



American Heart Association.

You're the Cure

Dear Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

My name is Allyson Perron Drag and I am the Government Relations Director for the American Heart Association (AHA). The AHA is the nation's oldest and largest voluntary organization dedicated to fighting heart disease and stroke, whose mission is to be a relentless force for a world of longer, healthier lives. We are writing in support of LD1679 *An Act to Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals*.

For almost two decades, the American Heart Association along with other health and food security partners have advocated to improve the school meals program at both the Federal and State level because we know that proper nutrition is critical to children's short- and long-term health outcomes. Food insecurity can lead to a variety of negative health conditions, including diet-related disease, and has severe consequences on a child's future health. Schools are a vital source of nutrition and are a bulwark against chronic food insecurity. Universal free school meals will benefit hundreds of thousands of kids each day and be a major step forward to eliminating health inequities. Food insecurity is at an all-time high. This crisis has health, educational, and economic consequences, leaving children particularly vulnerable to the long-term impact. We believe school meals for all is a necessary step toward ending hunger in our state and ensuring all our children can thrive.

LD1679 will give all Maine kids a chance to thrive and succeed, increase equity in Maine schools and streamline school nutrition programs. If LD1679 passes, the State of Maine would contribute funding to cover the cost of paid students in the School Breakfast and National School Lunch programs, so that all students in Maine can access school meal programs without cost. Universal school meals for all is critical because during the pandemic and through next school year, USDA is allowing all children to be served school meals free of charge, but there is no certainty that the feds will extend these waivers further or make School Meals for All permanent, so in school year 2023 kids not eligible for free school meals will have to start paying for them again. We should not go back to the way we used to feed kids at school because it was not working and too many children were going hungry and School Meals for All needs to become a permanent solution for Maine students. Before the pandemic hit, 43%, or around 80,000 students were eligible for free school meals<sup>1</sup>. Due to families experiencing economic hardship due to Covid, statewide eligibility for school meals and the number of children experiencing food insecurity is projected to increase.<sup>1</sup>

According to Feeding America, many families experiencing food insecurity are not eligible for school meals.<sup>2</sup> It is about equity. The normal policy for school meals, whereby some children are expected to pay while others receive their meals for free, creates stigma and shame for those students that rely on school meals for their basic needs, and a barrier for those students who are not eligible but are still experiencing food insecurity. Students who participate in school meals, particularly those who are

experiencing food insecurity, have better health outcomes, have improved test scores, and are better able to concentrate in school. Let's pay for good nutrition now instead of poor outcomes later.

Thank you very much for your time and your consideration of LD1679. I would be happy to answer any questions you have about this testimony.

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References

1. <https://feedingamericaaction.org/resources/state-by-state-resource-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/>
2. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america>