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NETWORK

Who's At the Table?

MAINE

A Case Study of LD 1679

How Farm to School and
Anti-Hunger Advocates Passed
Healthy School Meals for All

May 2023

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SCHOOL NETWORK
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The School Meals Campaign: **Who's At the Table?**

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the urgency to move toward a more resilient local food supply that builds racial and social equity. The pandemic also radically shifted how child nutrition programs operate, with school nutrition professionals working tirelessly to feed kids under emergency conditions with limited resources. Even before the pandemic, school food was inaccessible to many students in need. While certain income-eligible students can receive free or reduced-price meals, many more families who do not qualify for this subsidy have difficulty affording full-price meals.

We need a system of school meals that serves all kids and values the people who get it to the table. That's why National Farm to School Network advocates for universal meals focused on equity for the most impacted stakeholders across the food system. We created the ***Who's At The Table?*** School Meals campaign to provide tools to communicate how our shared community values have the potential to radically transform our food system for the better. This deep dive into Maine's LD 1679 policy is part of our effort to provide resources that support values-aligned universal meals advocacy. [Learn more about this campaign and find additional resources here.](#)

About National Farm to School Network

The National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy, and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing, school gardens, and food and agriculture education into schools and early care education settings. We provide vision, leadership, and support at the local, state, and national levels to connect and expand the farm to school movement, which has grown to reach approximately 67,300 schools in all 50 states as of 2019. Our network includes thousands of farm to school supporters, a national staff, an advisory board, and partner organizations in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and U.S. Territories. Our work is deeply rooted in equity, guided by our **Call to Action** that 100% of communities will hold power in a racially just food system.



LD 1679 (SP 540)

An Act to Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals

Maine was among the first in the nation to address student hunger by expanding access to free school meals for eligible students, starting in the 2022-2023 school year. This bill:

- Requires the state government to cover the difference between the regular price of the meal and any federal funding support for school meals. For example, if a meal costs \$3, and the federal government already provides \$1 in reimbursement for that meal, now, the state government will provide the remaining \$2. This ultimately makes school meals free to all public school students.
- Directs schools to request that parents and guardians complete household income forms that help determine eligibility for state and federal food assistance programs.
- Directs, but does not mandate, school administrative units to maximize federal funding to the greatest extent possible.

INTRODUCED	May 4, 2021
ENACTED	April 25, 2022
EFFECTIVE	2022-23 School Year
BILL SPONSOR	President Troy Jackson
FISCAL NOTE	<u>\$34 million</u>
STUDENTS BENEFITING	<u>173,907</u>

UNIQUE POLICY FEATURES

IT'S SIMPLE. Maine's universal meals policy is succinct compared to similar bills in other states. This bill is only three pages long and focuses solely on universal meals. While there are no additional provisions that support local food purchasing, there are existing policies in place that bolster these efforts.



ROADMAP TO END HUNGER: POLICY IN CONTEXT

Full Plates Full Potential was the School Meals for All Coalition lead. The organization was founded in 2014 after a legislative task force identified the need for an independent group to investigate federal Child Nutrition Programs and lead efforts to combat childhood food insecurity.

From 2014 to 2021, Full Plates Full Potential worked with partners on child nutrition policy changes, including expanding access to Summer Food Service Program, Breakfast After the Bell, and after-school meals. They also eliminated reduced-price copays for school meals. These changes laid the foundation for LD 1679. Advocates modeled LD 1679's bill text from previous legislation that eliminated reduced-price copays.

In 2019, Maine's 129th Legislature and Governor Janet T. Mills committed the state to end hunger by 2030. This led to the release of a 2020 report entitled

Everyone at the Table: Maine's Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030. Full Plates Full Potential and other advocates recommended universal meals as a critical policy solution to the roadmap's development team and this process coincided with Full Plates Full Potential's efforts to start a campaign for healthy school meals for all.

The COVID-19 pandemic bolstered Full Plate Full Potential's plan to introduce universal school meals. When the federal government provided meals at no cost to all children during the pandemic, advocates in Maine had already introduced legislation to continue universal meals after federal support was set to end in June 2022. Meals were about to be taken away from children, and they saw the window of opportunity to permanently provide healthy school meals for all.

Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution.

