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THE MAINE SENATE
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**Testimony in Support of
S.100, An Act Relating to Universal School Breakfast
and the Creation of the Task Force on Universal School Lunch**

**Presented to the Vermont House Committee on Education
March 8, 2022**

Good afternoon, Chair Webb, Chair Cupoli and esteemed members of the House Committee on Education. My name is Troy Jackson. I'm a fifth-generation logger from northern Maine and am currently serving my second term as President of the Maine Senate. Thank you for the opportunity to lend my support to S. 100, *An Act Relating to Universal School Breakfast and the Creation of the Task Force on Universal School Lunch*.

Shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic forced Maine schools to switch to remote learning, I noticed coolers begin to appear at the end of driveways all across my district. I soon learned that those coolers ensured kids could still access their school meals while learning from home. Food insecurity isn't a new issue for me – I've worked on it for years, and I've lived it. But driving by those coolers every day was a stark reminder for me about the sheer number of kids who relied on schools for healthy meals every day.

No child should have to go to school hungry, let alone be expected to learn, participate in class and earn good marks on an empty stomach. Yet this has been the reality for many kids across the country. Although the [National School Lunch Program](#) and [School Breakfast Program](#) provide some students with the healthy, nutritious food they need to learn, the current eligibility guidelines leave too many hungry kids behind. It also forces school administrators and teachers to spend more time on paperwork and less time teaching kids. I know we can do better. It's why I sponsored [a new law](#) making Maine one of the first states in the nation to ensure all school children could access school meals free of charge – no questions asked. This includes breakfast and lunch.

For me, it's personal. It wasn't always easy for my family to make ends meet growing up. Like most parents, mine worked hard to give me a good life. My father spent a lot of time on the road as a truck driver, while my mother took the bus with me to kindergarten, working to finish

her high school diploma so she could eventually become a teacher. Fortunately, I qualified for reduced-price school meals. The same is true for several of my legislative colleagues in Maine, both Democrat and Republican.

The program was a lifeline for families like ours, but the stigma of school meals remained. Some kids thought you were rich because your meals weren't free, while others looked down on you because they paid full price. Then, there were the kids who struggled with food insecurity but didn't qualify for the program and went hungry.

While the quality of the school meals program has greatly improved since my childhood with the inclusion of fresh foods from local farms, this dynamic remains the same. In some states, as many as [one in three eligible students](#) choose not to participate in the school meals program due to stigma and shame. According to Feeding America, [many families experiencing food insecurity are not eligible for school meals](#).

We have to do better. Our kids deserve better. And the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us we are capable of doing better.

As a lawmaker, and more importantly as a parent, I want children in Maine – and all across this great nation – to get a chance to focus on being kids, on playing with friends and learning how to read, not worrying about where their next meal will come from. And I imagine folks in Vermont want the same.

No child should ever have to prove they are worthy of nutritious food, regardless of which state they live in. Schools shouldn't have to go broke or jump through outrageous bureaucratic hoops just to feed students. I hope Vermont will follow Maine's lead by offering two free school meals daily to all students and that the rest of the country will do the same.

Thank you for your consideration and for your time this afternoon.