

## Testimony in Support of LD 2064: The APPLE Act

To: Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

My name is Steve Bussiere, and I serve as Assistant Superintendent of the Sanford School Department. I am providing written testimony in strong support of LD 2064, An Act to Expand Access to Early Childhood Nutrition by Establishing a Grant Program for Public Preschools, also known as The APPLE Act.

In my role as a school leader, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative impact of Maine's School Meals for All program on students and families in our district. Universal school meals have removed barriers to learning, reduced stigma, eliminated lunch debt, and ensured that every child has access to nutritious food during the school day. Since the start of School Meals for All, we have seen a 25% increase in participation statewide, with over 100,000 kids eating school meals every day.

However, as a district leader working to expand early childhood education options, I see a critical gap: our youngest learners in off-site public Pre-K programs have been left out of this vital support due to overly complicated federal regulations in the National School Lunch Program. This creates an inequity where Pre-K students in community-based settings miss out on the same nutritional support their Pre-K peers receive in our schools, and some programs have had to use their own strained budgets to cover the cost of feeding children.

LD 2064 will establish a grant program that allows school administrative units like ours to partner with off-site public preschool providers to offer breakfast, lunch, and a snack at no charge to students or families. This will ensure equity in Maine's Pre-K classrooms and help us expand public Pre-K options in communities across our state.

From a school leadership perspective, this bill addresses a real barrier we face. For the 2024-2025 school year, approximately 85% of School Administrative Units offered a public Pre-K option, but only 48% reported universal enrollment. The cost and ability to feed children is a documented barrier to expanding Pre-K access. When families ask us about Pre-K options and we cannot guarantee the same meal support we provide to older students, it limits their choices and our ability to serve all children equitably.

Maine has the highest rate of child food insecurity in New England. One in five kids in Maine experience food insecurity, and 40% are not income eligible for free school meals. As educators, we know that early childhood is a critical developmental period, and we know that children learn best when they have full stomachs. Research consistently shows that school meals reduce childhood hunger, improve child nutrition and wellness, enhance school readiness, and support learning, attendance, and behavior. School meals save families an average of \$165 a month per child—a significant relief for the families we serve.

Additionally, extending this program to Pre-K will support our local agricultural economy. During the 2023/2024 school year, over \$968,000 was spent on local foods by Maine schools. Our

Pre-K programs deserve this same opportunity to serve fresh, locally sourced meals while supporting Maine farms.

As a school leader committed to ensuring all children in our district have what they need to succeed, I strongly believe our Pre-K students deserve the same opportunities for healthy, nutritious meals that we have successfully provided to other students through School Meals for All. I urge the Committee to support LD 2064 and vote "Ought to Pass" on The APPLE Act.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and for your service to the people of Maine.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Steve Bussiere". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steve" being more prominent than the last name "Bussiere".

Steve Bussiere  
Assistant Superintendent  
Sanford School Department