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TESTIMONY REGARDING

L.D. 1679

AN ACT TO ADDRESS STUDENT HUNGER THROUGH EXPANDING ACCESS TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Steven Bailey, executive director of Maine School Management Association, testifying on behalf of the legislative committees of the Maine School Boards Association and Maine School Superintendents Association in support of L.D. 1679.

School Boards and superintendents support strong breakfast, lunch and, where possible, after-school food programs because we know schools are a vital source of nutrition for many of our students. During the height of the pandemic we applauded the incredible work food service staff and bus drivers did together to get meals out to children and families.

Many of us have discussed the goal of making the food free for everyone to take away any stigma around the free-and-reduced lunch program. We would like to focus on feeding children instead of chasing money or determining eligibility based on various income guidelines.

One issue we have is the bill would cover the cost of food, but it does not address the cost of labor for our employees who prepare and serve meals. In reality, school lunch programs have typically lost money and our concern is we will lose more – a situation that will have to be addressed in the local school budget.

An additional concern is we use the free-and-reduced lunch form as a benchmark of poverty in a school district and that designation determines eligibility for Title I funding and other federal grant programs. One example is E-Rate, which is a major revenue source for keeping technology infrastructure updated in our schools. We will have to develop some alternative way of collecting data that will meet federal eligibility guidelines because these programs support student learning in a broad variety of ways.