

Testimony of Martha Poliquin, Falmouth Public Schools 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 Martha Poliquin I am a resident of Lisbon and the School Nutrition Director with Falmouth Public Schools serving Falmouth, Maine.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 362. I want to thank the bill sponsors for your commitment to addressing childhood hunger in Maine.

I've worked in school nutrition in Maine for 25 years. Every fall, we go through the process of determining which students qualify for free or reduced price school meals. This is also known as a student's Economic Status. This is determined in two basic ways. Families may be directly certified through the DOE and DHHS or they may fill out a paper or electronic Free and Reduced Price Meal Application. It's a simple form that asks for some basic family information such as how many members are in your household and who they are, and how much each one makes. Income includes gross wages earned, welfare received, child support, social security, disability, alimony, some pretty personal information that many families are quite reluctant to provide.

The application is processed by the person in the school district designated as the "Approving Officer". Often that is the school nutrition director, but it may also be a kitchen manager, a school secretary, any school staff member who has been trained and authorized to fill that role. It is not uncommon for that person to be a member of the same community as the applicant, meaning families risk embarrassment, shame, and identification as a member of the community having financial difficulties. Because of these risks and concerns, too many families choose not to apply for this valuable benefit. Therefore, this system does not provide an accurate picture of the financial need that exists among our students and their families.

Additionally, this is a tedious and time consuming process for school nutrition programs of distributing applications, reminding parents to fill them out and submit it by a certain deadline, reviewing those applications for approval or not, informing the family of the decision, checking the online Direct Certification list frequently, and keeping extensive records. Implementing this task lies squarely in the hands of the school nutrition program. We are responsible for the collection and safe keeping of this highly confidential information. And yet, it is regularly sought after for determining all sorts of funding for public education (Title funds, E rates, grants, fee waivers SAT's and Advanced Placement tests, ect.).

Please support this bill. It is time to rethink how schools collect the economic status of our students' families in a way that is more accurate and less dependent on a system that places vulnerable families in the most uncomfortable and unnecessary position of revealing their personal finances. Let Maine set a new standard that other states will want to copy.

Thank you Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs for your time and commitment to Maine's children. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions that I may help answer.

Martha Poliquin, Falmouth Schools Nutrition Director, Falmouth Public Schools