

Testimony of Ashley Edmondson  
Portland, Maine  
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 Ashley Edmondson. I'm a parent of two children in Portland Public Schools. I'm here today to voice my strong support for LD 577.

Universal School Meals make a difference for families like mine. My husband and I both work full time, and while we don't qualify for free lunch under current guidelines, we still feel the strain of the rising cost of living. School meals help ease that burden—and they ensure our kids are nourished and ready to learn.

It's hard for anyone to focus on an empty stomach—I know I can't do my best work when I'm hungry. For kids, it's even more critical. Hunger affects concentration, behavior, attendance, and overall academic performance. A consistent, healthy school meal isn't just about nutrition—it's about giving every student a fair shot at learning and success.

Universal School Meals ensure that *all* students—regardless of family income—can access food without hesitation or shame. When everyone is eating together and enjoying the same choices, it removes the stigma around who "needs" a free meal and who doesn't. It levels the playing field and fosters community and connection.

I also love asking them what they tried at lunch. My 10-year-old recently told me, *"I love that you have the choice of a hot meal, cold option, and different sides—and everyone is eating together."* And my 8-year-old shared, *"Mom, I love the snacks you pack me, but I*

*get so hungry at school, and I'm so glad I can get hot food there."*

They were both excited to tell me about a new meal they tried—bean and cheese pupusas—which has since become a favorite in our home. This kind of exposure enriches their palate and our family's food culture.

Universal School Meals support not just families, but school nutrition staff too. School nutrition professionals can focus on food quality, student needs, and local sourcing—instead of tracking down meal debt and more administrative tasks.

LD 577 protects a program that's working. It's good for kids, good for schools, and good for Maine. I urge you to support LD 577.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to Maine's children.

Ashley Edmondson