

**Testimony of Anna Korsen, Full Plates Full Potential
In Support of LD 1256**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Anna Korsen and I am the Policy and Program Director with Full Plates Full Potential, a statewide non-profit working to address childhood food insecurity in Maine by maximizing access to federally funded USDA Child Nutrition Programs like school breakfast and lunch. I was born in Greenville, ME, grew up in Steep Falls, ME and graduated from Bonny Eagle High School. I now live in Portland and my son is a freshman at Portland High.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 1256 "An Act to Support Healthy Meal Programs in Maine Schools by Allowing the School Revolving Renovation Fund to Make Loans to Repair and Renovate School Kitchens and Cafeterias" We'd like to thank Representative Salisbury for her dedication to Maine's children and school nutrition programs across our state.

Last week, you heard two hours of testimony about the impact Maine's School Meals for All policy is having. How it is foundational for farm to school, scratch cooking, and student engagement. How it supports learning and development. And that School Meals for All is especially important because **Maine has the highest rate of childhood food insecurity in New England. At least 1 in 5 Maine kids¹ lack consistent access to reliable nutrition. And school meals can save families \$160/month per child²**, helping to stretch already tight grocery budgets. We must ensure that the infrastructure is in place to support hard-working school kitchens to continue this important work.

On an average day across our state, school nutrition professionals serve breakfast to nearly 60,000 students and lunch to nearly 100,000 students. Maine school kitchens are chronically underfunded, understaffed, and often ill-equipped to meet the growing daily demand. Many are operating with outdated, broken, or missing equipment, such as ovens, refrigerators, freezers, dishwashers, and more that are critical for serving nutritious meals. To further compound the issue, the funding available from private funders and foundations, as well as from the state and federal government, to support purchasing or replacing large pieces of kitchen and cafeteria equipment (with price tags ranging from \$20,000 to \$50,000 a piece) is extremely limited and doesn't meet the need. Furthermore, tight school budgets rarely include funding to support large-scale kitchen equipment.

Full Plates is a grant-making organization, and since 2016, we have provided \$3,210,991 in grants to schools to support improved access to school meals, student engagement, taste testing and menu

¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics#children>

² <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/overall/maine>

development, marketing and outreach, and, most notably, requests for necessary kitchen supplies and equipment. This includes small items like blenders, pots and pans, and large basic equipment such as ovens, refrigerators, freezers, dishwashers, and more. Unfortunately, the number of grant requests we receive for large pieces of equipment regularly exceed our own funding capacity. In a recent grant cycle, we received requests from 34 school districts, and 70% of these included requests for equipment purchases. Applicants requested a total of \$133,374 in just equipment needs, which was larger than our total budget for this grant. The Maine Department of Education receives funding from the USDA each year to distribute to schools to purchase large pieces of equipment, and this fall they received applications from 30 school districts requesting a total of \$305,188, but only had \$37,544 to partially fund 6 districts. It is also worth noting that the federal funding for school kitchen equipment in Maine is currently frozen.

To put some perspective relative to the funding available versus the actual need, if every School Administrative Unit in Maine had just one school kitchen that needed to purchase or replace one piece of kitchen equipment this year, the estimated cost would be between \$4.3 million at the low end and \$10.8 million at the high end. **School kitchen needs should be considered within school construction projects, and ideally a separate state fund for large-scale school kitchen projects should be established and adequately funded.** We provided comments to this effect to the Governor's Commission on School Construction.

This bill would amend the School Revolving Renovation Fund statute to include specific language about school kitchen and cafeteria upgrades and renovations, making it clear that these projects are priorities for the Fund. It would also invest \$500,000 in the School Meal Equipment and Program Improvement Fund, established by the 131st Legislature with \$385,000 available last school year. The fund was depleted in less than two weeks.

Kitchen infrastructure is a necessary component of Maine's School Meals for All policy, and critical to support hard working school kitchens that are feeding record numbers of students everyday. Please support them by supporting LD 1256.

Thank you, I'd be happy to answer any questions and can be available for the work session.

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