

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

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Arthur Phillips

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Arthur Phillips. I’m a Policy Analyst at the Maine Center for Economic Policy and I am submitting this testimony in support of LD 577 to protect Maine’s universal school meals program.

Just a few years ago Maine became one of the first states in the nation to guarantee that all students in K through 12 education could count on breakfast and lunch at school. No longer would students be identified by their socioeconomic status when going to the cafeteria, nor would educators have to hound families for balances owed for their child’s nutrition or withhold transcripts due to lunch debt. Studies show free school meal programs improve the health and well-being of all children, from lower- and higher-income households, and reduce administrative burdens.ⁱ

However, proposed cuts to federal school meal funding could jeopardize these gains and place Maine in a challenging position. This bill aims to ensure that all school districts are incentivized to maximize the federal contributions to school meal programs so Maine can most effectively use its resources to support food security for children.

An estimated 45,790 children were food insecure in Maine in 2022, roughly one-in-five, the highest rate in New England. The counties experiencing the highest rates of food insecurity among children were Washington, Piscataquis, Somerset and Androscoggin Counties, where more than 23 percent of children weren’t always getting adequate nutrition.ⁱⁱ Nearly 60 percent of Maine children in 2022 were eligible for federal nutrition programs.

The federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows certain school districts to offer no-cost meals to all enrolled students without collecting household applications, instead relying on highly accurate eligibility for other means-tested programs.ⁱⁱⁱ Federal proposals seek to significantly reduce the number of schools that are CEP-eligible, which could cut federal funding to support school meals from an estimated 23 Maine schools districts in which nearly 22,000 students are enrolled.^{iv} This bill would prepare Maine for those potential cuts and incentivize school districts to maximize their federal contributions, which the Department would convey how to do on an annual basis.

Ensuring students are well fed is a downpayment on our state’s economy. Studies show that access to free school meals improves students’ test results^v, classroom behavior^{vi}, and, in some cases, attendance.^{vii} Over the longer term, this means better graduation rates and higher earnings in adulthood, which will help build a stronger economy for all of us.^{viii}

This bill’s fiscal note could be funded by proposals that bring more fairness to our tax code, and the bill would be a down-payment on our long-term economic success. To ensure all Maine students are well-fed and ready to learn, we urge the committee to support this bill.

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- ⁱ Weinstein, Merle, et al., “Not Just for Poor Kids: The Impact of Universal Free School Breakfast on Meal Participation and Student Outcomes.” Social Scholars Research Network, Sept 7, 2021. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1923972>
- ⁱⁱ Feeding America, “Food Insecurity among the Child Population in Maine,” <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/child/maine>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/cep>
- ^{iv} Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Proposed Cuts to School Meals Would Worsen Childhood Hunger, Hurt Struggling Families, and Create Unnecessary Burdens for 75 Schools in Maine, <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/3-11-25fa-factsheets-me.pdf>
- ^v Schwartz, Amy Ellen & Michael Rothbart, “Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance,” *Center for Policy Research, the Maxwell School*. July 2019. https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/uploadedFiles/cpr/publications/working_papers2/wp203.pdf
- ^{vi} Gordon, Nora, & Krista Ruffini, “Schoolwide Free Meals and Student Discipline: Effects of the Community Eligibility Provision,” *Education and Finance Policy*, 1(25), 2021. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00307
- ^{vii} Bartfield, Judith, et al., “Universal Access to Free School Meals through the Community Eligibility Provision Is Associated with Better Attendance for Low-Income Elementary School Students in Wisconsin,” *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. 120(2), Feb 2020, 2010-218. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31624028/>
- ^{viii} Alex-Peterson, Jesper, “Long-Term Effects of Childhood Nutrition: Evidence from a School Lunch Reform,” *IZA Institute of Labor Economics*. Dec 2017. <http://ftp.iza.org/dp11234.pdf>