

As the school nutrition director for RSU #14 and a licensed Dietetic Technician with 28 years of experience as a School Nutrition Director, I urge you to preserve universal free meals for all Maine students.

Since the beginning of Maine's bipartisan Healthy School Meals for All legislation, participation in school meals across Maine increased 25%. In RSU #14, we have seen astounding growth in student meal participation. Some of our schools are feeding twice the number of meals that they served prior to this legislation being passed. Families are utilizing school meals to nourish their children while in school, allowing them to stretch their household budgets to afford life necessities, such as food, medicine and clothing.

Maine has a long and treasured history of leading the nation. In fact, when it comes to school nutrition, even before the passage of Maine's School Meals for All legislation, Maine was recognized as a leader in school nutrition program innovation, serving delicious meals and incorporating fresh & locally grown fruits and vegetables. Maine was among the first states in the country to pass legislation ensuring that all children would have access to a healthy school breakfast and lunch every single school day, once again leading the nation and caring for Maine school children. Other states have followed us, many states have reached out to us as leaders for guidance. This is the time to continue our commitment to ensuring that Maine school children are adequately fed, because everyone knows that a hungry child cannot learn.

As I reflect on the years I have worked in school nutrition, it is amazing the impact that feeding **all** children has had. Looking around school cafeterias in our district, one will quickly notice that lunch boxes are few and far between. Most students are eating a school meal, have visited a salad bar and are drinking Maine milk. I think back to years ago, when students felt stigma and shame for accessing school meals. Those long held biases are gone. Participating in school meal programs have become an integrated part of the school day. Children no longer feel stigma and shame, children are no longer going hungry.

Universal meals have created positive ripple effects throughout our state. Local farmers, producers and fishermen have seen increased demand, as school meal participation has risen and efforts to get local food on school meal trays has increased.

Before universal meals, nutrition directors became debt collectors. When families couldn't pay, this debt often fell to school districts, draining general funds meant for education. In the the 41 states without universal meals, school meal debt has skyrocketed compared to pre-COVID levels—sometimes by hundreds of thousands of dollars. I recently sat with a School Nutrition Director from Nevada, where Universal School Meal waivers recently ended, and she reported school meal debt rising over \$30,000 per month.

Studies consistently show that participation in school meals:

- Reduces childhood hunger
- Decreases childhood obesity and increases student wellness
- Enhances child development and school readiness
- Supports learning
- Improves attendance
- Improves behavior

School meals have been shown to be the healthiest meals that most children have access to. As a school nutrition director, resident of Maine, parent and grandparent of Maine children, I am asking you, to support LD 577. This bill will help preserve Maine's School Meals for All legislation by requiring eligible districts to participate in the Community Eligibility Program (CEP). We don't question or means test universal transportation to school. Schools ensure that students have the essentials that they need to learn in school each day. These are considered fundamental educational rights, integrated part of the school day. Food access should be no different. Access to nutrition is not a luxury - it's a basic human right and it is essential to learning. Our children - Maine's future - deserve continued universal access to healthy school meals.

Thank you for your consideration and commitment to the wellbeing of Maine's students.

Respectfully,

Jeanne Reilly, NDTR, SNS Director of School Nutrition - RSU #14