



Testimony of Whitney A. Parrish Perry

American Heart Association

In Support of

***LD 577, “An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine’s Universal School Meals Program”***

Dear Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Esteemed Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Whitney Parrish Perry, and I am the Government Relations Director for the American Heart Association (AHA). The American Heart Association is the nation’s oldest and largest voluntary organization dedicated to fighting heart disease and stroke, whose mission is to be a relentless force for a world of longer, healthier lives. We are writing in strong support of LD 577, “An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine’s Universal School Meals Program” (amended title).

For almost two decades, the American Heart Association, along with other health and food security partners, have advocated to improve the school meals program at both the federal and state levels. This is a priority because we know that proper nutrition is critical to children’s short- and long-term health outcomes. Food insecurity can lead to a variety of negative health conditions, including diet-related disease, and can have severe consequences on a child’s future health.

Food insecurity is at an all-time high, and school meals are a vital source of nutrition and a bulwark against chronic food insecurity and hunger. This crisis has health, educational, and economic consequences, leaving children particularly vulnerable to long-term impacts. Protecting access to no-cost school meals is a critical step in ending hunger in our state and ensuring all our children can thrive.

Maine’s Healthy School Meals for All policy gives all Maine kids a chance to thrive and succeed, and it is a model for other states. It increases equity in our schools and streamlines school nutrition programs. The previously utilized policy for school meals, whereby some children are expected to pay while others receive their meals for free,



creates stigma and shame for those students that rely on school meals for their basic needs, and serves as a barrier for those students who are not eligible but still experience hunger and food insecurity. A student's household income does not necessarily predict their ability to access nutritious meals, or food in general. Every Maine student deserves the opportunity to thrive academically and have good health now and into the future.

What we know is this: students who participate in school meals, particularly those who are experiencing food insecurity, have better health outcomes, improved test scores, and are better able to concentrate in school. **School meals should be treated the same way as textbooks, technology, transportation, access to the school nurse, and other services provided to our students at no cost.**

Let's pay for good nutrition now instead of poor outcomes later. Please vote "ought to pass" on LD 577.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am very happy to answer any questions about this testimony at the email address provided below.

***Sincerely,***

Whitney A. Parrish Perry

Government Relations Director

American Heart Association

Whitney.parrishperry@heart.org