

Testimony of Mary Emerson, Westbrook School District In Support of LD #362

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Mary Emerson. I am a resident of Kennebunk and the School Nutrition Director with the Westbrook School Department

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD.#362 "An Act to Ensure Maine Schools Receive Adequate Financial Resources" I want to thank the bill sponsors for your commitment to addressing childhood hunger in Maine.

I have been a school nutrition director for the past 15 years. Part of my responsibilities include the processing of the free & reduced lunch applications. The current free & reduced lunch application requires parents to provide specific income information listing everyone in the household and asking specifically how much each person makes in income. The form is cumbersome to complete. Allow me to share a situation we encountered this past year when we started the online registration process. We placed the online meals application in the third slot in a process that has eight steps. By the time the parent completed all the information which consisted of name & grade of each student, name and income of each household member, address, telephone number, email address and they signed it they thought they were done registering their students and they closed out of the registration process. This left their child not registered, but they did not realize this until our registrar contacted them.

Two out of three students in Westbrook qualify for school lunch. Two of our three elementary schools qualify to participate in the USDA Community Eligibility Program which requires parents to complete the Economic Indicator Form and not the free & reduced lunch form. The other three schools require parents to complete the Free & Reduced Lunch Form to be completed. This is confusing to parents.

Another factor that we face in Westbrook is that over 20% of our students come to us from homes where English is not their first language. This makes the process even more difficult. Simply put the more complex the form the less likely parents will complete it. Not completing the lunch form leads to unpaid meal debt incurring. Last year Westbrook was carrying over \$17,000 of unpaid meal debt.

As the school nutrition director I am responsible for processing the meals application during the month of September while I am also responsible for getting my kitchens fully operational, new staff trained, working with vendors to get our school specific food products in, making sure new students with specific dietary needs are met, and a myriad of other duties that arise as a new school year begins. Processing of applications in our district can take up to 20 hours a week of my time. Time I could spend increasing meal participation.

I fully support modification of this process to use an alternative economic indicator for all students. I want to simplify processes so I can concentrate my efforts on providing delicious meals for my students that will nourish them to be able to fully participate in the learning process.

Mary Emerson
School Nutrition Director, Westbrook School Department