

**Testimony of Jeanne Reilly, Director of School Nutrition, RSU#14
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 Jeanne Reilly. I am a resident of Kennebunk, Maine, and the School Nutrition Director in RSU#14 – the Windham & Raymond School Department. I am also the Legislative Chair for Maine School Nutrition Association, and I am a co-administrator for the Facebook Group TIPS for School Meals that Rock, representing over 17,000 School nutrition professionals from across the country.

Today, I am submitting testimony in support of LD #1679. I want to thank the bill sponsors for your continued commitment to addressing childhood hunger in Maine.

I have spent my career focusing on the nutritional needs of the children in our State. From working in the Women, Infants & Children Program as a nutrition counselor to spending the past 24 years working as a school nutrition director, I fully believe that by ensuring optimal nutrition for our children, we are #FeedingTheFuture. I believe that hungry children cannot learn. School Nutrition programs across the state are already providing healthy and delicious school meals to children from Kittery to Caribou and in every school district in between. We have the skills, the commitment and the guidance to ensure that every child in Maine is well fed & ready to learn.

Throughout the COVID19 Pandemic, School Nutrition operators throughout Maine and across the country changed their operational service model virtually overnight. From feeding in cafeterias, we quickly shifted our business model to accommodate families struggling to have access to nutritious food by providing curbside meals, in home delivery and delivery along bus routes. USDA generously provided waivers, allowing meals to be provided to children at no cost to the families, steam-lining meal service, and curbside pick-up and ensuring that ANY child could have access to these benefits. The reaction from our communities was overwhelming.

Here are just two of the many quotes we have received from families:

”we’ve been taking advantage of your meal programs throughout the pandemic and they have helped us feel connected to the school and community, saved us time during meal times, saved us money and simply put, your program has been a HUGE comfort to us. Even though we’ve never met, I can’t help but feel welcomed through your weekly communications, which demonstrate your attention to detail and call to include all families. It’s clear that you’re on a mission and your staff and volunteers carry that same giving nature with them – you are an inspiration. Thank you so much”

“From the bottom of our hearts – we thank you! I cannot begin to tell you the impact that this program has had on our family. If you could only see HOW EXCITED my kids

are to receive milk cartons, just like they get at school! Thank you thank you thank you for the comfort and the food during this time.”

One of the **silver linings** of this pandemic has been the opportunity to feed children, every day, free of charge. We have been able to ensure that children start the school day ready to learn. Without a school breakfast, many students would start the school day with their “needle on empty”. Offering school lunch to all children keeps children well fed throughout the school day and ensures that they have access to plenty of fruits, vegetables, milk, whole grains, and lean protein. Studies show children eating their most nutritious meals at school.

Healthy School Meals for All removes long existing stigma associated with school meals. The waivers, allowing us to offer meals at no charge to all children have helped us chip away at that stigma and implicit bias that many associate with the free & reduced meal program.

Schools currently provide transportation, technology, books and many other services at no individual cost to the child. Why do we charge for food, one of the most basic of human needs?

Participation in school meal programs increases when meals are provided for free, resulting in increased revenue through federal reimbursements. Students who participate in school meals exhibit better health outcomes, improved overall diet quality and decreased food insecurity, have improved test scores, and are more likely to graduate from school. Let us pay for good nutrition now instead of poor outcomes later.

I believe that Maine can lead the nation by paving the way for the healthiest, most well equipped children in our country. Healthier children grow up to be healthier adults. What better way to prepare our children than to ensure that they have consistent access to healthy school meals at no cost to their family? This benefits children, helps families, and because many Maine school nutrition programs are committed to using local food, it also stimulates our local economy.

In closing, I ask the committee to support LD#1679, for the sake of our children. It is time to feed the future of Maine! Thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony and thank you for your commitment to Maine’s children. I will happy to answer any questions they have, and happy to have any of you visit one of my Mobile Meal sites in RSU#14!

Thank you,

Jeanne Reilly, NDTR, SNS, Director of School Nutrition
RSU #14 – Windham & Raymond School Department
Maine School Nutrition Association – Legislative Chair