



**April 10, 2025**

**Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs**

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

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Ryan Parker, I am a resident of Newport, and I am the Maine Program Director for FoodCorps, a non-profit focused on connecting kids to healthy food in the cafeteria and through experiential education. I am here today to support passage of **LD 577 “An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine’s Universal School Meals Program”**

In addition to my professional work with dozens of school districts around Maine over the last decade or so, I have also served two terms on my local school board, including years on the Budget Committee and as Chair of the Education Committee. So I know exactly how school nutrition budgets interact with the general fund and, by extension, property taxes.

Prior to becoming the second state in the country to enact our universal meals law, school nutrition departments, almost universally in Maine, operated annually at a deficit. This was due to many factors, not least of which is the ill-understood and out-dated mechanisms by which school nutrition programs are funded federally. *Today*, only a few years later, the majority of school nutrition departments operate in the black. This has a direct impact on property taxes which, as you all know, pays for what schools need beyond what is covered by the Essential Programs and Services formula.

As one example among dozens, in my local school district, each year since before my time the board had to vote to transfer \$80,000 from the general fund to the school nutrition budget to cover losses associated with program operation. Additionally, my district’s nutrition director, prior to passage of



school meals for all by the 130th Legislature, estimated chasing meal debt, cost \$6000-\$8000 in staff time annually.

The year after school meals for all passed we were able to reduce that transfer from the general fund to \$40,000. The year after, it went to zero and our nutrition department, like the majority in Maine now, have continued operating in the black. If school meals for all is not protected, expect that to reverse and property taxes to go up as a direct result.

In addition, no longer operating at a deficit has led to many school nutrition departments being able to provide professional development for staff to learn how to process whole, Maine produced foods instead of opening ready to heat packaged meals, while others have been able to dedicate staff time to better use than chasing meal debt and filing bureaucratic paperwork from the old system, such as obtaining other funding sources which allow for program improvement.

I happened to be in our nutrition director's office in late October when she had to pause our conversation to pay an invoice being presented by a local farmer whose children attend our district schools. She had just purchased 1200 pounds of local, grass fed beef from his farm. Studies show every school nutrition dollar spent locally results in a nearly 2:1 ROI to local economies. The ability to invest in training, better local ingredients, and educational programs, leads to higher levels of student participation, which in turn leads to higher revenue, which helps keep budgets in the black.

I want to thank Senator Tipping for introducing this legislation and I hope this committee and the Legislature as a whole will support LD 577 so we don't go backwards to a time when property taxes were routinely needed to cover school nutrition deficits, and nutrition department staff spent time on bureaucratic forms instead of being able to work to enhance meal programs to increase revenue. I'm happy to share additional information about how school nutrition funding works and how it translates to school budgets and property taxes, or answer any questions you may have.