

Testimony of Melanie Lagasse, Valley Unified Education, Service Center
(Madawaska, MSAD 27, MSAD 33) 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 Melanie Lagasse, I am a resident of New Sweden and the Food Service Director for the Valley Unified Education Service Center serving learners in Madawaska, Fort Kent, St. Agatha, Frenchville and all of the outlying communities.

Today I am submitting testimony in support of LD 1679. I want to thank the bill sponsors for your commitment to addressing childhood hunger in Maine.

In March of 2020, our schools were closed due to Covid-19. As the Food Service Director, my first thought was how are we going to feed our learners. So many of them rely on the meals at school as their main meal for the day. I reached out to Child Nutrition and asked about bus routes. Two hours later we were given permission to deliver food using buses. After a long Sunday and Monday, the Director of Transportation and myself were able to come up with a plan. Hence the delivery of just under 262,000 meals using bus delivery. Knowing that so many of our students use our breakfast and lunch program gave us the push that we needed to make sure they were fed through the pandemic. Not only did we serve meals, but we also delivered 400+ emergency food boxes from our School Food Pantry. With parents worrying about how they were going to pay their light bill, or put fuel in the house, free meals for the learners were a Godsend for many. With many businesses laying off employees, cutting hours, or closing their doors, having free meals for their children is a huge burden lifted from their shoulders.

This bill will help so many learners, they will no longer have the stigma of being on the free/reduced list. No other student will know because all learners will eat for free. There will no longer be paperwork to fill out. When learners come to school, they ride the bus with no cost, they play sports and take gym with no cost, have art class and music class at no cost, so why do we charge them for breakfast and lunch? Eating at school should be at no cost as well. Eating is part of their day just like English, French or Geography. If universal meals were available to all it would help immensely. Many of the families experiencing food insecurity are not eligible for Free/Reduced meals because of guidelines. This bill will help the single parent who doesn't receive child support, or the family that has huge medical bills because someone is sick.

The State of Maine already pays for the reduced portion of the meals for the students that qualify for reduced meals, why not make it universal for all learners. That would be in the best interest of all learners and families. Let Maine set an example and have other states follow. Maine should be putting all learners first.

I would thank you in supporting LD 1679 because all of our learners deserve to be a child and not have to worry about where their next meal is going to be coming from,

or if there will be food to eat on the weekends. Thank you Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and all esteemed members for your time and commitment to Maine's children.

Melanie Lagasse
VUESC Food Service Director