

Good afternoon,

I am Laura Baker, the Director of Food Services at MSAD #1 in Presque Isle. Thank you for allowing me to testify today regarding the amendment to LD 577.

Access to breakfast and lunch at no cost has significantly increased the number of students who eat at our schools. Parents no longer have to worry about being able to afford these two meals at school, and students are no longer missing meals because their parents did not send meal money to school. School meals are designed to be healthy, and for some students, these may be the healthiest meals that they eat in a day — or may be the only full meals they eat in a day. These meals make a tremendous difference in students' health, energy, and ability to learn. The no-charge meals at school support students whose families may not be able to afford meals, thereby leveling the “playing field” for these students in school.

The no-charge school meals are also a boon for our community. Since more children are eating at school, I am able to work with local farmers to plant fruits and vegetables that I use in the school nutrition program. Since the demand for these local fruits and vegetables is higher, it is much more likely that local farmers will work with the school district to supply us with fresh food.

Some students are able to try fruits and vegetables and dishes that they would not get elsewhere. With fresh foods, we are able to do more cooking from scratch, which increases the nutritional value of the dishes but also makes the food better tasting.

Finally, as a Director of Food Services, the no-charge program allows me to focus more on building good menus and working with my staff to make healthy rather than focusing on applications and past due accounts. With this time I have been able to work with other directors

in the County to build connections with local farmers and to establish good working relationships.

Most people would agree that access to healthy food is important for children's physical and intellectual development. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for schools in Maine to be able to serve meals to any and all students who want them, regardless of the family's ability to pay. This supports the growth and health of our local communities as well as the state of Maine. The children of Maine deserve to eat no-charge meals at our public schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laura Baker". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Laura Baker
Director of Food Services, MSAD #1/RSU 79