

Amy Johnson  
MEPRI

Dear Sen. Daughtry, Rep. Brennan, and esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

On behalf of the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI), I wish to testify neither for nor against LD 362, A Resolve to Require the Maine Department of Education to Form a Family Income Data Collection Working Group.

Student eligibility for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) is used for several important purposes. In addition to ensuring that children in need have access to adequate nutrition, the data are used in aggregate as a general indicator of poverty for the Essential Programs and Services (EPS) funding model. Economic status is also an important consideration in policy research; FRPL data has thus been a staple element in our work.

In our most recent analyses of the Economically Disadvantaged component of the EPS funding formula we identified several challenges to relying on Free and Reduced Price Lunch data as the state's primary measure of student poverty. Maine is not alone in feeling these impacts. We have also heard first-hand reports from school nutrition directors about the growing obstacles of gathering documentation about family income. These challenges have only been exacerbated by Covid-19, putting yet additional stress on this data point to serve as a valid and reliable measure of poverty. If the quality of this measure deteriorates, we have concerns about the implications for school nutrition programs as well as for the ripple effect on Maine's equitable funding system and for our longer-term ability to incorporate the context of poverty in education policy research.

MEPRI is ready and willing to serve on the working group if this bill is successful. We are glad to have a MEPRI representative available at the work session upon request.