



Maine Education Association

Jesse Hargrove President | Beth French Vice President | Jaye Rich Treasurer
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Testimony

In Support Of

LD 577: An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals, as amended

Jan Kosinski, Government Relations Director, Maine Education Association

Before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee

April 10th, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and other members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Jan Kosinski, and I am the Director of Government Relations for the Maine Education Association (MEA). The MEA represents nearly 24,000 educators, including teachers and other educators in nearly every public school in the state, as well as full-time faculty and other professional and support staff in both the University of Maine and Community College systems. Thousands of retired educators continue their connection and advocacy work through the MEA- Retired program.

I offer this testimony today on behalf of the MEA in SUPPORT of LD 577 as amended, *An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals*.

On March 19th MEA members of the Portland Education Association participated in a national rally for our Public Schools. I want to open with the powerful words of a 4th-grade student at Rowe Elementary School, who spoke at the rally about the importance of fully funding our schools and the programs that students and families depend on. She said, "I know that I have friends here at my school who rely on the lunches they receive, but right now the government is trying to take those away...let's stand together and tell the government to start being helpful again."

It is deeply troubling that any child, especially here in Maine, should worry about where their next meal will come from. Through LD 577, you have the opportunity to ensure that the state government continues to support students at Rowe Elementary School and in every public school across the state, despite the challenges of funding freezes.

We consistently receive positive feedback from teachers and educators about the benefits of the free meals program in our public schools. However, the universal school meals program is more than just a program; it is a promise to Maine students and a lifeline for many communities. This initiative has been transformative, effectively removing a significant barrier to student hunger.

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Prior to the adoption of the free meals program, there were bills in this Committee to prevent food shaming – sadly, some schools were chasing down lunch debt in ways that resulted in humiliation and stigma for students. The universal school meals program has not only eradicated these practices but also streamlined operations by eliminating the need for free/reduced lunch forms and the associated bureaucracy.

We support the free meals effort, and we support this new amended version of LD 577 to expand and improve the program.

Specifically, we support the effort in this bill to require eligible schools to participate in the community eligibility program to both maximize the impact of programs and to maximize federal resources to support our schools. As we read this language, schools eligible for community eligibility will be required to participate to receive the funding for the free meals program.

We want to underscore the importance of securing the additional \$6 million to see the free meals program through the next two years. The Governor's proposed biennial budget included an additional \$6 million but this additional funding was not included in the Part One budget that was passed a few weeks ago. We hope these additional funds will be prioritized in the Part Two version of the budget and we will convey our hopes to members of the Appropriations Committee.

Lastly, given the uncertain environment in Washington, DC, we appreciate the ongoing communication from the Maine Department of Education as the state and schools adjust to changes on the federal level.

For all these reasons, we support LD 577 as amended. Thank you for your time and your attention and I will do my best to answer any questions you may have.