



Troy D. Jackson
President of the Senate

THE MAINE SENATE
130th Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Testimony in Support of LD 1679
An Act To Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals
Presented to the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
May 20, 2021

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Troy Jackson and I represent the people of northern Aroostook County in Senate District 1. I am here today to present LD 1679, "An Act To Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals."

No child should have to go to school hungry, let alone be expected to learn on an empty stomach. Yet, we know too many of our kids don't have access to reliable, nutritious food on a regular basis. It's hard not to get choked up about it.

Early on in the pandemic, a young woman in Aroostook County reached out to me weeks before she was set to graduate from high school. Over the course of twelve years, she showed up to school, put in the hard work and earned her high school diploma. At the end of the day, all that stood in the way of receiving her cap and gown was an outstanding lunch bill that she couldn't pay. Fortunately, we were able to get the issue resolved but there are too many kids like her and it doesn't have to be this way.

In Maine, we consistently have the highest rate of food insecurity in New England, with one in six children lacking access to basic nutrition. The pandemic has only made things worse. According to Full Plates, Full Potential, the number of children experiencing food insecurity is projected to increase by about 40 percent statewide in the wake of COVID-19.¹

We have to do something. When children go to school hungry, it affects their ability to focus, retain information and get ahead.² Providing free, universal school meals is an easy and effective solution. Studies show that removing the barriers to school meals leads to better outcomes, making sure our food insecure kids don't fall behind through no fault of their own.³ School meals make sure our kids get what they need early on, and it pays off. It's also just the right thing to do.

¹ feedingamericaaction.org/resources/state-by-state-resource-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/

² https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/health-academic-achievement.pdf

³ frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf

You see I remember what it's like growing up without much. There were periods of my childhood when times were really tough but my mother did everything in her power to help us scrape by. While I never qualified for free or reduced lunch, I probably should have and it probably would have made a huge difference for us.

As a lawmaker, and more importantly a parent, I want our kids to get the chance to focus on being kids — doing things like playing with their friends or learning how to add and subtract — not worrying about where their next meal will come from. Throughout the pandemic, I've watched school nutrition directors, teachers, volunteers and advocates find creative and innovative ways to make sure our kids get fed. In my district, I've seen the coolers at folks' mailboxes waiting for school meal deliveries from schools and volunteers. It has shown me what is possible when we come together around something that's so important to the future of our kids, and we shouldn't stop now.

Under this proposal, the State of Maine would contribute funding to cover the cost of paid students in the School Breakfast and National School Lunch programs, so that all students in Maine can access school meal programs without cost. Making school meals available to all students improves participation from eligible students because it takes away the shame and stigma associated with free-and-reduced lunch. Even though free-and-reduced school lunch may be the only reliable, nutritious meal a student gets during the day, many students simply don't participate to avoid the stigma.⁴ This change would ensure that students don't fall through the cracks and cut the bureaucratic red tape schools have to deal with, which could help pay for the program itself.

In a small state like Maine, we have the power to not just put a dent in childhood hunger but possibly end childhood hunger. That starts with universal school meals. No child should ever have to prove they are worthy of nutritious food, and our schools shouldn't have to go broke or jump through outrageous bureaucratic hoops just to feed them.

Universal school meals help kids, help teachers, and help the Maine farmers and producers that grow the food that feeds our children. And, it's just the right thing to do. The best teacher cannot reach, inspire or train the next generation of Maine workers and leaders if they are hungry. Let's come together as Republicans, Democrats and Independents to feed our kids. Thank you for your time. .

Sincerely,

Troy Jackson
Senate District 1
Maine Senate President

⁴ www.fordfoundation.org/just-matters/just-matters/posts/fighting-the-stigma-of-free-lunch-why-universal-free-school-lunch-is-good-for-students-schools-and-families/