

Fern Neilson  
Pittston

### Testimony of Fern Neilson

#### Mom of Three MSAD 11 Students, 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 Fern Neilson. I am a resident of Pittston and the mother to three children who attend Pittston Consolidated school in the MSAD 11 district which serves the Central Maine towns of Gardiner, West Gardiner, Randolph and Pittston.

I am pleased to share this written testimony in support of LD 1679 and offer my sincere thanks to the bill sponsors for their commitment to solving the issue of childhood hunger in Maine.

After raising our two biological children to adulthood, my husband Howard and I felt called to grow our family by fostering children in need of a stable and loving home. We first welcomed Jedd in 2009 while I was serving as Committee Clerk for the Maine Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. Soon after we welcomed Kiki and LeiLei. With a deep belief that these kids were meant to be ours, we have since adopted all three – each of whom have varying degrees of special needs that require me to be fully present to provide and manage their care. Meeting their unique and critical care needs stretches our modest, single income to its limits.

It is my hope that the universal free school meals we've been fortunate to access during the pandemic become permanent in Maine. These meals have been really helpful to my family. We are in a financial bracket that does not qualify for free or reduced-price meals, but we are not far over that.

As an adoptive mom of children who were once part of Maine's foster care system, I respectfully ask the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee - and indeed the full legislature - to make it easier, not harder, for those who give these children permanent homes. More than that, I encourage you to eradicate the stigma between those kids whose families traditionally qualify for free meals and those who do not. If ever there were a place and time in one's life when the playing field should be leveled, I hope you can coalesce around the idea that meals at school is it.

In closing, I offer my sincere appreciation for your consideration of these words and my family's circumstances as you weigh this game-changing legislation. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have via email at the address listed below.

Fern Neilson  
1230 Wiscasset Road  
Pittston, Maine 04345  
princessfern@yaho.com