

Testimony of Kelly A. Roberts
In Support of LD 1679, An Act to Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Kelly Roberts. I am a resident of Biddeford.

Today, I am submitting testimony in support of LD 1679, An Act to Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals. I want to thank the bill sponsors for your commitment to addressing childhood hunger in Maine.

I am a parent of two and I also work closely with many kids & families in York County through sports and public health initiatives. I am fully in support of LD 1679 because it will give all Maine kids a chance to thrive and succeed and increase equity in Maine schools. 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. Additionally, BIPOC students are disproportionately impacted by 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.

Studies show that school meals:

- Reduce childhood hunger
- Decrease childhood weight issues & obesity and improve child nutrition & wellness
- Enhance child development and school readiness
- Support learning, attendance, and behavior

The Bell Institute of Health & Nutrition states that kids who eat school meals eat more whole grains, milk, fruits, and vegetables and have better diets overall compared to kids who do not eat school meals.

We cannot go back to the way we used to feed kids at school because it was not working. Too many children were going hungry and School Meals for All needs to become a permanent solution for Maine students. Federal officials are watching states that are working on School Meals for All legislation. Maine can be a leader on this important issue and pave the way for the rest of the United States.

I urge all members of the committee to support LD 1679 to give all Maine kids a chance to thrive and succeed and increase equity in Maine schools. Thank you, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs for your time and commitment to Maine's children. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Kelly A. Roberts