

TESTIMONY

In favor of
LD 1679, An Act To Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals

**Dan Allen, Professional Development Director, Maine Education Association
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing**

May 19, 2021

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and other esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Daniel Allen, and I am the Instruction and Professional Development director for the Maine Education Association (MEA) which represents 24,000 teachers, education support professionals, and retired educators across Maine.

I am here to testify in support of LD 1679, An Act To Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals.

No one wants to see a child go hungry and Maine's school nutrition programs work very hard to see that our students get the food they need each school day. Feeding our neediest students has become even more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic despite a waiver from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that allowed children ages 18 and younger to receive breakfast and lunch at no cost. Maine schools did their very best to reach and feed as many students as possible this year and we can be proud of the school nutrition personnel who have provided those meals and the transportation employees who often delivered those meals to students while schools were closed or students were quarantined.

Now that we seem to be moving towards a more normal school year, reaching students with those meals will be easier, but funding them will still be necessary. The economic impact of the pandemic has highlighted the immense need we have in Maine to support food-insecure families and students. While the federal government's waiver has been extended through the coming school year allowing Maine to continue to provide these meals, LD 1679 will go even further by creating permanent supports for hungry Maine students. Our current access to full federal funding for these programs makes it a great time to implement such a bill. That funding may not always be there, but we believe we must still meet the need and it would be unwise to depend only on the will of the current administration.

As a former teacher from a school that typically has a free and reduced lunch rate above 60%, I have personal experience with the impact of hunger on student learning. Hungry students are often not all that interested in what Shakespeare has to say about life and whether or not their papers are properly

punctuated. According to the [Food Research and Action Center \(FRAC\)](#), “School meals programs are linked with improvements in the classroom. Students who participate in school breakfast programs have improved attendance, behavior, academic performance, and academic achievement as well as decreased tardiness, based on decades of research on the topic.” And hunger is often only one of several issues related to poverty that students must manage and that the teacher, in turn, must factor into their planning. FRAC also noted that, improvements in student behavior have been observed well with out-of-school suspension rates falling substantially after the implementation of a school-wide fully funded nutrition program.

Students who are getting regular nutritious meals are more likely to be focused in class and are less likely to act out. The impact of hunger often results in compounding problems that require multiple school resources, problems that could have been avoided by simply providing a school meal to a student.

Finally, we think it is important to address the very real issue of shame. Few families and fewer students, once they reach high school, are rushing forward to claim the distinction of being among the poor. We would probably all agree that there is no shame in being poor. That is a fine sentiment, but not a reality for many of those who are poor. Whether it is appropriate or not to feel that way, many of our students and families experience the shame of living in poverty every day and they do not want to willingly add to that by asking for what appears to be a handout from their schools. The percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch often declines dramatically at the high school level, not because poverty magically disappears after the 8th grade, but because those students are more acutely aware of their place in society.

LD 1679 would help reduce the stigma attached to receiving free and reduced lunch by providing meals to all students free of charge whether or not they qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

This, of course, will cost money if the federal government decides to end its support for school meals under the current waiver. LD 1679 mitigates the potential costs to the districts by requiring the state to pay the difference between the federal reimbursement for a free lunch or breakfast for each student whether or not they qualify for the reduced-meal program. Even so, we understand that this will lead to increased costs – at least on paper - for the state and for Maine school districts if the federal government ends the current program. Despite this, we believe the costs are outweighed by the benefits of such a program.

All students benefit from a strong school meal program, but those who experience food insecurity are provided a degree of equity that will allow them to learn and grow with their peers that might not otherwise have been available.

For these reasons, the MEA encourages you to vote “ought to pass” on LD 1679.