

Testimony of Jim Hanna of Portland in Support of LD 1682, An Act to Create the Maine Experiential Education Program

Honorable Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry,

As Executive Director of the Cumberland County Food Security Council (CCFSC), I represent a diverse food system coalition that created an initiative called Food Fuels Learning (FFL). This partnership with Portland Public Schools emerged from the advocacy of a parent who was troubled by the food insecurity she witnessed among her child's peers. With support from former Superintendent Xavier Botana, the coalition completed a school food system assessment involving more than 200 community members. Our collaboration agrees that all students have the right to nutritious, culturally appropriate food that allows them to attain their full potential.

Many positive outcomes have been generated by the Portland schools opening the opportunity for collaboration with partners working to increase community nutrition security. These results include the award of a USDA Farm to School grant invested in developing better processes for procuring and using local foods in cafeteria meals. Cooking carts were purchased for schools to support development of skills to prepare and appreciate local food.

One of the most profound results emerging from FFL is the creation of a position specifically designed to teach children about ecology and how food grows. The first job description was developed by the Principal at Gerald E. Talbot Elementary School working with the Schools Program Manager at FFL partner, Cultivating Community. FoodCorps resources were referenced in developing the role. Beginning as an Education Technician titled Garden Educator, for the 2022-23 academic year, five positions were created systemwide called Living Schoolyard Teacher. Like music, gym, and art, a special class period was scheduled each week to implement a STEM curriculum about food and the environment.

Parents and staff members have been raving about this unique new element of the school day. Children look forward to "Garden Class" like they anticipate recess. This is the necessary kind of education innovation that deserves replication and pilot testing in many diverse schools.

One unfortunate challenge is sustainably funding these positions. Initially paid for by ESSERF money available during the pandemic, these positions were eliminated in the 2023-24 Portland Public Schools budget. It was only after the state discovered that they had additional funds to allocate to schools that four of these five positions were reinstated in the budget.

CCFSC supports this legislation to invest in maintaining this exciting new education model and can lead to sustainable long term funding. The experiences students have with local food in their classrooms will prepare young people to nourish themselves and build a healthy future.

James Hanna
Cumberland County Food Security Council
LD 1682

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