

**Testimony of Anna Korsen, Full Plates Full Potential
In Support of LD 577**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Anna Korsen and I am the Policy and Program Director with Full Plates Full Potential, a statewide non-profit working to address childhood food insecurity in Maine by maximizing access to federally funded USDA Child Nutrition Programs like school breakfast and lunch. I was born in Greenville, ME, grew up in Steep Falls, ME and graduated from Bonny Eagle High School. I now live in Portland and my son is a freshman at Portland High.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 577 "An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program". I'd like to thank Senator Tipping for his commitment to feeding Maine kids, and his willingness to shift gears and amend his bill to put protections in place to sustain Maine's landmark bipartisan School Meals for All policy.

School Meals for All is especially important because **Maine has the highest rate of childhood food insecurity in New England**. At least **1 in 5 Maine kids**¹ lack consistent access to reliable nutrition, and school meals are one important tool we have to fulfill Maine's historic commitment to Ending Hunger. We know that a hungry child can't learn, and that consistent access to nutritious food supports school readiness, improves behavior and academic outcomes, and overall mental and physical health. School meals are often the only reliable source of nutrition for food insecure children, and Maine's School Meals for All policy has eliminated the stigma of receiving a "free" lunch. School meals are now a valued part of the day for all students and **meal participation is at a record high** with over 100,000 students eating at school everyday statewide.

Maine is leading the nation in school meal participation, with a 25% increase in students eating breakfast and lunch since pre-pandemic times.² **Maine schools served a total of 29,757,082 meals** during the 2023-2024 school year,³ making Maine's collective cafeteria the largest restaurant in the entire state. We're hearing reports from schools that more students with full bellies has caused a reduction in hunger related visits to the school nurse and fewer behavior

¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics#children>

²

<https://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/meal-participation-continues-to-rise-in-states-after-two-years-of-healthy-school-meals-for-all>

³ <https://www.maine.gov/doe/schools/nutrition/CNDataareports>

disruptions in classrooms. And **school meals can save families \$160/month per child⁴**, helping to stretch already tight grocery budgets.

School cafeterias are often the only food serving institution in a rural community and can have an important impact on local businesses and the local economy. Thanks to School Meals for All and streamlined enrollment in free school meals for eligible children through direct certification and Community Eligibility Provision, school nutrition professionals no longer need to spend a significant amount of time chasing lunch money and processing paperwork, and can turn their attention to sourcing ingredients from local growers, producers, and processors. **Over \$968,000 were spent on local foods** and directly benefited the local economy and food system during SY24.⁵ School nutrition staff are also spending more time honing their culinary skills and engaging with students to better respond to their unique dietary and cultural needs and preferences.

Community Eligibility, or CEP, plays an important role in Maine's School Meals for All Policy. CEP maximizes federal funding by allowing high-need schools to offer breakfast and lunch to all their students at no charge using federal funds and eliminates the need to collect school meal applications every year, reducing the administrative burden on schools and families. Rather than using individual student eligibility to determine the school meal reimbursements, CEP schools are reimbursed based on their percentage of poverty, as determined by students' participation in other means-tested programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and in many states like Maine, Medicaid. Students enrolled in these programs are directly certified for free school meals. The percentage of students in a school enrolled in these programs is called the Identified Student Percentage, or ISP. To account for any students that may be eligible for free meals but not captured through direct certification, CEP schools multiply their ISP by 1.6 and use that number to claim reimbursement for free meals. Starting next school year, any school or school district with an ISP of 25% or more will be able to participate in CEP, which is about 75% of all schools in Maine. This bill would require participation in CEP as a condition of receiving state funds for School Meals for All, just as the other 8 states with this policy have done.

But sadly all of this great progress is under threat, with proposed cuts to school meals, SNAP, and Medicaid at the federal level. Congress is working on a budget that will give tax breaks to the wealthiest citizens paid for by cuts to food assistance and healthcare. They are veiling these

⁴ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/overall/maine>

⁵ <https://www.maine.gov/doe/schools/nutrition/programs/farmtoschool>



cuts as "cost sharing", expecting the state to pick up the difference. Furthermore, they are proposing 100% household income verification in order to qualify a child for a free or reduced price meal. This would cause undue administrative burden on schools, especially when we have other, more efficient and accurate ways to capture household income through direct certification. The reality is that families will not apply for free and reduced price meals if this change is put in place, and Maine schools will not get their fair share of federal funding. Notwithstanding cuts to SNAP and Medicaid, the proposed cuts and changes to school meal funding alone will leave a funding gap of at least \$10 million statewide.

Maine must put protections in place now to ensure that schools are supported and kids are still being fed, not if, but when, these federal changes happen. The good news is that we have opportunities to generate revenue to help fill these federal funding gaps, and the reality is that we have a revenue problem because of our inadequate tax code. Tax cuts that primarily benefit the wealthy have left the state consistently unable to adequately fund schools and communities, and left other priorities competing against each other for funding. Wasteful tax breaks have allowed profitable corporations to pay less than they should, reducing funding for services that benefit all of us. The pandemic downturn has revealed the limitations of our inadequate, unequal tax code. But even before COVID, Maine faced hundreds of millions in revenue shortfall in every two-year budget.

There are bills being heard in the Taxation committee, like LD 1089, sponsored by Representative Golek and a great collection of cosponsors including the Speaker, that would create a surcharge of 4% on income over one million dollars. The bill directs the funds that would come from this new surcharge (currently expected to be over \$100 million per year) to fund our schools. Adding this revenue stream would not only help guarantee funding for education, but also free up other funds to meet other unmet needs.

Hunger is a policy choice. What scares us more than the impending federal funding shortfall is the loss of bipartisan support for common sense policies like School Meals for All in our state. Maine kids need you, the adults in charge, to come together once again to make sure that no matter what, they are getting the most basic human need - the right to food - met, at least while they are learning at school. Please protect School Meals for All by supporting LD 577.

I would be happy to share more information about the Community Eligibility Provision and direct certification, as well as to answer any questions today or during the work session. Thank you for your time and continued commitment to feeding Maine's children.

Anna Korsen
akorsen@fullplates.org
207.653.6301

