



April 10, 2025

Good Afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Educational and Cultural Affairs committee. My name is Meg Parkhurst, and I am the assistant superintendent of the Saco School Department, and a resident of Kennebunk. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today to express my strong support for LD 577, which seeks to maximize federal funding for Maine's Universal School Meals Program while ensuring continued access to nutritious meals for all Maine students.

Universal school meals are a critical service for our students. Food insecurity remains a persistent challenge for Maine families. According to recent data:

- Approximately 1 in 5 Maine children experience food insecurity, which is higher than the national average, and is also higher than the 1 in 8 Mainers that experience food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> A clear indication that children are at higher risk for food insecurity.
- School meals are often the most reliable source of nutrition for many students.
- In Saco alone, in the past 5 years, we have shifted from 1 in 4 economically disadvantaged students to 1 in 3 students.

Maine's universal school meals program has demonstrated significant benefits since its inception in 2020. It has eliminated the stigma associated with free/reduced lunch status: when lunches are free, more students participate in eating school meals, and all students access these meals the same way, eliminating the fear of being seen by peers as poor. Students experience better academic outcomes, particularly among vulnerable student populations.<sup>2</sup> When students are well fed, they are able to focus on learning.

Beyond equity for students, this approach offers practical benefits for our education system. For school staff, free lunch for all students reduces administrative burden by eliminating the need to process individual meal applications- while data is still needed for funding, the timing and collection of this is far easier and less burdensome. Most importantly, students enter school on the first day knowing that they will be fed.

This amendment wisely requires schools to maximize federal reimbursement opportunities, including participation in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) when eligible. This approach ensures state funds supplement rather than replace available federal funds, creates a sustainable funding model, provides the DOE with clear authority to guide schools toward optimal funding strategies, and protects taxpayer investments by maximizing every available federal dollar.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://campaignforendinghunger.org/about/hunger-statistics-in-maine/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/schoolwide-free-meal-programs-fuel-better-classroom-outcomes-for-students/>



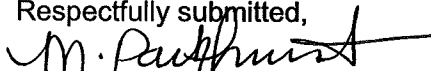
Despite these clear benefits, a critical gap remains in our implementation. Currently, private schools that receive 60% of their funding from public sources through sending schools (60/40 schools) are not required to provide universal meals, despite receiving substantial taxpayer support. This creates an inequitable system where a student's access to nutrition depends on which school they attend. LD 577 could go further to address this gap by ensuring ALL students receiving public education funding have access to these critical meals.

This extension of universal meals is not merely an administrative concern but a matter of fundamental fairness. It is essential that ALL students who receive public funding, whether they attend traditional public schools or publicly funded private schools, have equal access to universal school meals. Nutrition should not be determined by school type - if Maine taxpayers are funding a child's education, they should also be supporting that child's basic nutritional needs regardless of whether they attend a public school or a 60/40 private school.

By passing LD 577, you will be strengthening a program that ensures no Maine student has to learn while hungry. The amendment sensibly requires schools to maximize federal funding opportunities first, creating a more sustainable program that protects both students and taxpayers.

I urge you to support LD 577 and help secure the future of universal school meals in Maine.

Respectfully submitted,

  
Meg Parkhurst