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Freeport  
LD 577

To the committee:

I am a licensed naturopathic doctor in the state of Maine and I would like to testify in favor of continuing to fund access to food at school for children.

Briefly, who is against providing our children with free food? What kind of adult would deprive children of the basic right to food?

I recently learned that Maine is the only state in the nation that voted on and approved access to food as a constitutional right in 2021. This is something I believe we should celebrate and advertise proudly! I have lived in Maine for almost 20 years and have 40 years of family history tied to Maine. As a member of a charitable foundation in Maine, I have heard the stories from Wayside Kitchen, Good Shepherd Food Bank, Full Plates Full Potential, and The Locker Project on the impact of hunger and food insecurity on my Maine neighbors both near and far from Cumberland County, where I reside.

I also will argue for this bill from a doctor's perspective.

As a naturopathic doctor, a portion of my training was dedicated to nutrition. The way I treat many patients is through teaching them about ways to improve their nutrition at home. We know that increased nutrition leads to improved health outcomes in so many realms.

When children have breakfast, they are better able to learn and pay attention. When there is food insecurity in the home, children are not able to focus on school, they are hungry, they are malnourished. This is not a state in which we learn well. Children are growing and learning every day. They are engaged in play and navigating social structures. This requires an immense amount of energy, and that energy comes from food. When children are fed with nutritious food, they can do the work that their teachers are asking of them. There are fewer behavioral problems when children are fed. Studies show that iron deficiency leads to difficulty with language comprehension for up to 5 years and developmental delays beyond that. Childhood hunger can predict depression in adolescent children. Look around, how many adolescents are depressed now? Could providing 2 meals per day at least remove one risk factor for depression and other mental health challenges for our growing children? How much money is spent on substance use disorder-related issues in Maine? It is possible that childhood hunger can lead to substance use disorder and other mental health disorders. Let's curb that. Let's nip those risk factors in the bud. Children who experience food insecurity are stressed. We know how toxic stress can be to health, causing chronic inflammation, irregular immune system responses, mental health challenges, and more.

The free meals that children receive at schools benefits our entire society now and in the long run.