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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF

L.D. 577

AN ACT TO MAXIMIZE FEDERAL FUNDING AND PROTECT MAINE'S UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM (AMENDMENT)

April 10, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Robbie Feinberg, the director of communications and government relations of the Maine School Management Association, testifying on behalf of the legislative committees of the Maine School Boards Association and the Maine School Superintendents Association in strong support of the amended version of L.D. 577.

As you might expect, we've talked with superintendents and school board members a lot over the past few months about the state budget. During those discussions, we have received two questions far more than any others: "*Is the state providing 55 percent education funding?*" and "*Is there still money for Universal School Meals?*"

There is a good reason for this. For close to half a decade, school officials have seen with their own eyes how transformative this policy has been for students, families, and classrooms. Parents no longer have to worry about packing up their kid's lunch each morning. Kids can just pick and choose what they want in the cafeteria line, instead of worrying about if they have enough money in their account.

One Maine teacher shared that when a student gets upset or irritable during her morning class, she tells them to get up, clear their head, head down to the cafeteria, and pick up a free breakfast. When they return, she said, the students are calm, fed, and ready to get back to work.

This has been transformational, and parents and educators have made it abundantly clear that they do not want to go back. Research shows that when more kids are fed, attendance rates go up and more students graduate. Maine's investment in School Meals for All is a proven investment in Maine kids' futures, and we urge you to fully support this program and pass L.D. 577.

This bill also comes at a critical time for Maine superintendents and school districts. Across the state, school boards are dealing with two overlapping issues: an already challenging local school budget year, combined with uncertainty over the amount of federal funding they will receive moving forward. Some districts are already being forced to lay off staff to limit school budget increases. Others are weighing cuts to programming because of budget uncertainty.

While L.D. 577 would not completely solve any of these problems, it would offer school districts and local taxpayers more assurance. It would invest an additional \$6 million to fully fund Maine's School Meals for All

program over the biennium. And by requiring eligible schools to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision, it would ensure that Maine can maximize the amount of school nutrition funding it receives from the federal government. Nearly as importantly, it would require the DOE to provide schools with guidance and support, helping districts navigate this rapidly changing funding landscape.

We also believe that every Maine public school student should have access to these crucial benefits – including publicly funded students that are sent outside of our districts. We feel this would help ensure crucial nutrition to Maine students with so much potential uncertainty in the years ahead.

L.D. 577 will not fully eliminate the budget uncertainty that so many school boards are feeling at this moment. But it will help to offer some stability in a program that is vital to tens of thousands of children and families across our state. Your support of L.D. 577 will help our schools keep their promise of feeding every Maine child, and we urge you to vote “ought to pass.”

Thank you for your consideration, I’m happy to take any questions you might have.