



## Testimony of John Bennett, Oakhurst Dairy in Support of LD 1679

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is John Bennett—I am a resident of Portland and the President of Oakhurst Dairy.

Today, I'm submitting my testimony in support of *LD 1679: An Act to Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals*.

In 100 years of operation, Oakhurst has become synonymous with “The Natural Goodness of Maine” by offering customers the freshest products every day, supporting the environment, and working alongside Maine family farms, including both independent and DFA co-op members, to source and process milk weekly. Oakhurst is also passionate about Giving Goodness back to local communities and helping Maine kids lead healthy active lives. As a lifelong Mainer and businessman in the state, I care deeply about Maine’s future which means ensuring our children are allowed to grow healthy and have success in school.

When the Oakhurst team learned that Maine has the highest rate of childhood food insecurity in New England, we decided that we had to do something about it. In 2019, Oakhurst launched a partnership with Full Plates Full Potential –the Oakhurst After School meal grant program. We made a \$300,000 investment to support the expansion of Maine’s after school meal programs. No child should go to bed hungry and for too many kids in our state, school lunch is their last meal of the day.

While at least 80,000 students across Maine are eligible for free breakfast and lunch at school, too many of those students face barriers to accessing the critical nutrition they need. Too often, [the stigma and shame surrounding school meals prevents a child from eating](#), regardless of how hungry they are. [A recent study found that when all children are offered a meal at no charge, more children participate in school meal programs, especially those that need them the most.](#)

Maine now has the opportunity to invest in our future in a way that has far reaching benefits. Making sure that all children have access to nutrition at school is a wise and worthy investment that I’m sure will result in incredible returns. Returns like [reduced food insecurity](#), [improved behavior in school](#), [better test scores](#), [improved health outcomes](#), and a better chance at success for our most precious resource: Maine’s children.

In closing, I, on behalf of everyone at Oakhurst, urge the committee to take this important step and vote in support of LD 1679. Thank you for your time and consideration.

John Bennett  
President, Oakhurst Dairy