Full Plates Full Potential staff attended an annual statewide meeting for school nutrition directors hosted by Maine Department of Education. When asked how they wanted to end hunger, a participant suggested, "let's feed them all for free," which prompted the crowd to cheer and stand up in support of the idea. This moment was a turning point for Full Plates Full Potential, which identified universal meals as their top policy goal moving forward.



ADVOCACY STRATEGY SUMMARY

Maine's coalition is self-described as "informal," "scrappy," and "small," with only a handful of organizations involved at the decision-making level. The Coalition was also supported by a local lobbying firm. Many Coalition partners had deep relationships with each other from previous collaborations on hunger and food systems issues.



KEY PARTNERS

Small State, Strong Relationships

Maine is a small state, and because of this, Coalition members already collaborated on anti-hunger and local food systems issues. This existing trust between Coalition members allowed them to work nimbly and quickly. All Coalition members brought in their respective networks to advocate for the policy. The top three coordinating partners included Full Plates Full Potential (as the Coalition lead), Maine School Nutrition Association (SNA), and FoodCorps. Full Plates Full Potential played the lead role in drafting bill language and directing the overall strategy of the Coalition. Maine SNA conducted outreach to superintendents and school business administrators.

FoodCorps, a national organization, is advocating for universal meals throughout the country. In Maine, FoodCorps conducts garden-based education and scratch-cooking programming in many schools. The organization was able to leverage its connections with students, teachers, and cafeteria staff in support of universal school meals. Other supporting partners included (but are not limited to) Good Shepherd Food Bank, Maine Children's Alliance, Maine Equal Justice, Maine Farm to School Network, Preble Street, Maine Education Association, Maine Public Health Association, and No Kid Hungry.

Legislative Champions

Two key legislative champions for LD 1679 include Senate President Troy Jackson and Speaker of the House Ryan Fecteau. Both offices assisted with strategy and earned media throughout the campaign. Senate Minority Leader Matt Pouliot was a strong vocal champion and secured bipartisan support for the effort. The Coalition also worked closely with Senator Cathy Breen and Representative Teresa Pierce, the chairs of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. They received advice about possible concerns, potential challenges, and other legislators that the Coalition could engage with.

FARM TO SCHOOL AND UNIVERSAL MEALS

While Maine's universal meals bill may not explicitly support local food or values-based purchasing, advocates see this bill as intertwined with statewide farm to school efforts. This is seen in the makeup of the Coalition. FoodCorps and the Maine Farm to Sea and School Network, two organizations whose missions are to support farm to school efforts, were some of the most active supporters of universal meals. These organizations promote local purchasing, scratch cooking, taste testing, and meal quality improvement.

*"It is just a fact that those of us who work on the issue of universal meals are also at the same time working on what those meals look like, how to support farmers, how to get kids interested in eating the food, and all of the other factors that go into school meals. **It is all one big issue for us.**"*

- Ryan Parker, FoodCorps



Photo Credit: Winky Lewis



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FARM TO SCHOOL AND UNIVERSAL MEALS

Maine had strong farm to school programming already in place before the introduction of LD 1679. This support for farm to school is influenced both by the high percentage of small farms, a robust sea-based economy, and relative geographic isolation. With over 60% of Maine farms being smaller than 100 acres, their top agricultural commodities include fruits, vegetables, dairy, and eggs, unlike many other states that mainly grow field crops.

Maine was among the first in the nation to introduce a **local food incentive program**. Established in 2001 but fully funded in 2019, Maine's Local Foods Fund (formerly Local Produce Fund) provides a \$1 match for every \$3 spent on qualifying local ingredients. All schools qualify for this incentive program and can receive up to \$5,500 annually.

This program was supported by Full Plates Full Potential, whose research and advocacy ultimately resulted in changes that made the program more accessible for schools and in legislation that fully funded the Local Foods Fund.

Farm to school made universal meals an easy ask.

*"At least in Maine, Farm to School local food in school is so popular; it's such an easy issue to talk to legislators about. They all say, "Yes, let's get the best food possible. We love local food. Let's do it." We make the connection of why it's important to have these meals more accessible to all students and how that can help move more local food initiatives forward at the same time. **School meals for all benefits the bigger picture.**"*

-Anna Korsen,
Full Plates Full Potential



TOP TIPS FROM ADVOCATES IN A COALITION

Create resources for Coalition partners.

Full Plates Full Potential supported Coalition partners by providing them with a comprehensive document with talking points and data links. They created an additional guide for advocates who want to testify at hearings. They strategically targeted nutrition directors in the districts of key representatives and provided them with resources to effectively share their stories about childhood hunger.

