

Testimony of LD 1679, MAINE FARM TO SCHOOL NETWORK 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 Stephanie Cesario. I am a resident of Freeport and work as the Maine Farm to School Network (MFSN) Coordinator at Healthy Communities of the Capital Area, a public health organization serving Kennebec county and statewide. Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 1679. I want to thank the bill sponsors for your commitment to addressing childhood hunger in Maine.

MFSN is a statewide network of local food, school nutrition, agriculture education, and school garden advocates across Maine working to increase Maine-grown food in Maine schools. School nutrition directors in Maine that lead this network are eager to be source from Maine farmers, but the current model of tiered meal cost paperwork is a significant burden to increasing their local purchasing for their cafeterias.

For institutional food service, the two biggest barriers to offering local foods are *time* and *money*. Local foods can be more expensive and time consuming to procure and process when compared to processed products. Even though many school nutrition programs want to incorporate more Maine-grown foods in their menus, it's often not a viable option through the current tiered (paid/reduced/free) school meals model.

School Meals for All will streamline and strengthen school nutrition programs by eliminating the time-intensive administrative burden of collecting school meal applications and chasing down unpaid school lunch "debt." More time will free up school nutrition staff to focus on what's really important: feeding kids nutritious, high quality meals, while supporting the Maine economy.

School nutrition programs will have more money to spend on local foods if a School Meals for All program is adopted. Schools receive reimbursement for every meal that is served, and if all meals are served at no charge, that will result in an uptick in participation by students and therefore more money going back into the school nutrition programs to spend on local food, which directly benefits the Maine economy. There is already a passed bill to expand Maine's Local Produce Fund (LD 636: An Act to Encourage the Purchase of Local Foods for Public Schools) and several technical assistance organizations in Maine to support school nutrition professionals to grow their local procurement.

As school meal advocates, we often hear that we must rely on the federal government to initiate School Meals for All. Through the past 120 years of grassroots advocacy for free school meals across the nation, we continue to see that this will not happen at the federal level and is therefore up to our state and our local communities to feed our children. Our neighboring states are already on-board; earlier this month the Vermont Senate approved to a bill that would bring Universal School Breakfast to all Vermont schools by 2022, and the Senate also committed to a path to providing full Universal School Meals (breakfast and lunch) to all public school students by funding a task force to develop a plan to provide universal lunch by the 2026-27 school year.

If Maine moves towards School Meals for All, Maine farms and fisheries will gain expanded market channels in over 200 school districts in Maine that serve hundreds of thousands of school meals every day. School Meals for All will be a win for Maine students, Maine farmers and fisheries, and Maine schools.

Thank you for your time and commitment to Maine's children and I am happy to answer any questions you have.

Stephanie Cesario
Maine Farm to School Network Coordinator
Healthy Communities of the Capital Area
Gardiner, Maine
s.cesario@hccame.org