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Before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee

Support for LD 1679: An Act to Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals
May 20, 2021

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education committee. My name is Melissa Hackett, and I am offering support for LD 1679, An Act to Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals, on behalf of the Maine Children's Alliance, a statewide research and advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound public policies to improve the lives of children, youth, and families in Maine.

This legislation is about equity and opportunity. Too many children in our state grow up experiencing hunger or food insecurity,¹ not knowing when they will have their next meal. Nationally, BIPOC children are more likely to live in poverty, and to experience food insecurity.² We have the opportunity now to acknowledge the inequities in the current system of charging students for school meals, and the chance to lead on this issue by making school meals free for all students across Maine.

In schools, and in policy discussions around education, we work to ensure students' academic success. Increasingly, we are also making investments that recognize the needs of the whole child in creating the conditions for children to thrive at school. This includes schools coordinating to provide health services like dental cleanings, developmental screenings, and mental and behavioral health supports. We have made these investments, because we recognize the important role schools play as a hub for resources that meet the comprehensive needs of children and reduce barriers to participation in these critical services. Providing a free breakfast and lunch at school is a logical step as part of that investment, and one that is long overdue.

Children do not have to pay to get a pencil or textbook for their reading and writing when they are at school. Buses pickup and drop off children, so transportation is not a barrier to their attendance. And when children are in school during regular mealtimes, they should not be expected to pay to eat.

Numerous studies show us how important nutrition and hunger are to learning, and to the overall health and well-being of children.³ When they get school meals, children's learning, behavior, and health are all improved. Yet this should come as no surprise. Children cannot be expected to focus on learning

¹ <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/maine>

² <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/blog/the-universal-free-school-meal-experiment/>

³ https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning_FNL.pdf

when they are hungry. And it is impossible for them to grow and develop in healthy ways when they regularly experience hunger and food insecurity.

Additionally, the current system for providing free meals to qualifying students is cumbersome, creates stigma, and depresses participation.⁴ School nutrition directors rely on students taking home paperwork to be filled out each school year – just one of many forms parents have to sift through - only some of which will be returned. Parents also experience stigma and concerns about privacy in completing and returning these forms.

The current system also creates an additional burden for school nutrition directors, who are forced into the role of debt collectors when children get meals they cannot pay for. When meal debts cannot be recovered from families, school districts assume that debt – often in the thousands and tens of thousands of dollars - placing them in impossible budget situations.⁵ This reinforces regional inequities, with some districts able to absorb the financial burden, while others simply don't have the resources to.

Like many things, the pandemic has highlighted how fragile food security is for Maine children and families, and how critical a role school meals play in meeting that need.⁶ This year, with many schools closed to in-person instruction, or operating in hybrid models, schools have juggled the logistics of meal drop-offs to homes or pickup times at schools. Administrators and nutrition directors know it is simply not an option not to feed their students. Also recognizing the need, the USDA made school meals free for all students for both this school year and next.⁷

In the case of school meals, we have made it more difficult than it needs to be to provide children with what they need to be successful in school and beyond. We are operating a system of feeding children at school complicated by red tape for parents and nutrition directors, with stigma for students, and financially burdensome for school districts. Thankfully, it is within our power to correct this. As a state, we must recognize the critical role food security plays in the health, well-being, and academic success of our students, by simplifying this service and eliminating these issues – by making school meals free for all.

Thank you.

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https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/5_News_and_Publications/4_The_Journal_of_Child_Nutrition_and_Management/Fall_2016/BarriersandAdvantagestoStudentParticipation.pdf

⁵ <https://schoolnutrition.org/news-publications/press-releases/2018/sna-survey-reveals-innovative-efforts-to-boost-consumption-curb-waste-in-school-cafeterias/>

⁶ <https://www.rwjf.org/en/blog/2020/07/to-help-recover-from-covid-19-we-need-universal-free-school-meals.html>

⁷ <https://edsources.org/2021/usda-extends-free-meals-through-next-school-year>