



Testimony of Heidi Stevens, Food Service Director AOS 98 School District Boothbay-Boothbay Harbor, Edgecomb, Southport, and Georgetown. Resides in Wiscasset, 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 Heidi Stevens. I am the Food Service Director at AOS 98.

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 school meals in Maine.

I have been working in school food service for over 10 years, and the director for the last 5. I came from a large family in a small town that thrived in the summer but all but closed down in the winter. For many of us, money was tight. We didn't qualify for free meals but the reduced price that we did qualify for made a huge difference in my family's household budget.

Like all of my peers I have watched many kids from all walks of life pass through our schools. I have seen the good and great of these young people as well as the bad and ugly, especially when it comes to the obvious income differences in our local families. I've seen these differences used as a tool to both suppress and to lift up, as a weakness and as a power, by students as well as their parents. "Free Meals for All" changes the playing field for all students. It takes away that power of the more privileged and balances those weaknesses of the less privileged.

As food service employees we make a completely different connection with kids than teachers and administrators. We are the grandmas and favorite aunt or uncle of the school family. We spoil them and then send them back to their classrooms. We feed them! We can change their whole day with a good hearty meal and a smile. Sometimes a child is just hungry and a good hearty and healthy meal can get them on track. A luxury that would be denied many if funding for our programs is lost or reduced. For many, the meals they get at school are the only meals they get, sometimes going without or with very little all weekend until they can get back to school on Monday. School meals are also their only source of fruits and vegetables which are so vital to their growth and development. These kids look forward to coming to school,

they work harder to please, even if it's just for the food.

I am not going to share one specific story but rather a larger picture of the positive effect "Free Meals for All" has had on our school environment, students, and communities. As I said before, "Free Meals for All" puts all kids on an even playing field. Stigma's come in many forms and affect all students regardless of financial position. The stigma of low income is just the one we talk about the most. Stigma's often bring out the worst in people and are used to assert power over those less fortunate. "Free Meals for All" greatly reduces those stigmas. Freedom from these stigmas starts in the cafeteria with free meals to all students regardless of income, but spreads throughout the entire school environment. Students develop a confidence that was denied to them before. Free meals to all students allow kids to not see each other's social status. They develop friendships with each other based on common interests rather than the burden of where they are supposed to fit in society. There is just less judgement! I have seen not only a gradual increase in participation as kids realize they can eat free, but also changes in character, confidence, and growth. Once they realized they would no longer be judged by their peers, they stood taller, engaged more, and let their personalities show without fear of being categorized. They grew physically, intellectually, mentally, behaviorally, academically and athletically. Kids who could afford to pay started eating because they were no longer afraid of appearing like they "needed" school lunches. They didn't want to be judged as "better than" or a snob. They didn't want to present their parents with a big bill at the end of the month. Some were perhaps not as well off as they appeared and paying for a school lunch bill their parents couldn't afford exposed them. Some didn't want their friends to find out they received meals for free or at a reduced price so chose not to eat even though they were hungry. They wanted to avoid the embarrassment of being asked to pay when they didn't have money. Free meals to students is so much more than savings in the school budget or an expense to the government. Believe it or not, it opens doors for students, encourages curiosities and adventures, builds confidence, helps with learning and behavioral problems, makes kids happy and nicer, they are more willing to jump in and help, be it with their peers, teachers, or clean up duties at the end of lunch. Their personalities are able to shine and they are allowed to dream. Full bellies make them happy and their happiness and excitement is contagious.

Cuts to funding for free meal would un-do all of the good this program has given our kids. It will cause hardships financially for the families who already struggle to make ends meet. It would raise local taxes putting more burden on the schools and local budgets as well as the tax burden to families with and without kids in our schools.



Many families live just outside of the financial guidelines and would have to make the choice of letting their kids eat at school or pay household expenses. Participation would drop denying many children healthy, nutritious food options. Directors would have to spend far too much time collecting the information they need to verify applications. Information they likely will never get. Countless letters will be sent only to end up sending that last letter of denial when information is not acquired to verify income. Information many families feel is none of our business. Their kids would either accumulate a large bill that will never get paid or just simply go hungry to save themselves and their families the embarrassment.

Tariffs, trade wars, and reimbursement cuts will greatly reduce the options of fresh fruits and vegetables that we can offer our students. Many of the fruits and vegetable we offer simply do not or cannot grow here in the USA. Winters see a huge reduction in what is available. Up here in the Northeast we cannot grow produce year-round and rely on other states and countries to supply what we cannot. Climate change brings a whole other set of challenges that further hinders the growth of fresh produce. This country by itself simply cannot grow enough food to supply its population, let alone supply our schools.

Tariffs and trade wars would make food too expensive or impossible to acquire both locally and from imports. Schools would not be able to recoup our expenses thereby causing us to operate in the negative, and needing help from already over stressed and over stretched school budgets. We need programs like "Free Meals for All" , federal reimbursements and local food funds to offset costs. We also need affordable food to make sure our kids get healthy, nutritious meals. If we want to make America healthy, and smart, again then we need our government to invest our students and our schools, and proved free meals to all students.

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