



Testimony in support of LD 1679, An Act to Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals

May 20, 2021

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Kristen Miale and I am the President of Good Shepherd Food Bank. We work with a network of more than 500 partner agencies, supporting our mission to eliminate hunger in Maine by improving access to nutritious food for people in need, building strong community partnerships, and mobilizing the public in the fight to end hunger. Last year, through our network, we distributed 27 million meals across the entire state.

We are here today to support LD 1679, An Act to Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals. This bill provides a critical opportunity to decrease childhood hunger in Maine.

We spoke with a teacher last week. She used to purchase what was called “community snack,” food that is available to any student for free. She would be working with students and could hear their stomachs grumbling. This was often accompanied by what she describes as grumpy behavior. The community snack provided teachers the option to offer a snack instead of disciplining the behavior. She would see those behaviors, as well as academic performance, improve almost immediately. Eventually the school started using Clynk funds to supplement the snack purchases so it wasn’t coming out of teachers’ pockets. During the pandemic, this school and all schools nationwide have been providing breakfast and lunch for free. Not only does this eliminate the need for community snack, the students are exposed to a much wider variety of healthy foods.

Before the pandemic, 80,000 Maine children were income-eligible for free or reduced school meals. We expect that the increase in financial hardship for families across the state due to the pandemic will increase this number. And yet we know that many children who are eligible are not receiving these meals for a number of reasons.

Currently, parents must complete an application for school meals, providing sensitive information about their income and household demographics, often relying on children to transport it from school to home and back to school in a backpack. This is problematic for a number of reasons, and another bill (LD 362) would be an attempt to find new way to collect this information from families. Next, the school must compile and submit this information to receive

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funding for these meals. This bill would eliminate this administrative burden, freeing up limited resources for school staff to addresses other needs. Finally, the meals are provided to students at a full price, reduced price, or for free. The stigma of free meals discourages many children from participating in the program. If every child in every classroom in every school in Maine could eat breakfast and lunch for free, the stigma is entirely removed and all students benefit. Providing breakfast and lunch at school can increase attendance, decrease distractions including challenging behaviors that impact the entire classroom not just the hungry child, improve academic performance, and move significantly closer to ending childhood hunger in Maine.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Kristen Miale