

# Windham Raymond School Nutrition Program

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Good afternoon members of the Commission.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to join the discussion today on the complex problem of Hunger in the United States.

My name is Jeanne Reilly and I am the Director of School Nutrition for RSU #14 – the Windham & Raymond School Department. I am also the President Elect of the Maine School Nutrition Association.

School Nutrition Programs are at the forefront of the war on Childhood Hunger. Nationwide, 16,000,000 children don't have an adequate supply of nutritious food. That figure represents 1 out of every 5 children. Our own state of Maine ranks 5<sup>th</sup> nationwide for very low food security, and it ranks #1 in New England. Last year, of the 180,000 school age children in the state of Maine, nearly half of them, 86,000 qualified for free or reduced price meal benefits. Teachers report that as many as 3 out of every 4 school age children regularly come to school hungry, and research shows that students experiencing food insecurity are more likely to have difficulty paying attention in school, have more attendance problems and increased disciplinary problems. Think about it... who can focus on learning when your stomach is growling or your head is hurting from lack of food? Or when your primary focus is on where your next meal will come from?

In my own district, RSU #14, during the past school year, we served over 200,000 meals to students who qualify for free or reduced price meals. Additionally, over the course of the school year, we sent nearly 5000 backpacks of weekend food home with students to ensure that they would have access to nutritious and accessible food over the weekend.

School Nutrition Programs are making a dent in the hunger problem, and yet many families who might qualify for meal benefits never even fill out the application. Of those students who DO qualify for meal benefits, as many as 40% do not regularly access these benefits. Weekends and summer pose additional problems.

Currently, Maine is only serving 16% of children eligible to receive a free meal in the summer. Similar figures are reported across the country. Students who are able to access a healthy breakfast & lunch Monday through Friday during the school year often struggle throughout the summer. Students who do not get enough to eat during the summer months are shown to be more likely to fall behind their peers in reading, experiencing a greater "summer slide" than children who are adequately nourished over the summer. They are also more likely to experience long term health consequences associated with hunger, than students who have access to a summer meals program. Even though summer meals programs are on the rise, the

need is still so great. Over the past 8 years, in my previous district of Westbrook, Maine, the summer meals program has grown from the initial 2 sites to at least 8 this summer, with several of those sites serving breakfast in addition to lunch. RSU#14 has struggled to find an accessible and federally qualifying site, in spite of the significant need in both of the RSU #14 communities.

Some of the recent successes in our district, as we strive to combat student hunger, have been in the increase of students, particularly students who qualify for free and reduced meals, eating breakfast at school. Through several different approaches, including extended hours breakfast, Room Service Breakfast Cart and grab & go breakfast, we have seen an increase of 30% in the number of students accessing a nutritious breakfast at school. Our own privately funded back pack program was started with a couple of school administrators who were concerned that several of the students in their schools did not have adequate food in the home for the students to make it through the weekend. From those humble beginnings of just a few back packs per week, we have grown to providing 152 backpacks to hungry children each weekend. In yearly surveys of our back pack recipient families, we frequently receive comments from parents and children about how beneficial the program is: "This is a new experience for us to need help. I have learned a great deal about the programs offered. This can be a humbling experience and your program has made it a positive, fun and informative experience for all of us. All that was provided to (our child) was utilized and enjoyed! I would like to thank you sincerely. We are extremely grateful for the help and support. I hope, in the near future, when established to be able to re-pay and help individuals like your program is doing..."

School nutrition professionals know that the meals they provide are often the best and most nutritious meals that many children receive. We recognize how important these meals are to the health and academic success of America's children. We know that we are at the forefront, waging war against childhood hunger. And yet the fight is an uphill battle, but we can win this. In 2012, Astronaut Buzz Aldrin said if we can conquer space, we can conquer childhood hunger. I say, the time is now. This problem is solvable and the infrastructures already exist. Utilize School Meals programs, utilize SNAP, utilize food pantries, WIC and faith based initiatives: Here are some of my thoughts & suggestions.

- Summer EBT for school age children who are eligible free & reduced meal benefits, especially if they do not have access to summer meal sites
- Aligning Summer meal programs and enrichment programming through local recreation departments & lowering the threshold of area eligibility from 50% free & reduced to 40% .
- Increasing awareness surrounding school meals programs, eligibility requirements and anonymity requirements of the meals programs, so that families are fully aware of the benefits available to them.
- Additional support for school nutrition programs in the form of:
  1. Equipment assistance to support the production of fresh, nutritious food
  2. Increased meal subsidy for school meals
  3. Grants for fruits & veggies, back pack programs, nutrition education. And grants with lower eligibility requirements, so that schools with medium levels of free & reduced percentages can still qualify for these grants.

The Dalai Lama has said “It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act.” It’s not enough to stand here today and discuss the hunger problem. The time to solve hunger is now. We must act.