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Testimony of Representative Michael Brennan Introducing LD 362, "Resolve, To Require the Department of Education To Form a Family Income Data Collection Working Group"
March 8, 2021

Good morning Senator Daughtry and fellow members of the Education and Cultural affairs Committee. I am Michael Brennan and I represent District 36 which is part of Portland. I am pleased to introduce LD 362, "Resolve, To Require the Department of Education To Form a Family Income Data Collection Working Group for your consideration.

This legislation is an effort to help Maine schools solve an issue that has been problematic for a long time and has grown more so as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Federal regulations and Maine statute currently require schools to collect income information from families, which is then used to qualify students for free or reduced-price school meals. In addition, the data is used by schools to secure other critical education funding, such as Title I funds and 21st Century grants. The problem is that the process for collecting this income information from families is flawed. The goal of this legislation is to try to find a better way.

The current process works in the following way: the task of collecting family income information generally falls on the shoulders of school nutrition staff. This data is collected by way of a "meal benefit application," a paper form that parents must fill out and return to school. Some districts also offer an online meal benefit application, but must still send the paper forms home, as well. The work of collecting these applications takes up a great deal of administrative time that school nutrition staff could be putting toward their core mission – feeding our students nutritious meals.

The current practice of collecting this income data via the meal benefit application fails to give Maine schools the accurate data they need. Many applications are not returned to school, meaning children who should qualify for free or reduced-price meals are not made eligible. This year, given the added challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the return rate for meal benefit applications has dropped significantly. Earlier this school year, Maine Department of Education reported a gap of 17,000 missing

school meal applications from students who were previously eligible in the 2019-2020 school year.

As I'm sure you know, there are many other state and federal programs where income is used to qualify children and families for services, including TANF, SNAP, MaineCare, rental assistance, and more. There is a provision in the federal school nutrition programs called Direct Certification, wherein students whose households qualify for some of these programs are automatically eligible for school meals. But not all programs are included in Direct Certification. For instance, MaineCare and rental assistance are not on the Direct Certification list. I realize the purpose of this bill is to bring together a group to investigate this issue, and so I don't want to focus too much on potential solutions today, but I do believe this process of Direct Certification is something the group could look at closely, perhaps as a starting point.

To be clear, the current process of collecting meal benefit applications is required federally by USDA in order for schools to receive reimbursements for meals served. The job of this working group would be to analyze the current practice, discuss potential solutions, and ultimately work with Maine DOE to determine a plan that could then be proposed to USDA. The end goal would be to enter into a pilot project or receive a waiver from USDA to begin implementing what we determine to be the better process for collecting this data.

I am sure there are questions, and I will do my best to answer them, but I will also let you know that others will be coming up after me, including school nutrition staff and superintendents, and those individuals will likely be able to answer your questions more conclusively.

Thank you for your time.