

## Free Meals for All

My name is Caroline Trinder. I am a school nutrition director, a registered dietitian, and the president-elect of the Maine School Nutrition Association. I live and work in Old Orchard Beach. I'm here today to urge you to do everything in your power to preserve universal free meals for all Maine students—something we've had since March 2020.

I'm here on behalf of a high school student who, five years ago on a Friday at noon, had to choose between appearing “cool” in front of their peers or getting a school lunch—knowing that it would be the last meal they'd have until breakfast on Monday morning.

I'm here for a single parent of three children who, five years ago, made just \$100 a year too much to qualify for meal benefits. Despite working two jobs to make ends meet, she was forced to pay over \$75 a week so her children could eat breakfast and lunch at school.

I'm also here representing local farmers and fishermen who, five years ago, weren't experiencing the demand they are now—thanks to more students participating in school meal programs. In fact, according to data from the Maine DOE, school meal participation has increased by at least <sup>25%</sup>~~12%~~ statewide since 2020.

I'm speaking on behalf of school nutrition directors who, more than five years ago, were expected to become debt collectors when families couldn't afford school meals. Staff still had to be paid, and food had already been purchased. This debt often fell on school districts, pulling from general funds that are supposed to support educators. Colleagues in the 41 states

without universal meals report that school meal debt has skyrocketed compared to pre-COVID times—sometimes by hundreds of thousands of dollars. And that money has to come from somewhere.

As a parent, I ask: Why in 2025—when we all agree that children learn best when they are nourished and not distracted by hunger—is this even a debate?

*My name is Carline Trader and I'm RSU 23 food service director in OOB and the USNA Pres- We don't have to advocate for universal bussing, because it's considered a basic right to have our children transported to school. We don't show up here fighting for middle school sports uniforms—they're standard. We don't question universal access to teachers, because we all agree that educating our children is a fundamental public service. Elee*

So why are we still asking if children should have the right to eat at school—something just as essential to learning as a ride, a uniform, or a textbook?

If we require students to be in school, then we must also commit to meeting their basic needs while they're there. Access to food is a basic human right. Our children—our future—deserve nothing less.

*I'm here today to advocate to do everything in our power to maintain free meals for all students in Maine. We know a fed student can learn & focus best at school.*