

Testimony of Tina Fabian, RSU #03 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 Tina Fabian. I am a resident of Fairfield and the School Nutrition Director with RSU #3 serving Brooks, Freedom, Jackson, Knox, Liberty, Monroe, Montville, Thorndike, Troy, Unity and Waldo.

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.

I have worked in school nutrition for 21 years. In those 21 years I have seen many changes in school nutrition. We have seen meal pattern changes in both breakfast and lunch, portion sizes change, calorie counting, reduced sodium levels, minimum protein requirements, grain requirements, vegetable sub groups, restrictions on what can be sold as al-a-cart snacks, lunch shaming, plus many more operating changes. The one constant through all of these years has remained the same; we still have hungry children coming to school. This is my 4th year as the School Nutrition Director for RSU 3, located in Waldo County. The school district I work in has a very high rate of poverty and we have provided free meals for our students since 2016 by participating in the Community Eligibility Program and Provision II. Our students are very fortunate to attend school in a district that supports Universal Free Meals for everyone and I urge you to support Universal Free Meals for every student regardless of income eligibility.

Maine's food crisis is real. Almost half of Maine students qualify for free and reduced price school meals. As a school nutrition director, I want to feed every child a nutritious meal every day. I see the effects that hunger is having in my community. In the fall of 2019, I received a phone call from a mom that was upset because she was new to the district and her daughter told her that she was eating breakfast and lunch at school every day. This mom was furious that we would allow her daughter to eat without having money to pay for it and she didn't know when she would be able to pay her daughter's debt but wanted to make it clear that her daughter was not allowed to eat meals at school as she could not afford to pay for those meals. When I explained to this parent that all children in our school district eat for free and she did not owe any money she was relieved and extremely thankful. It is sad to know that the cost of a school meal is a huge debt to some families and the difference between putting gas in your vehicle to drive to work or paying for school lunch.

Students that attend public school receive free transportation, a free education which includes books and technology equipment to succeed, they participate in drama, chorus, athletics, etc. all for free. So, why do we fund free public education and extra-curricular activities for all kids and not free meals? School meals are an essential part of the school day. We all know the saying "A hungry child can't learn". Hunger insecurity is alive and growing in America. Thankfully, USDA approved waivers to school nutrition programs across the country to provide free meals to all students during the pandemic. We need your support to continue providing free meals to all children. Let's put our money where our values are to support the children of Maine!

Many children live in homes with parents that are battling addictions to drugs and alcohol. For these children, school meals are essential for them to survive. They do not have parents to fill out a meal application for them to qualify for free meals, they do not have parents to go to the grocery store and buy food for them to pack lunch to bring to school, they do not come home from school to a snack when they get off the bus until dinner is ready. Many of these children rely on breakfast and lunch at school to hold them over until the next day of school. If they are lucky, they have a food school pantry to send them home with food to get them through the weekend or school vacation week. This is the new reality for many of our children. As times have changed, society has changed. No longer do we have the "nuclear family". Both parents are working, families are split, children are living in multi-family homes, living with relatives other than parents, etc. When students come to school, we, as

school professionals are charged with not only providing them with a high-quality education, but doing more to support their basic needs. With that in mind and knowing what our students are dealing with outside of academic learning, having to worry about a healthy meal should be the last of their worries. Students should be able to come to school knowing they are going to be fed, without the fear of having money for the meals.

Sadly, this is our reality, which is why I urge you to support Universal Free Meals for all students regardless of income eligibility. Thank you for taking the time to listen to me today. Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Tina M. Fabian
School Nutrition Director, RSU #3
tfabian@rsu3.org
207-568-4607