

**Testimony of STEPHANIE CESARIO, MAINE FARM TO SCHOOL NETWORK**  
**In Support of LD LD 636: An Act to Encourage the Purchase of Local Foods for Public Schools**

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is STEPHANIE CESARIO. I am a resident of FREEPORT and the NETWORK COORDINATOR with MAINE FARM TO SCHOOL NETWORK at HEALTHY COMMUNITIES OF THE CAPITAL AREA BASED IN GARDINER MAINE and working statewide to support the Maine local food system and public health nutrition

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 636 on behalf of the Maine Farm to School Network. I want to thank the bill sponsors for your commitment to addressing childhood food security and farmer livelihoods in Maine.

*Maine Farm to School Network consists of 20 statewide farm to school leaders such as school nutrition directors, producer grounds, Dept. of Ag, Dept. of Ed., Cooperative Extension, and more. MFSN supported the organizing of a statewide food system event called the Maine Food Convergence, where from 2020-2021 we convened 300 Maine local foods stakeholders to strategize together on increasing markets for Maine farms and fishermen and addressing food insecurity in Maine, among other statewide issues. Through a survey of 400 Maine food system organizers, regionally-focused dialogues of 200 stakeholders across the state, and virtual strategic planning with 300 stakeholders, increasing the breadth & depth of state policy incentives to support farm to institution emerged as one of 4 top actions for moving the needle on expanding local markets for Maine producers & fishermen. There is a great need identified across the Maine local foods community for expanded financial support to Maine institutions.*

*Why is this Local Produce Fund expansion so important in particular? School nutrition directors across Maine need support in order to prioritize Maine producers. Right now, the majority of the local produce fund dollars are left unspent, and those spent are mostly used on apples, when schools COULD be using the funds to purchase other local products such as fish, tofu, and yogurt. We need Maine institutions like schools to be investing in the Maine economy, and building community with the rural producers surrounding their schools.*

*We are grateful to live in a state with such a diversity of local producers, and our schools have the opportunity to showcase the breadth & depth of this diversity in their school nutrition programs.*

*For many Maine students, school breakfast & lunch programs are their only opportunity to taste the diversity of local Maine products. The Maine Farm to School Network wholeheartedly stands behind school nutrition programs as one of the hubs of food security, community, and economic development for Maine communities, providing equitable access to fresh local products to all students.*

*Thank you co-chairs and committee for your time and commitment to Maine's students and Maine's school nutrition programs and I am happy to answer questions and provide more info.*

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