



Testimony Supporting

LD 1679, An Act to Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Ryan Parker, I live in Newport and I am the Maine Associate Director of Programs for FoodCorps. FoodCorps is a national non-profit focused on teaching kids about, and ensuring they have access to, healthy food, through school garden curriculum, cooking lessons, and our work in school cafeterias throughout Maine from Portland to the Katahdin Region, Belfast to Eustis. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in favor of LD 1679 An Act to Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals.

I want to begin by thanking Senate President Jackson, Speaker of the House Fecteau, and their cosponsors, many of whom serve on this committee, for bringing forward this critically important legislation.

This bill, and the solutions it would create if enacted into law, have a firm foundation in morality. In fact, it would be hard, if not impossible, to come up with an argument against feeding our state's children in our schools where kids spend the majority of their days from a very young age to adulthood. Other, more eloquent speakers will undoubtedly share specifics about the morality of this issue. But I would like to raise a different perspective, the economic benefits of passing this bill.

My work with FoodCorps allows me access to school districts, administrators, and dining services directors throughout Maine, and around the country. I am also privileged to serve my community as a member of the RSU 19 school board, comprised of representatives from the eight towns in our large district. These experiences have provided me a somewhat unique opportunity to learn about the myriad complications of our nation's school food system, how it was designed, how it operates, what about it works, and what doesn't, how much it costs, and how much return we get on that investment, which is not just an investment in individual children, but literally in the future of our communities, state, and nation.

The national school meal program is set-up in such a way that individual RSU dining services programs are meant to operate like businesses. Yet, they are forced to operate within constraints that make their business model one in which it is almost impossible to be successful. Dining services programs are told what they can serve, how it has to be made, where and what types of ingredients they can use, and how much they will pay for them, all without the benefit of being able to control what price they charge per meal, which is also dictated to them, often by people who have no idea what they are talking about. This is all compounded by the very real

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moral obligation these programs, departments, and the people that comprise them, have to feed their customers, our children. It makes very little sense and one does not need to dig too deeply to begin to understand why nearly all school nutrition departments in Maine, and indeed the country, operate in the red annually. Depending on the size of the district, this financial loss can total a few, to tens of thousands of dollars each year. Interestingly, statute dictates that the dining services budget is separate and independent from the school budget process; that they must at least break even. Yet, this is so rarely the case that state law also dictates losses in this area must be covered by the general fund of the school budget. In my district, this leads to the need to raise an additional \$80,000 annually that taxpayers must contribute to the school budget to be transferred into the dining services budget. My district is by no means unique in this regard. In fact, those districts that do not have this issue are the outliers, annually constituting a single, or low double-digit percent of the school districts in Maine.

Interestingly, school meals are the only system within which we give students something depending upon their parents' ability to pay for it. Providing meals to students at school should be approached in the same way we approach math books and bussing. Every student, regardless of their parent's income, gets equal access to those things because we recognize them as tools a student needs to succeed in school. This is true of everything in school. Everything except food which, ironically, is more important to success than anything else.

The current system, whereby we break students into different categories, is inefficient, and wastes shocking amounts of time, labor, and capital in our schools. My district serves just under 2000 students from eight communities. In speaking with our dining services director about this bill, I asked him to estimate how much time and money he spends chasing information, and money, to satisfy this multi-tiered system of free/reduced, and full-pay students. He estimates it takes about \$6000-\$8000 of his budget annually, which includes the time he and his staff act essentially as collections agents and administrators doing paperwork, instead of concentrating on feeding kids. If you multiply this out across the state, taking into account factors such as budget, population, and program size, we are wasting hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars, not to mention expertise and experience that would better serve our communities elsewhere.

