



**Testimony of Anna Korsen, Full Plates Full Potential
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 Anna Korsen, Advocacy Director with Full Plates Full Potential. We're a statewide nonprofit organization working to address childhood food insecurity in Maine by expanding access to school meals and out of school time meal programs.

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 1679. I want to thank Senate President Jackson, Speaker Fecteau, and all the bill's cosponsors for their commitment to Maine's children.

Every day in schools across Maine, children are going hungry.

Maine has the highest rate of childhood food insecurity in New England with [1 in 6 children lacking access to basic nutrition on a regular basis](#). The pandemic has exasperated that trend, and more and more families are struggling to put food on the table.

Before the pandemic hit, 43% of all school age children were eligible for free meals at school. That's around 80,000 kids. [Feeding America is projecting food insecurity to increase by at least 40% statewide](#) and due to families facing economic hardship, the school meal eligibility rate in Maine is likely to increase as well. The [eligibility guidelines for school meals](#) are restrictive and if a family makes just \$1 too much, their children can't get a free meal at school. Additionally, food insecurity is complicated and is not tied to income alone. For these reasons, [many families experiencing food insecurity are not eligible for school meals](#), meaning that those households would be expected to pay for school meals they likely can't afford.

School meals are important and [improve household food insecurity for those that receive them at no charge](#). For many children in Maine, school meals are their only reliable source of nutrition. But those meals are so often wrapped up in shame, [stigma, and red tape](#) that many children don't access them. When school meals are provided as a part of the school day at no charge to all students, stigma goes away and [more kids eat](#).

School meals support learning. Studies show that school meals [enhance child development and school readiness](#) and [support learning, attendance, and behavior](#).

School meals provide critical nutrition for developing children. A recent study found that [school meals are the healthiest meals that many children have](#). Additionally, they [decrease childhood weight issues and obesity](#) and [improve child nutrition and wellness](#).



During the pandemic and continuing through next school year, the USDA has allowed school meals to be served to all children at no cost, regardless of their family's income. This has been a lifeline for so many families and we can't go back to expecting some kids to pay for school breakfast and lunch. [While the federal government is taking steps to improve and expand school nutrition programs, they are not prioritizing school meals for all.](#) If Maine doesn't take this critically important step to ensure that all kids can get meals at school after the pandemic flexibilities go away, there will be hungry children sitting in classrooms across our state once again. There will be children visiting the nurses office with hunger related headaches and stomachaches. There will be children unable to learn, participate, and concentrate during the school day. We need to ensure that our education dollars are being used well and not wasted because too many children lack access to proper nutrition.

Here's the bottom line: **a hungry child can't learn.** Childhood is complicated and food insecurity isn't tied to income alone. Children are in school all day and the most basic of needs, food, is the only part of the school day some kids are expected to pay for. Maine spends billions of dollars on public education every year, and funding dedicated to ensuring that our students have the fuel they need to learn and grow is a worthy investment. Today, we have the opportunity to do something about this crisis for Maine children and families. You have the decision-making power to make a real difference in the lives of Maine's children by making sure they can eat nutritious food at school regardless of their family's income.

Nearly 1000 people have already signed onto our [petition](#) in support of providing school meals for all Maine kids. LD 1679 is also supported by the Maine School Nutrition Association, Jobs for Maine's Graduates, Educate Maine, Maine Equal Justice, Maine Children's Alliance, Good Shepherd Food Bank, Maine Farm to Institution, the Maine Chapter of the American Heart Association, Maine Education Association, Maine Farm to School Network, FoodCorps, and the Piscataquis Regional Food Center.

In my work to address childhood food insecurity in Maine, as we work to expand access to school meals, we have learned that there is one solution that will knock down almost every barrier to food access faced by kids at school. Today you have the power to make that solution a reality for every child in Maine. I'm asking you today to support school meals at no cost for all Maine students. I urge you to vote in support of LD 1679. Maine's future depends on it.

Thank you.

Anna Korsen
Advocacy Director
Full Plates Full Potential