

**Testimony of Anna Korsen, Full Plates Full Potential
In Support of LD 362**

Good morning Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Anna Korsen. I live in Portland and I'm the Director of Advocacy with Full Plates Full Potential. We're a statewide nonprofit on a mission to end child hunger in Maine by maximizing participation in school nutrition programs.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 362: Resolve, To Require the Department of Education To Form a Family Income Data Collection Working Group. I want to thank Representative Brennan for his commitment to addressing childhood food insecurity in Maine.

In our work to support school districts across the state to increase access to school meals, we receive numerous requests for help collecting school meal benefit applications. Maine School Nutrition Directors and school administrators have tried many methods to incentivize families to return applications, and Full Plates and our partner organizations have worked to support them with outreach materials and campaigns to encourage families to return their paperwork. Despite these efforts, every year many eligible families do not return their school meal benefit applications which has far reaching implications resulting in fewer federal dollars flowing into Maine schools. This year is no exception, as Representative Brennan shared, earlier this fall, Maine DOE reported a statewide gap of 17,000 missing applications from previously eligible families, and districts were scrambling to come up with a solution.

In order to receive federal funding to support school meal programs and critical educational programs, Maine school districts must collect family income data. The current system of relying on school meal benefit applications as the method for collecting this data isn't working for Maine families or for Maine schools. As you'll hear from school nutrition directors today, requesting that a family share their income information with their school district can quickly lead to feelings of shame which often prevents the family from sharing that information. When a family doesn't return their application and also isn't able to pay for school meals, school meal debt accrues and at the end of the school year, any school meal debt remaining must be reconciled out of the school district's budget. The task of collecting school meal benefit applications falls primarily on the shoulders of school nutrition directors, taking up a lot of administrative time that could be better spent on activities more directly related to feeding children. In fact, many school nutrition directors spend much of the months of September and October processing school meal applications. These efforts often spill over into the rest of the school year as they attempt to contact eligible families to track down missing applications and to reconcile school meal debt. Additionally, inaccurate and incomplete income data impacts a school district's eligibility to provide meals to children during the summer, afterschool, over weekends, and during vacation weeks. It also impacts a school's eligibility for state funding to implement breakfast after the bell.

This issue isn't unique to Maine, as school districts across the country also struggle to collect school meal benefit applications. Clearly, the current system is inherently flawed. We need to find a new way to collect this important information to ensure that schools have the resources they need to feed and educate children. If Maine can find a common-sense solution, we would be leading the way.

In closing, I urge the committee to vote in support of creating a workgroup to tackle this critical issue. Thank you for your time and commitment to Maine's children, and I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

Anna Korsen
Full Plates Full Potential