

Testimony of Erin Dow, School Nutrition Director for RSU 5, in Support of LD-362: *Resolve, To Require the Department of Education To Form a Family Income Data Collection Working Group*

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Erin Dow. I am a resident of Manchester and the Director of School Nutrition for RSU 5, serving the towns of Pownal, Durham and Freeport.

Anyone who knows me on a personal level knows that one of my core passions is mitigating child hunger in all its forms. Those who know me in my professional capacity might also cite my pretty strong feelings about the process by which nutrition directors like me determine whether our school-aged children are eligible to NOT be hungry. For this reason, I am submitting this testimony in support of LD-362, which I believe is an important and urgent step toward addressing the insufficiencies of the income application process for eligibility for free and reduced meals.

In early March of last year, I sent one of my routine past due notices to parents who do not qualify for free or reduced meals and hadn't paid their bills. During that same week, I was working with Freeport Community Services to try to figure out how my district was going to support students nutritionally should our in-person instruction be interrupted by the global pandemic that was already wreaking havoc on Maine's retail and service industries. As a district with a historically-low free and reduced percentage, we didn't qualify as a Summer Food Service site at any of our six schools.

I received a call from one of the recipients of my past due notice. She wanted to fill out an application for free meals. She was willing to drive to my office to pick it up that day because it was so urgent that her child continue to be able to eat two of his meals a day at school. She also needed some relief from the bill hanging over her head. She had \$400 in the bank and a business equipment lease payment coming due. COVID had struck her business down. She was in tears...the kind of crying that only happens when embarrassment and fear collide. "My son's on MaineCare," she said. "That makes him eligible, right?"

At the time, I should've been solely focused on ironing out the kinks around supplying emergency meals to the 2500 students in my district facing learning at home: students like this woman's kid, this woman with \$400 in her bank account, a failing business and a son who qualified for MaineCare who was standing before me saying that she, like so many others, needs those two free meals per school day provided to stay above water. Rather, I was standing before a woman in tears saying, "No, you have to lay bare your ledgers to "the man" again, on this fluorescent pink form here."

I already knew that free meals were likely coming through the nationwide COVID relief waivers. But on the off-chance that this woman qualified when she completed this application, I needed to get it processed to protect my district's educational subsidies. And if her son was applying to

colleges, for example, this qualification could drastically change his financial aid outlook, another pressure I feel every year that has nothing to do with feeding kids.

Absent COVID, the same issues exist. I tracked my time spent solely on free and reduced application outreach, processing, follow-up and record keeping two years ago, when I had prioritized raising my district's free and reduced percentage. I knew that my communities were underserved and I worked to soften the perception of the eligibility process, going so far as to message that, by applying, families could help our district as a whole by applying for help themselves.

The effort ate up more than 10% of my total working hours for the entire year. Throughout this past summer and into last fall, I continued my relentless campaign to collect free and reduced applications to try to mitigate the effect that the nationwide free meals waiver threatened to have on my district's educational subsidies. Despite my attempts, our district subsidy is currently down due to, among other things, drops in enrollment and our free and reduced percentage.

Unless and until school meals are provided to our students as freely and easily as a math textbook or the services of a guidance counselor, the next best thing we can do is make sure that we seal the cracks of the ship on which we are currently sailing. LD-362 can open the door to solutions that might allow us to more accurately identify the real needs of our families without the sometimes redundant and very often inaccurate data that free and reduced applications provide. The state already possesses some data on individuals that might keep people like the woman in my anecdote from crying in a parking lot.

No matter how we try to normalize and de-stigmatize free school meals, nutrition directors are in the awkward position of being the gatekeepers of a lifeline for needy families that hinges on that family exposing private, sometimes embarrassing financial information to someone whom they often share a community with. It behooves all of the school nutrition stakeholders - the state agency, the nutrition directors, and the communities and families they serve - to take a closer look at how we can best identify those in need in order to better address childhood hunger in Maine.

I want to thank the committee for your time and for your consideration of Maine's families. I'm happy to answer any questions the committee may have.

Erin Dow
Director of School Nutrition, RSU 5