Build trust among a broad coalition of partners, and know when to get them involved.

The Coalition built trust and cultivated deep relationships among their partners. While most of the decision-making power resided among a small core group of organizations, the wide range of partners trusted them to lead the Coalition. The wider network of partners were always available for input, feedback, and to take action when asked. The core group of organizations strategically called upon different organizations for their expertise throughout the campaign.

Distribute important tasks among coalition members.

While a small coalition structure worked in Maine and had its benefits, advocates discussed the time-consuming nature of convening and leading a coalition effort, including the challenge of keeping everyone engaged and informed and fielding questions. They suggest that the advocacy process would have been easier if they had a system of sharing knowledge and updates among coalition partners and involved more partners with essential coalition tasks.



STORIES FROM THE COALITION



Even small organizations can make a huge impact.

During the time Full Plates Full Potential led Maine's universal meals Coalition, the organization itself was small and nascent. Anna Korsen, Advocacy & Implementation Director, shares:

*"When we started this effort, **I was the only full-time programming staff**, and we had one and a half people working on fundraising, and our co-founders, co-directors who were both volunteers. It was a lot of work for me to do all of this, but thankfully we had all these wonderful partners.*

*Eventually, we added another full-time programming staff person, which was incredible. But during the pandemic, she spent a lot of time ensuring we were getting emergency grant funding out. **We didn't have a lot of staff capacity before the time we had the bill passed.***

*We continued to increase our staff; We hired our first full-time executive director and added two more full-time staff. And by the time we got full funding of universal meals, we had the staff that we have now, which is seven people. More staff would have helped during the campaign, but **we were just a little scrappy organization.**"*

TOP TIPS FROM ADVOCATES IN THE **CAPITOL**

Understand your state's legislative structure.

The issue of school food is complicated and often involves different sectors, making it challenging to pass legislation that addresses multiple issues. In Maine, for example, it may not make sense to put local procurement provisions into a bill about universal meals because they fall under different departments and have various committees of jurisdiction in the legislature. Knowing the legislative process and nuances of how it works in a particular state is critical to passing effective legislation. In some cases, it may be beneficial to focus on a single issue and break policy changes into individual bills.

Building relationships with influential policymakers can significantly impact the success of advocacy efforts.

Full Plate's co-founder held a previous role as Senate president, which allowed the Coalition to establish relationships with current state officials. With valuable recommendations from key policymakers, these legislative champions' influence was greater than if the Coalition had worked with less experienced legislators.

Work with lobbyists.

Even though fundraising for lobbying is difficult, advocates attest that having lobbyists on board was a massive help for the Coalition. The Coalition worked with Maine Street Solutions, who acted as the eyes and ears in the state house. This insider knowledge greatly impacted the success of this bill.

TOP TIPS FROM ADVOCATES IN THE CAPITOL

Garner bipartisan support.

It was important to garner support from both Democrats and Republicans because of Maine's varied political makeup. The Coalition talked to leaders from both parties about the need to ensure all kids have access to healthy food at school. They explained that this was something everyone should agree on, regardless of their political views. Eventually, Assistant Senate Minority Leader Matt Pouliot, who had personal experiences of hunger, stepped in as a supporter of the bill. He conveyed to his party that not having enough food as a kid is detrimental to society in the long term.

Sometimes personal experiences carry more weight than traditional political ideologies.

"[Our Republican champion] was Matt Pouliot, who is fiscally very conservative, but is very socially conscious... His personal story was one of growing up with food insecurity and how challenging it was to have meal debt and live with the stigma. He had compelling personal experience to bring to this discussion. And because he had a lot of sway with his caucus, both his position and perspective were really important."

-Ryan Parker, FoodCorps



TOP TIPS FROM ADVOCATES IN THE COMMUNITY

Meet the moment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of feeding all kids for free and supporting school staff rose to the forefront of public awareness. The Coalition was prepared with policy solutions to permanently address student hunger.



Keep the focus on the students.

The Coalition sought to center student voices in their advocacy. The Coalition found it impactful to have students testify to the Legislature and share their stories about the experience of hunger in school.

Build long-term community awareness.

