

**Testimony of Mary Emerson, Westbrook School Department
In Support of LD 961**

**An Act To Provide Equity in Access to Applications for the National School Lunch Program
and School Breakfast Program**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Mary Emerson. I am a resident of Kennebunk and the School Nutrition Director for the Westbrook School Department.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 961. I want to thank the bill sponsors for your commitment to addressing childhood hunger in Maine by making the process for applying for free & reduced meals benefits easier for Maine families.

The online meals application allows families to complete the application assuring the parent/guardian the application reaches the meals director in strict compliance with confidentiality. Since the families enter all the numbers in the application there is no handwriting judgements to be made on our end in the approval of the application. We are not relying on the students to actually return the application - which increases our response rate significantly. The cost of purchasing the online application from my point of sale vendor was almost \$2000 - which I would much rather use to purchase food for my students.

In Westbrook about 20% of our student population qualifies for English Language Learners so having the application available online in their native language helps with families completing the application.

The largest reason I strongly support the online application is to reach our target population - the families that are truly struggling - the working poor. A student with a household income of 130% of the federal poverty threshold is eligible for free lunch, whereas a student with a household income of 130-185% of the federal poverty threshold is eligible for reduced lunch status. It is not uncommon for families in this income bracket to be holding more than one job while raising their children. The more convenient we can make applying for benefits the better our response rate. We know that those struggling families that don't apply are at higher risk of accumulating unpaid meal debt and the district's economic status is not appropriately reflected in the funding formula for education.

In closing I encourage your strong support of LD 961 to support Maine families in accessing meal benefits for their students. Thank you Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. I am happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have.

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