



*Senator Eloise Vitelli
Senate Majority Leader
3 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0003
Office (207) 287-1515
Home (207) 443-4660*

***Testimony of Sen. Eloise Vitelli introducing
LD 636, "An Act To Encourage the Purchase of Local Foods for Public Schools"
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
March 24, 2021***

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Eloise Vitelli, and I represent Senate District 23, which includes all of Sagadahoc County and the Town of Dresden in Lincoln County. I am before you today to introduce LD 636, An Act To Encourage the Purchase of Local Foods for Public Schools.

The Local Produce Fund, which has actually existed for many years, was first funded by a bill of mine in the 129th Legislature. The Local Produce Fund incentivizes schools to purchase produce and other minimally-processed foods from local farmers and producers by matching one dollar for every three dollars a school administrative unit spends on qualifying local foods. It's an arrangement that benefits our local farmers, our schools, our planet and our students, who are getting healthy, nutritious food grown close to home.

This bill will broaden the eligibility criteria for the Local Produce Program to further benefit those stakeholders. Our local farmers and producers not only grow delicious produce; they can help supply our schools with value-added dairy and protein sources, too. This includes yogurt, fish, eggs, meat, tofu and other items that round out our children's school meals. Appropriately, this bill would change the name of the Local Produce Fund to the Local Foods Fund.

One roadblock schools face in taking full advantage of this program is that it requires food to be purchased directly from farmers. However, this doesn't necessarily reflect the way our schools or our farmers do business. Schools often do much of their purchasing through food service distributors, so making these purchases eligible will go a long way towards making it easier for more schools to participate.

We also heard from schools about some other changes that would encourage higher participation in the Local Foods Program. While eligible foods must still be minimally-processed, explicitly including peeled, chopped, refrigerated and frozen products in that definition will open up possibilities for schools with limited kitchen capacity. Most important, raising the ceiling on the amount of reimbursement funds a school can receive from the fund, from \$7,500 to \$10,000, will incentivize more purchase of local foods without impacting Maine's budget.

This pandemic has been hard on our schools and our students, many of whom have continued relying on school meals to get nutrition even when learning from home. The pandemic has also disrupted the supply chain for many of our local farmers, who had to find creative ways to get their products to market. The Local Foods Fund brings these two groups together to find a solution that works for everyone.

Thank you for your time, and for your consideration of this bill. I'm happy to take any questions.