



**Testimony of Anna Korsen, Full Plates Full Potential
In Support of LD 961**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Anna Korsen and I'm the Director of Advocacy with Full Plates Full Potential, a statewide non-profit working to end childhood food insecurity in Maine by strengthening and expanding child nutrition programs.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 961. I want to thank Representative Millett and the bill's cosponsors for their commitment to Maine's children.

School meal applications are a critical data collection tool for schools to ensure that they can provide adequate support and resources for their students. They are also the ticket for many Maine students to receive free meals at school. For some kids, school meals are the only reliable source of nutrition they have. Despite their importance, the current system of collecting school meal applications is inherently flawed and every year school districts struggle to collect them from families. Earlier this school year, 17,000 applications were not returned by previously eligible students. Organizations that partner with schools, like Full Plates, try to help promote school meal applications but struggle to do so due to the disjointed approach taken across our state. There is not one way for families to complete and return applications, and so outreach campaigns are not very effective.

During the 129th legislative session, Maine took steps to make school meal applications more accessible by dedicating funding to provide an online application available to any Maine school district free of charge. Currently, 70 districts are utilizing the state funded online application option. However, more than half of all Maine school districts do not use this software and while some of them pay for their own online application, other school districts do not have an option for families to apply online. Maine DOE does provide a downloadable version of the school meal application on their website, but that must be downloaded, printed, and returned to a school. We must ensure that all families have access to an online option, and right now, only families in districts that have an online application have the option to apply for school meal benefits online. Today, we have the opportunity to make an online school meal application available to every family across the state. Oregon has successfully implemented this solution and their online application can be accessed [here](#).

LD 961 directs the DOE to provide an online school meal application accessible by a link on their publicly available website and easily translated into multiple languages. The online application link can also be displayed on school district's websites. The online application would collect data from any family in Maine and that data would be sent to the corresponding school district to be processed. A family's income information would only be available to view by the authorized administrator in their school district, ensuring that the data is kept confidential.



Knowing that the state currently contracts with Nutri-Link Technologies and that 70 school districts utilize Nutri-Link's online application software, we reached out to them with an informational request to see if it would be possible to expand their existing services to be available to districts and families across the state. We were pleased to learn that this was possible, and that the ease of doing so would benefit both the state and school districts. We learned that the process for a school district to accept family income data from the online application could be as simple as receiving a secure excel spreadsheet via email. Here is what they shared with us:

Nutri-Link Technologies, Inc. provides an Internet-based application for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program called Nutri-Cloud. Nutri-Cloud is a secure hosted service that provides parents and guardians an online free and reduced application along with an easy-to-use online interface for school district administrators to review and export eligibility determination information.

Parent or guardian access to the online free and reduced application entry is an easy-to-follow wizard, which walks them through the process of completing a F&R Lunch Application, and ensures each requirement is properly completed. Applications are automatically received into NutriCloud within 10 minutes of completing the online application. NutriCloud will attempt to automatically match the students on the application with the students from the F&R or SIS system. If a successful match is made, and there are no other issues with the application, it will be marked as processed, ready for submission to the F&R system. If no successful match is made, or if there are other issues, then the application will be held for further review.

Making Free and Reduced Applications more accessible

We currently have the ability to provide a link to the Online Application portal, to any district interested in using Nutri-Cloud, including adding a link on the Maine Department of Education / Child Nutrition website allowing parents easier access for applying. The link would make it easy for a parent to simply choose the District their child attends, and then begin applying. Those applications would be downloaded to the applicable district for processing. As an even bigger push for capturing more students, we could discuss making a Back to School Video that each district could send to their local News agency to run for their Back to School series.

CEP / Household Income Surveys

For those schools currently on or contemplating moving to CEP/Household Income Surveys and to continue to capture low economically challenged numbers, it is an easy application transition to our Nutri-Income solution where a similar Online wizard form is used to capture the household income survey information. These numbers are then used for the many other Federally funded programs that rely on F&R data.



In closing, I urge the committee to take this necessary action to ensure that all families in Maine have equitable access to apply online for critical school meal benefits. This is important for families, students, and school districts. Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions you have.

Anna Korsen, Director of Advocacy, Full Plates Full Potential