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*Testimony of Representative Holly Eaton in Support of
LD 2064, An Act to Expand Access to Early Childhood Nutrition by
Establishing a Grant Program for Public Preschools
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs*

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Holly Eaton, and I proudly represent House District 15, which includes the communities of Deer Isle, Stonington, Brooklin, Tremont, Southwest Harbor, Frenchboro, Swan's Island, Isle au Haut, and Vinalhaven.

I am here today in support of **LD 2064, An Act to Expand Access to Early Childhood Nutrition by Establishing a Grant Program for Public Preschools**. I am proud to be a co-sponsor of this bill, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak both as a legislator and as a parent who has lived the reality this bill seeks to address.

Right now, approximately 17 districts across Maine are operating off-site public pre-K programs, serving about 250 young students. These programs are an essential part of how many communities — especially rural and coastal communities like mine — deliver public education. But unlike classrooms located within school buildings, off-site programs often face barriers to providing meals. LD 2064 helps close that gap by giving schools the tools they need to ensure that children enrolled in public education have access to breakfast, lunch, and a snack during the school day.

I'm speaking today not just as a legislator, but as a single parent who has navigated these systems firsthand — and not that long ago. When my children were younger, I received support through WIC and at times relied on SNAP benefits to help keep food on the table. My youngest child attended Head Start, which serves as our local public pre-K option, and I was deeply grateful that meals were provided at school during a time when I truly needed that additional support. Having that consistency didn't just help my child — it helped stabilize our entire household. I know many parents across Maine are in similar positions right now, balancing work, childcare and rising costs, and policies like this recognize that when we support children's basic needs, we support families as well.

The early childhood years are a time of extraordinary brain development, and the ability to focus, regulate emotions and engage in learning is closely tied to whether a child's basic needs are met. When we talk about education, we cannot separate learning from nourishment. If a child is enrolled in a public program, we should do everything we can to make sure they have equitable access to the same supports as their peers — regardless of where that classroom happens to be located.

This bill is not about creating a new mandate. It is about removing a practical barrier that currently limits access to public pre-K and creates inequities between students based solely on geography or program design. By providing targeted grant funding, LD 2064 allows school administrative units to partner with community-based preschool providers while maintaining high nutrition standards aligned with federal guidelines.

In rural and island districts like mine, public pre-K often looks different than it does in larger communities. Programs may be located in shared community spaces or partner facilities, simply because that is what works best for families and local infrastructure. These models expand access to early education, but they also require thoughtful policy solutions. This bill recognizes that reality and offers a flexible, practical approach that supports both students and schools.

Ultimately, this legislation reflects a simple principle: if a child is enrolled in public education in the State of Maine, that child deserves equitable access to meals that support their growth, development and readiness to learn. LD 2064 helps ensure that where a classroom is located does not determine whether a child is nourished, and it is one more way we can support Maine families as they work to make ends meet.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and I would be happy to answer any questions.