



Testimony of Anna Korsen, Full Plates Full Potential In Support of LD 636

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Anna Korsen, Director of Advocacy with Full Plates Full Potential.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 636. I want to thank Senator Vitelli and the bill co-sponsors for your commitment to addressing childhood hunger in Maine.

Full Plates Full Potential is a statewide nonprofit organization on a mission to end child hunger in Maine. We do our work by breaking down barriers to food access and increasing participation in school meals. Supporting school nutrition programs to source local foods to serve in the cafeteria is a key part of this work. However, school nutrition programs struggle with the cost of local food, as well as the process to source locally, and often lack the staffing capacity and equipment to process that food. To address some of these challenges, the Local Produce Fund was established almost a decade ago, but was never fully funded until the 129th Maine Legislature took action and dedicated ongoing state funds to support farm to school efforts.

While the Local Produce Fund can support schools to source locally, we have learned that there are still limitations to the fund. In partnership with Maine DOE, FoodCorps Maine, Maine School Nutrition Association, and the Maine Farm to School Network, we surveyed the field to learn more about the limitations of the fund and how it could be improved. LD 636 reflects those learnings and would make great strides in supporting Maine schools to provide more local food to students.

Through the survey, Maine school nutrition programs reported that they would spend more on local products if they were able to receive more in reimbursements since local products tend to be more expensive. School districts face many challenges in sourcing local food directly from farmers, and reported that they would be more likely to purchase locally if they could also do so from their contracted food service distributor. School nutrition programs also reported that expanding the products that can be purchased and reimbursed through the fund beyond only produce to include value-added dairy and protein would make it more likely that they would use the fund, since many schools already purchase these products at great cost to their program and would benefit from the reimbursement. Additionally, having access to local produce that has been peeled, chopped, and frozen would help expand school nutrition staff's capacity to serve local foods. If these changes are put into statute, there will be implementation work to do to ensure that schools take advantage of the fund. This work will include strengthening existing farm to school relationships, nurturing new relationships, and creating systems to support farm to school activity in the state.

I urge the committee to support LD 636, this bill is important for Maine students, Maine schools, and Maine agriculture. Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions.

Anna Korsen
Director of Advocacy, Full Plates Full Potential

