

**Testimony in support of LD 1679 “An Act To Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals.”**

James Myall, Policy Analyst

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Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is James Myall. I’m a policy analyst at the Maine Center for Economic Policy. I am here before you today to testify in support of LD 1679 “An Act To Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals.”

No Maine child should be going hungry. LD 1679 fulfills this basic moral obligation, and will not only reduce day-to-day hardship for thousands of Maine children, but will strengthen Maine’s economy for all of us over the long run.

LD 1679 would ensure that all public school students in Maine can receive a school breakfast and lunch for no cost. The bill would require individual school districts to maximize the enrollment of eligible students in the federal free- and reduced-price meal programs, and the state would reimburse districts for the remaining cost of providing free meals to students.

This would build on the success of a temporary program which has been in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past year, the US Department of Agriculture has granted waivers to allow communities across the country to distribute free food through the school meals program, regardless of families’ income. But children don’t just go hungry during a pandemic. The need will continue once Coronavirus has subsided, and our efforts to feed Maine kids must continue as well.

An estimated 45,000 Maine children – almost one in five kids – were food insecure in 2019,<sup>1</sup> meaning that they lived in households which regularly could not afford enough food to eat, or the right kinds of food to eat. For many of these children, the ability to receive two meals a deal free of charge at school would have a huge impact.

Almost half of Maine’s food insecure children are ineligible for the current free meal program, based on their family’s income, while the remainder may be eligible but not enrolled.<sup>2</sup> LD 1679 would help both groups by simplifying the eligibility process, and removing the stigma that can still be associated with applying for the free or reduced lunch programs.

There’s a lot of research showing the benefits of universal free school meals.<sup>3</sup> Studies show that such programs improve the health and well-being of low income students who might already be eligible but who are not receiving free meals, and on the higher-income students who become newly eligible for free meals.<sup>4</sup>

On a fundamental level, universal meal programs like that envisioned by LD 1679 reduce hunger and improve nutrition.<sup>5</sup> What’s more, ensuring that students are well fed boosts their ability to learn. Access to free school meals improves students’ test results,<sup>6</sup> improves their behavior in the classroom,<sup>7</sup> and in

some cases, improves their attendance as well.<sup>8</sup> Over the longer term, this means better graduation rates and higher earnings in adulthood for these children.<sup>9</sup> That leads to a stronger Maine economy for all of us.

Adults close to the students also feel the benefit of universal meal programs. For parents, LD 1679 would relieve them of a financial strain, and a very fundamental mental stress of worrying about where their child's next meal will come from. Teachers can better focus on instruction when they aren't concerned for their students' basic wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

Passing LD 1679 and establishing a universal free school meal program in Maine is both a moral imperative and a smart economic decision. We can ensure that no Maine child goes hungry at school, while making an investment in our collective future as a state. I urge you to vote "ought to pass" on LD 1679.

Thank you. I'll be happy to take any questions.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Feeding America, *Map the Meal Gap*, 2019. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2019/child/maine>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Carson, Juliana, et al., "Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review," *Nutrients* Mar 2021, 13(3):911. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33799780/>

<sup>4</sup> Weinstein, Merle, et al., "Not Just for Poor Kids: The Impact of Universal Free School Breakfast on Meal Participation and Student Outcomes." *Social Scholars Research Network*, Sept 7, 2021. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1923972>

<sup>5</sup> Kenney, Erica, et al., "Impact Of The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act On Obesity Trends," *Health Affairs*, 39(7). July 2020. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.00133>

<sup>6</sup> Schwartz, Amy Ellen & Michael Rothbart, "Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance," *Center for Policy Research, the Maxwell School*. July 2019. [https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/uploadedFiles/cpr/publications/working\\_papers2/wp203.pdf](https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/uploadedFiles/cpr/publications/working_papers2/wp203.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, Nora, & Krista Ruffini, "Schoolwide Free Meals and Student Discipline: Effects of the Community Eligibility Provision," *Education and Finance Policy*, 1(25), 2021. [https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp\\_a\\_00307](https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00307)

<sup>8</sup> Bartfield, Judith, et al., "Universal Access to Free School Meals through the Community Eligibility Provision Is Associated with Better Attendance for Low-Income Elementary School Students in Wisconsin," *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. 120(2), Feb 2020, 2010-218. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31624028/>

<sup>9</sup> Alex-Peterson, Jesper, "Long-Term Effects of Childhood Nutrition: Evidence from a School Lunch Reform," *IZA Institute of Labor Economics*. Dec 2017. <http://ftp.iza.org/dp11234.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Hecht, Amelie, et al., "Universal free school meals through the Community Eligibility Provision: Maryland Food Service Provider Perspectives." *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems and Community Development*, 10 (2), 2021. <https://www.foodsystemsjournal.org/index.php/fsj/article/view/963>