



Stacy Brenner
Senator, District 30

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

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Augusta, Maine 04333

Testimony of Senator Stacy Brenner in support of
**LD 577, An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal
School Meals Program**
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

April 10, 2025

Representative Murphy, Senator Rafferty and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. I am Senator Stacy Brenner, representing Senate District 30 which includes all of Gorham and most of Scarborough. I am before you today to testify in support of **LD 577**, *An Act to Maximize Federal Funding and Protect Maine's Universal School Meals Program*. This bill will ensure no child in Maine goes hungry during the day and that our state continues to support our farmers and local food producers.

Maine struggles to deal with child hunger. Currently in Maine, 1 in 5 children don't always know where their next meal is coming from. That is why in 2021, the Legislature worked on and enacted the landmark School Meals for All program, making Maine one of the first states in the nation to guarantee that every student regardless of income receives a free school meal. Studies have proven that access to nutritious school meals is fundamental to a child's health, well-being, and ability to succeed academically. Our students deserve the best chance to succeed and this bill will put them on track for a bright future.

The school meals for all program is a vital pillar for Maine farmers and local food producers. During the 2024/2025 school year, over \$968,000 was spent on local foods by Maine schools. When school nutrition professionals aren't concerned with money and paperwork, it frees them time and energy to develop creative menus, expand offerings that are locally sourced and

engage with students and be responsive to their dietary needs and preferences. An example of a program in Maine that is the cream of the crop is the Westbrook School Nutrition program. The entire department centers their work on food equity and ensuring every student that walks in through their doors can access the free school meal program.

I'd like to share this quote from Mary Emerson, the Director of School Nutrition at the Westbrook School Department. "We are very excited in forming the Halal Meals Network, which allows us to be transparent about the food we serve to our students who have special dietary restrictions due to their faith. We've also partnered with a number of local organizations to promote local fish consumption and utilize locally grown greens in our meals. We also work with our school nutrition chefs to provide recipes for culturally appropriate dishes and provide variety to our menus."

This bill, as amended, will get ahead of any changes at the federal government that would negatively impact Maine schools and will ensure Maine's policy to feed all kids at school at no cost. By ensuring predictable funding for universal meals, we also stabilize demand for local producers who depend on school contracts to sustain their businesses. Today's legislation will help Maine to maximize federal funding for school meals which in turn will support Maine farmers. We must continue to support our heritage industries and reinforce the connection between local farms and local schools.

I urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 577 and continue Maine's leadership in fighting child hunger and supporting our local food systems.

Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions you have.

Stacy Brenner
State Senator, District 30