

Testimony of Mary Emerson, MS,RD/LD,SNS, Westbrook School Department 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 Mary Emerson, I am a resident of Kennebunk, the School Nutrition Director with the Westbrook School Department. I am the current secretary of Maine School Nutrition Association and the State Regulatory Specialist for the Maine Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 1679: An Act to Address Student Hunger by Expanding Access to Free School Meals. I want to thank the bill sponsors for your commitment to addressing childhood hunger in Maine.

The Westbrook School Department has been diligently working on addressing diversity, equity & inclusion. Twenty percent of our students identify as english as a second language. In Westbrook roughly two out of three students qualify for free & reduced meals. We are working on diversifying our meal offerings to be more representative of all of our students. We strongly support universal meals as a part of our commitment for diversity, equity & inclusion. To go back to charging our middle and high school students for meals SY 23 will be the equivalent of taking a huge step backwards in our progress in addressing the inequities in our community.

Universal meals support the learning process. Meals are as important as the school buses that get the student to school. Nutritious food is what brings the student's attention to the class! Research has consistently shown that hungry students simply do not learn!! An investment in universal meals is an investment in education. Our lunchrooms are the largest classrooms and provide students a lab where they can make healthy food choices that will promote healthy eating habits in the future. Healthy students are more likely to become healthy adults.

In order to protect students' confidentiality around lunch status we have to use expensive point of sales computer systems where all students use their individual lunch numbers. This requires an employee to man the computer. This person on each lunch line could be better utilized in serving food to the students and promoting more scratch cooking in our kitchens. These computer systems are meant to eliminate the stigma around free & reduced meals. This stigma is still there although the process is confidential. The only thing that can end the stigma being tied to meals is to have universal meals.

Universal meals will benefit all students in Maine. Many Maine families with incomes above 185% of the poverty level who do not qualify for free & reduced meals have to make choices on which bills they pay with each paycheck. Since schools do not charge interest our bill is likely to be moved to the bottom of the stack. Returning to the previous system of charging for meals will only increase unpaid meal debt. Unpaid meal debt falls back to the taxpayers of the municipalities having to make decisions between funding educational programs and making the school nutrition program whole. Please stop this negative cycle and pass universal meals for all Maine students.

Mary Emerson - Westbrook School Department