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MEJ Testimony *in support of* LD 577, An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program

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Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Kathy Kilrain del Rio, I use she/her pronouns, and I'm the Advocacy and Programs Director for Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

When Maine expanded access to free school meals for all students, we made an investment in the health, well-being, and educational success of all the students in our state. When all students have the same access to meals, there is less stigma around eating those meals and financial pressure to pay for or provide meals is taken off families. This has become even more important in the years since that law passed because the rising costs of food, housing, utilities, and many other costs burdening families have all increased over this period. Ensuring that all students can eat nutritious meals at school takes one pressure off families' finances while also improving students' ability to concentrate and learn.

Food insecurity is not always visible. There are families in every community in our state struggling to put food on the table – or in their children's backpacks. Nearly 45,800 children in Maine experience food insecurity¹ - with the highest rate of childhood food insecurity in New England. What many people don't realize is that many families that are over income for free meals or other supports still experience food insecurity. Forty-one percent of food insecure children in our state would not qualify for free meals. When their children can eat at school, families can save up to \$160 each month for each child. Those savings can then go toward rent, groceries, electricity, heat, and other everyday needs straining many Mainers' budgets. These are some of the reasons universal free school meals are so important.

Unfortunately, changes that have been proposed by some in the federal government could make it harder to provide these meals. LD 577 helps prepare Maine for potential changes so we can maximize opportunities to receive federal funding to assist with the costs of school meals. It also provides for additional state funds so we can continue to provide meals given current expected costs and federal funding.

We've seen the value investing in free school meals provides to our state in healthier children, improved learning outcomes, and savings for families. LD 577 will provide stability for the program during uncertain times. We urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 577. Thank you.

¹ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/child/maine>