

Good afternoon,

Thank you for allowing me to testify regarding the amendment to LD 577. As the food service director of the Valley Unified Education Service Center—which serves the communities of Madawaska, St. Agatha, Fort Kent, and their surrounding areas—I see firsthand how impactful no-charge school meals have been for our learners. Valley Unified represents three school districts in Aroostook County, covering a vast geographic region and serving hundreds of students across rural northern Maine.

With access to no-charge meals, both breakfast and lunch participation has increased significantly. Families no longer have to worry about whether their children can afford to eat at school, and students are assured of a healthy, nutritious meal every day. For many of our learners, these school meals are their only or best meals of the day, and having consistent access to them makes a tremendous difference in their health, energy, and ability to focus in class.

The benefits of continuing no-charge meals are clear: students are eating healthier, attendance is improving, and academic performance is on the rise. Just as importantly, these meals create opportunities to strengthen our local agricultural economy. We're proud to source food from right here in Aroostook County—working directly with local farmers, producers, and distributors. We are able to incorporate more farm-to-school practices, which not only brings fresher ingredients into our kitchens, but also supports the farmers and ag businesses that are the backbone of our local economy.

Because meals are offered at no charge, food service directors are freed from processing Free and Reduced applications and can instead focus on strengthening our local food system. That means I can spend more time sourcing high-quality products from local partners—purchasing beef from area cattle farms and bringing it to the local slaughterhouse, picking up fresh fish off the pier in Portland through Fishermen Feeding Mainers, delivering those items to other schools in Aroostook County, working with local honey producers, and even asking farmers to grow specific crops for our menus.

By using locally sourced products, we're able to return to more scratch cooking, giving us control over sodium, sugar, and processed ingredients. This not only improves the health of our learners but also ensures our food dollars stay within the local economy—benefiting our farmers, our schools, and our communities.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share our experience. I urge you to support this amendment to LD 577—not only for the well-being of our students, but also for the continued strength and sustainability of Aroostook County's agricultural industry.

Melanie Lagasse

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