Advocates recommend that other states continue to promote universal meals policy even if they are initially unsuccessful. Advocates believe that talking about the benefits of universal meals and educating the public about childhood hunger will lead to more community support, especially if trusted voices such as pediatricians and policymakers are involved. In Maine's case, the Coalition secured an initial \$10 million for the universal meals program, which was only enough to partially fund the program. The Coalition's persistence and consistency in cultivating community support eventually built the momentum needed to fully fund universal meals through the governor's supplemental budget.



STORIES FROM IMPLEMENTATION: MORE MEALS, LESS DEBT

After Maine began its universal meals policy, participation in school meals increased, which in turn increased cafeteria revenues.

"The school budget in my community would habitually include \$80,000 per year that we plan to transfer to the Dining Services program. That's how much debt they would be in at the end of every year... During the last budget cycle, our school district reduced that debt by \$40,000. Even though the federal waivers have gone away, **because of universal meals, the nutrition program is now operating "in the black"** (meaning they produce positive earnings after accounting for all expenses). This year, we do not plan to budget any money for Dining Services because they're operating in the black. I think that's a predictable and realized benefit [of universal meals] that has spread across the state."

- Ryan Parker, FoodCorps



Photo Credit: Winky Lewis



Photo Credit: Winky Lewis

"I used to spend so much time being a debt collector. Without universal meals, that part of my job would be even worse now. We've seen other states start charging for meals after the federal waivers ended. Parents were used to school meals being free and just stopped paying. So now, those schools have huge unanticipated bills."

- Whitney Thornton, York School District

STORIES FROM IMPLEMENTATION: REDUCING THE LUNCH STIGMA

According to some preliminary data from Maine Department of Education, in the first three months of the school year (September through November) breakfast participation increased by 23% and lunch participation increased 16% across the state.

"Our district has nearly gotten rid of the stigma of school lunch. We're a moderate-income district, so we had a small number of students depending on subsidized school lunches. But now, **so many kids get lunch because it's an equal playing field, everyone is equal, and they all can get the same meals they want.** It's such a morale booster for many students, which I think is so nice. I would say that [universal meals is] definitely a success. Another success would be supporting the local economy because so many more kids are eating breakfast and lunch at school. They're getting to try new foods every week through taste tests."

- Whitney Thornton, York School District

Photo Credit: Winky Lewis



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CHALLENGES FROM IMPLEMENTATION

While evaluation of universal meals implementation is still underway, early challenges mainly revolve around scaling up to meet the higher demand for school meals. This includes more food waste, staffing issues, and a lack of cold storage capacity. Full Plates Full Potential is working to increase meal time for students, as they believe more time spent eating will decrease food waste.

Another main challenge is related to income forms. Fewer families are completing the necessary income disclosure documents needed to maximize federal funding for school meals. The decline in form completion is partly due to confusion over fast-changing regulations and COVID-19 emergency feeding measures. Full Plates Full Potential has created toolkits to encourage families to complete income forms. The Maine Department of Education is also looking for alternative ways to assess school communities' needs without relying on the labor-intensive income form process.

It is too soon to understand the full impact of the policy on federal funding. Regardless of the cost, advocates argue that feeding hungry children is critical, and the benefits to society outweigh any potential lost revenue.

Policy Design Limitations

- Advocates wished this bill would have included funding for additional support for policy implementation, such as additional staff time, administrative support for schools, etc.
- This bill did not **mandate** the maximization of federal funding, and used softer language to direct schools to do this. This is because policymakers were cautious about infringing on the autonomy of communities. However, this decision may lead the program to cost more if schools that qualify for federal subsidies choose not to participate in them.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [School Meals for All](#) web page by Full Plates Full Potential
- [NFSN Google Drive folder](#) with op-ed examples and student testimony, among other resources
- Radio Recording: [“Free school lunches in Maine alleviate food insecurity and tap into local sources”](#) by Maine Public Radio (October 24, 2022)
- Article: [“Educators say free meals have changed attitudes in Maine's school cafeterias”](#) by Maine Public Radio (August 26, 2022)
- Article: [“Values in Action: Centering Student Voice”](#) by Jenn So, Full Plates Full Potential (April 7, 2022)
- Video: [“Universal Free Lunch in Maine”](#) by Plate the State TV (Apr 27, 2022)
- Article: [“Maine’s Path to Healthy School Meals for All”](#) by Full Plates Full Potential Staff, hosted on Food Research and Action Center’s website (January 9, 2023)

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