



**Testimony of Anna Korsen, Full Plates Full Potential
In Support of LD 1183**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Anna Korsen, Advocacy and Implementation Director with Full Plates Full Potential, a statewide non-profit working to address childhood food insecurity by providing technical and financial assistance to schools and communities to help feed kids now, while advocating for the systemic changes necessary to ensure that all Maine children have consistent access to nutritious meals. Our strategy is to maximize access to USDA Child Nutrition Programs - commonly known as school lunch, school breakfast, afterschool meals, and summer meals.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 1183 "An Act to Establish the School Meal Equipment and Program Improvement Fund". We'd like to thank Representative Salisbury for her dedication to Maine's children and school nutrition programs across our state.

On an average day across our state, school nutrition professionals serve breakfast to nearly 60,000 students and lunch to nearly 100,000 students. Maine school kitchens are chronically underfunded, understaffed, and often ill-equipped to meet the growing daily demand. Many are operating with out-dated, broken, or missing equipment like ovens, refrigerators, freezers, dishwashers and more that are critical tools for meal service and necessary in the creation of nutritious meals. To further compound the issue, the funding available to support purchasing or replacing large pieces of kitchen and cafeteria equipment, with price tags ranging from \$20,000 to \$50,000 a piece, is extremely limited and doesn't meet the need. School budgets rarely include funding to support kitchen equipment. Some Covid relief funding was used to update school kitchens, but that has largely been spent and will not be renewed. Full Plates is a grant making organization, and we frequently receive grant requests for large pieces of equipment that we don't have the capacity to fund. In a recent grant round, we received requests from 6 schools, totalling over \$140,000, to fund large equipment purchases. The Maine Department of Education receives funding from the USDA each year to distribute to schools to purchase large pieces of equipment, and this fall they were able to award \$189,982 to partially fund 29 schools. To put some perspective on the funding available and the actual need, if every School Administrative Unit in Maine had just one school kitchen that needed to purchase or replace one piece of kitchen equipment this year, the cost would be between \$4.3 million at the low end and \$10.8 million at the high end. Additionally, school nutrition programs are seeing an increase in students with food allergies and lack the extra funding needed to support these students with food that is safe for them to consume.

Thankfully, there is an existing fund within the Department that could help to address this need. In 2019, the Legislature passed a law that required high-need schools to operate Breakfast After the Bell, meaning that schools with 50% or more students eligible for free and reduced price school meals needed to incorporate alternative models for delivering school breakfast, such as Breakfast in the



Classroom and Grab and Go Breakfast. At the same time, the Legislature recognized that schools may need funding in order to purchase the equipment necessary to operate alternative breakfast models, so you appropriated \$500,000 to the Department of Education to give grants for that purpose. At the time, very few schools were operating Breakfast After the Bell and there was significant need for funding to support breakfast equipment purchases.

Then the pandemic hit, and schools needed to adapt all of their meal programs to get food to students where and when it was needed. As schools started to reopen during the 2nd year of the pandemic, social distancing requirements resulted in alternative meal service in both breakfast and lunch. Full Plates Full Potential granted emergency funds to school nutrition programs, and those funds were largely spent on equipment like food carts traditionally used in Breakfast After the Bell. The result is that the 2019 funding has been underutilized, but the original intent of the funding has largely been accomplished. According to the Maine Department of Education, 91% of districts across the state now report that they are providing breakfast after the start of the school day in at least one school and the need for equipment to support Breakfast After the Bell is greatly reduced.

As a result, the Department of Education has unspent funds that could be utilized for the School Meal Equipment and Program Improvement Fund proposed in this bill. We support Representative Salisbury's proposed amendment to utilize the existing unspent funds from the Alternative Breakfast Delivery Service Program within the Department established during the 129th Legislature in 2019 [Public Law Chapter 480](#).

This existing fund of nearly \$374,00 will only be a drop in the bucket, but it will provide much needed funding to help schools purchase critical equipment for meal service. We would support an additional allocation to bring the fund back up to \$500,000 to better meet the need.

We urge you to support LD 1183 and Representative Salisbury's proposed amendment. Thank you for your time and attention to this important issue.

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