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AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: MAINE RELAY 711

Rebecca Millett

P.O. Box 6288

Cape Elizabeth, ME 04107

Residence: (207) 415 - 3770

Rebecca.Millett@legislature.maine.gov

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Testimony of Rep. Rebecca Millett presenting
LD 961, An Act To Provide Equity in Access to Applications for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and esteemed colleagues on the Committee of Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Rebecca Millett and I represent House District 30 which is most of Cape Elizabeth. I am presenting **LD 961, An Act To Provide Equity in Access to Applications for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.**

The 130th legislative session has shown that in general the public can gain wider access to their government at work when online. This is a reflection that, in the current age, we as a society do the majority of our business online. In today's world, when parents are asked to send information to their local school in order to enroll their children in school meals, they should be able to submit that information using an online application. Right now, some families in Maine have access to an online application for school meals, but many families do not. LD 961 is an attempt to remedy that inequity.

Every year, in order for eligible students to receive free or reduced-price meals at school, families must report their income data by way of a school meal benefit application form. Paper forms are sent home in backpacks or mailed to families as one small piece of a back-to-school packet full of information and paperwork. Understandably, these forms often get lost in the shuffle and are not returned. Additionally, despite the confidential approach taken by all schools, families living in small Maine communities may feel shame in sharing their income with school administrators as they could be neighbors. Schools across our state struggle to collect these forms year after year, and the consequences of this are wide reaching. When a potentially eligible student doesn't return their form, they may not be able to receive meals at no charge, leading to school meal debt accruing as every Maine school feeds children regardless of their ability to pay.

In 2019, Maine School Management Association surveyed school districts and 18 reported a total of \$330,000 in school meal debt. This debt must be reconciled, often by taxpayers. It also has implications for the school district which relies on free and reduced eligibility numbers to receive federal funds to support other meal programs like the Summer Food Service Program and At-Risk Afterschool Meals. This also impacts the district's ability to secure federal funding to support important educational programs and ensure adequate resources are available to meet the needs of their students. Earlier this school year, Maine DOE reported 17,000 missing applications from previously eligible students.

Maine has taken important steps to support schools and families to collect and return these important forms. In the 129th Legislature, we worked together to secure funding so that the DOE could provide an

online school meal benefit application free of charge for school districts to use. Seventy schools have implemented this, meaning better access to these important forms for families in their district. However, more than half of all school districts are not using this application software that is available at no charge. Some have their own online application, but many do not have an online option for families. Too many Maine families lack access to an online application, and there is no easy way to communicate to families on a statewide basis about how to obtain free meals for their children at school. This has negative implications for the family, the student, and their school.

Now we must take further action to ensure equity in access to online applications for all Maine families and students. LD 961 would expand the current state funded online application to be available to all Maine families and accepted by all school districts. It would require the DOE to have a link to the application on their website accessible by all Maine families to fill out, and the data would then be transferred confidentially to the appropriate school district. A statewide online application, available to all families at a single URL, would allow for easy access to the application and would improve communication with families about filling out the application. There could then be a statewide marketing campaign to inform parents about the ease of applying for school meals and everyone could be directed to one simple website for the application.

Today you will hear from a school district that currently uses the available state funded online application software and how it has helped their efforts to collect applications. You will also hear from local non-profit organizations about their challenges in conducting outreach campaigns to families to encourage school meal benefit application return because of the disjointed nature of Maine's current approach. Maine schools and families urgently need a solution to ensure school meal applications are widely accessible and returned to school districts.

Thank you for your consideration and I'm happy to answer questions.

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

Be it enacted by the People of the State of Maine as follows:

Sec. 1. 20-A MRSA §6601-A, as amended by PL 2019, c. 480, §1, is further amended to read:

§6601-A. Free or reduced-price school meals; Internet-based school meal applications

The department shall contract for the development and implementation of an Internet-based application for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program under 7 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 210 and the School Breakfast Program under 7 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 220. The department shall make available to public schools the Internet-based application for free or reduced-price meals developed under this section on the department's publicly accessible website. The department shall endeavor to provide the Internet-based application in various languages reflecting the student population of public schools in the State. A public school may make the Internet-based application available for school meal applications on the public school's publicly accessible website. ~~If a public school implements the Internet-based application process under this section, the~~ All public school schools shall continue to distribute paper applications for school meals to all students. A public school ~~implementing the Internet-based application~~ is solely responsible for processing that school's online applications. Data submitted through the Internet-based application may not be visible to the department and must be transmitted directly to the applicable public school. All public schools must accept data submitted through the Internet-based application.