

**Testimony of Laura Merrill, Food Service Director RSU 73 Jay, Livermore Falls & Livermore
In Support of LD 1183**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Laura Merrill. I am the Food Service Director at RSU 73.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 1183 "An Act to Establish the School Meal Equipment and Program Improvement Fund".

Having grown up in rural Maine I understand the importance of having access to healthy and nutritious meals and as a parent I understand the value of healthy school meals. But as a Food Service Director in a community that is economically disadvantaged, fiscal responsibility is of essence. I inherited a department with dysfunctional and decrepit equipment which often results in costly repairs. Just recently, we have been forced to replace a double commercial steamer, roughly \$40,000.00, and a dishwasher, \$25,000.00. Thankfully we were able to replace the steamer and have obtained grant funding for the replacement of the dishwasher.

We are mindful that replacing a kettle is in our very near future. This 1967, Kettle will cost between \$80,000-100,000 dollars.

Staff have had to work creatively around the obstacles we have encountered over the past few weeks. This has resulted in additional cost for paper products, menu changes, and additional labor hours. The level of commitment and dedication of my staff has often presents as personal sacrifice, more difficult work, and longer hours.

Food insecurity is all to real, effecting 1 in 6 students in Maine. Too often, the meals received daily at school are the only reliable and nutritionally dense food for many of our youth. No child is able to focus on learning when they are hungry. Many schools lack critical equipment needed to provide nutritious meals, often resulting in serving prepackaged and processed products. Establishing access to funding for replacing ancient equipment will help to ensure reliability and efficiency. The aforementioned will allow schools to focus on the quality of the products being served and not so much concern on HOW can we provide service to our community.

As a parent and a professional I stand here today asking for your support for this bill. Your support for this bill will allow for successful cultivation of community partnerships all while possessing a keen sense of fiduciary responsibility and ensuring all children in the State of Maine can benefit from your support. Thank you co-chairs and committee for your time and commitment to Maine's children and I will be happy to answer any questions they have.

Laura Merrill
Food Service Director RSU 73