Each hour these people spend doing this work is an hour they are not improving their menu. It is an hour they are not sourcing ingredients from local farmers, thus keeping that investment out of our local economies. It is worth noting several studies that show how every dollar spent on local food yields between \$1.91 and \$3 for the local economy. It is also an hour they cannot spend, and investments in specific people they cannot make, that would help market their meal programs to students in ways that will drive up participation, which is how school nutrition programs make money. The more students participate, the more reimbursement dining services



get from the national school meal program (USDA). These are literal, calculable dollars being lost.

Somewhat harder to quantify, but no less real, are the losses in dollars created over the long-term when students do not get enough to eat, or do not have nutrition appropriate for their physical, mental, social, and emotional development. Science is only now beginning to discover the connections between the food we put in our bodies and *all* functions of those bodies, including the brain, nervous system, etc. Yet, no parent necessarily needs science to tell us that getting food, the right kind and the right amount, into a kid, changes a lot about their behavior, and ability to learn, focus, and develop. “Hangry” isn’t a real word, but its meaning is universally understood, particularly among parents of young children, and teenagers. The nutrition, ingredients, and meals we are able to provide, or not provide, to our students translates into very real gains or costs in our classrooms, and our communities, which end up rippling through generations as these same students eventually graduate, and become adults.

Science is now beginning to show us concrete data linking hunger, poor nutrition, and food insecurity, with poor impulse control, lower achievement levels, inability to focus, learn, and develop. While it would be inaccurate to lay all behavior issues in our state’s schools at the feet of student hunger, a significant number of negative behaviors are caused by students’ lack of food and nutrition. Again, every parent who has ever tried to stretch the time between meals to get something done knows this. You’re playing with fire. The moral paradox of insisting children meet certain academic, developmental, athletic, and behavioral standards while not giving them one of the most important tools they need to achieve is real. But this also translates into costs.

Behavior issues in our schools impact our teachers, who are there to teach students. When they cannot because they have to manage disruptive behavior, that quite literally costs money, not to mention the impact it has on the learning of all other students who have now had their day disrupted. And, quite often, behavioral issues end up being dealt with by the principal of a school. Again, this translates directly into financial costs. Instead of coaching and observing teachers, building connections with parents, helping develop strong curriculum, our highest paid employees spend hours each day dealing with disruptive behaviors, a substantial number of which could be avoided if every child had adequate nutrition and calories. Additionally, the disruptive behaviors in this scenario build upon one another to create a cycle that has impacts into adulthood. How well a child does in school impacts nearly every aspect of their lives as adults including income, health outcomes, crime, housing, and more, all of which cost society money.

In short, while the moral imperative of providing all of our students equal access to food in schools cannot be overstated, the Legislature must also weigh the cost of any policy it enacts,

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or doesn't. Right now, the cost of not having universal meals in our schools is crippling, to our schools, our communities, and our state.

Finally, it is worth noting that schools nutrition operates within the parameters of a federal program and some may seek to dismiss this as a 'federal issue'. To be sure, this is a federal issue. But having that be the end of the conversation is not a solution and, quite frankly, it is perhaps the most un-Maine thing I've ever heard. I was born and raised in a small, rural Maine town where we took care of ourselves, and each other. In Maine, when we see a problem, we fix it. We don't look for someone else to do so, even if it is their responsibility. If I live in an apartment and there is a hole in the roof, the fact that it is the landlord's responsibility doesn't change the fact that my kitchen gets flooded when it rains. I patch the hole and deal with the landlord later. If the state wants to petition the federal government to fix this problem, by all means. In fact, one could argue the state has that obligation on behalf of our citizens and our children. As someone who used to work for a Member of Congress I know first hand how slowly things move through the federal government. Meanwhile, our kids are getting farther behind because we aren't providing them with universal access to nutritious food in schools while somehow expecting them to succeed.

I appreciate the opportunity speak with you today, and to support LD 1679. If it is helpful to you as you consider this legislation, I am available at any time to answer questions via email, phone, or at your work sessions to offer what I may from my years of experience working in Maine at the intersection of policy, education, and food. Thank you.

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