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Good morning, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Julie Orrego, and I am the Advocacy Supervisor at Preble Street. The mission of Preble Street is to provide accessible, barrier-free services to empower people experiencing problems with homelessness, housing, hunger, and poverty and to advocate for solutions to these problems. Preble Street operates 16 programs throughout Maine, and its staff works daily alongside hundreds of individuals and families who struggle with housing insecurity.

Preble Street supports LD 577, An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program. In New England, Maine has the highest food insecurity among children. Ensuring children access free, nutritious meals is critical for their school performance and overall health.

Feeding America says one in five, or 45,970, Maine children experience food insecurity. Additionally, 33.2% of Maine households that receive SNAP benefits have children. Research shows that school meals reduce childhood hunger and obesity, support development, and improve attendance, behavior, and academic performance. School meals are often the healthiest—and sometimes the only—meals a child will eat in a day.

School Meals for All also uplifts Maine families. Families save \$160 per month per child on average—vital financial relief when many costs are rising. It reduces the stress and planning required to ensure children are fed, giving working families peace of mind that their kids are cared for at school.

Since the implementation of School Meals for All, there has been a 25% increase in school meal participation in Maine, which amounts to over 100,000 students eating school meals daily. During the 2023-2024 school year, almost 30 million meals were served. Additionally, according to Full Plates Full Potential, over \$968,000 of funding for this program was spent on local food during this period, which means that this money stayed in Maine's economy.

Preble Street urges you to pass this legislation, especially at a time when there are proposals to cut SNAP. We must ensure that Maine is prepared to support children despite any changes at the federal level and can continue to feed all Maine children in school at no cost. We have a responsibility to sustain and build upon this progress. School Meals for All is working. It reduces stigma, creates healthier communities, and ensures that every student, regardless of

their background, can attend school ready to learn without worrying about how they will pay for their meal.

Thank you for your consideration.