of our students have access to healthy meals at school. Not only does the program increase health and academic outcomes for students, but we've also seen a direct impact on the social-emotional wellbeing of our school community. Before the program began, many students who qualified for free lunch were hesitant to access it. Having to line up and enter their student ID while their peers passed cash to our cafeteria workers created a visual divide amongst our students, and some chose not to eat at all rather than experience this stigma. Now, when all of our students are able

to line up together without worrying about who is paying and who isn't, chatting and joking as they fill up their trays regardless of economic background, we reduce that stigma. While our students are well-versed in and empowered by talking about the similarities and differences of their identities, now they get to focus on the similarities and differences that matter to them: who likes spicy chicken patties and who wants plain, who dips their tater tots in ketchup and who prefers barbecue sauce, and who wants to try kale and who would rather try pineapple.

In order to get ahead of federal cuts to school meal programs paired with increased eligibility parameters, I urge you to please pass LD 577 so that we are prepared to support schools through these changes. I urge you to please pass LD 577 for my tireless colleagues, for all of our students, and for the health of our communities today and in the future. Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Savannah Mirisola-Sullivan

Portland Public Schools

Portland, ME