

An Act to Address Student Hunger through a Universal Free School Meals Program

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

My name is Colleen Donlan and I live in Portland. On behalf of Food Fuels Learning, I am testifying in support of LD 1679, An Act to Address Student Hunger through a Universal Free School Meals Program.

The Food Fuels Learning Network, a project of the Cumberland County Food Security Council, believes all students have the right to nutritious, culturally appropriate food that enables them to attain their full potential. Recognizing the importance of school meals for students' health and readiness to learn, we strongly support LD 1679.

Maine could be the first state to guarantee children the right to free meals at school. While COVID-19 has increased the vulnerability of children to food insecurity in our state, child hunger has been a longstanding issue in Maine and will persist beyond this pandemic if we do not act. In Portland, almost half of public school students are eligible for free meals, meaning that their family's income is at or below 130% of the poverty line. And yet, due to the current method of collecting family income data, the USDA income guidelines, and the deep stigma attached to accessing subsidized school meals, the National School Lunch Program never fully meets the need. Universal meals would eliminate burdensome paperwork and normalize school meals as a free and zero-barrier service, like riding the school bus or using school internet.

This school year, schools across the nation have been providing students with meals at no charge in response to the pandemic emergency. But the child hunger emergency is not over. LD 1679 presents an opportunity to provide consistency, stability, and collective community care for Maine children at risk of hunger, investing in their future and the future of our state.