



Testimony of Melissa Hackett,
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Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
LD 961, An Act To Provide Equity in Access to Applications for the National School Lunch Program and School
Breakfast Program
April 26, 2021

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Melissa Hackett, and I am offering testimony in support of LD 961, on behalf of the Maine Children's Alliance, a statewide, nonpartisan, research, and advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound policies and best practices that improve the lives of Maine's children, youth, and families.

It is hard to learn on an empty stomach. And that is particularly true for children who go through school hungry. Both adults and children have limited cognitive bandwidth, and people tend to spend their mental energy on resources they lack. So, hungry children focus on food, which can lead to neglect in other areas, such as schoolwork. Too many of Maine's children live in food insecure households, which has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. A survey conducted in March indicated that 10 percent of households with children sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat.¹

Fortunately, we have ways to address this through free and reduced-price meals in school, which are also federally reimbursed. These programs can go a long way in addressing the nutritional needs of children in low-income households who experience food insecurity as a barrier to their ability to focus on learning.

Unfortunately, enrollment in these programs critical to addressing child hunger rely on paperwork sent home to parents, to be filled out and returned, to be eligible. By providing an online application option, we would be offering greater access for parents, more privacy of information, less stigma with providing information, and more accurate results. By opening the process to offer more ways to apply, we can increase the number of students who enroll and qualify for free and reduced-price school meals.

The Department of Education has funding for schools to contract with a software company for online applications. Expanding this to a statewide online application, available to all families at a single link, would make the application process more accessible and create greater equity in access.

Through passage of LD 961, we can both increase participation in federally reimbursed school meals and save local school districts money by creating a more efficient system for student eligibility. By increasing opportunities for parents to complete the free and reduced meals application for their children to qualify, we can increase participation in the programs, and take one more important step toward eliminating cost as a

¹ KIDS COUNT Data Center, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/10882-households-with-children-that-sometimes-or-often-did-not-have-enough-food-to-eat-in-the-past-week?loc=21&loct=2#detailed/2/21/false/2080,2079,2078,2077,2076,2047,2042,2034,2033,2032/any/21160>

barrier to children being able to get nutritious school meals. Making sure no child is struggling with hunger while trying to learn in school, will ensure more Maine children can achieve both health and academic success, which we all benefit from in the form of a strong next generation of Mainers.

Thank you.