

Notes from August 11th meeting of Task Force to End Student Hunger in Maine

(Deirdre Schneider and Jane Orbeton, OPLA)

(See separate document for information requests for September 9th.)

1. Present were: Sen. President Alford, Rep. Kornfield, Rep. Reed, Rep. Rankin, Rita Furlow, Michelle Lamm, Walter Beesley for Department of Education (DOE), Therese Cahill-Low for Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Ron Adams, Tiffany Krastins, John Woods, Kristen Miale, and Tom Desjardin. Absent were Sen. Langley, Sen. Millett, Rep. Black and Holly Lusk.
2. Senate President Alford and Representative Kornfield welcomed task force members and introduced staff, Deirdre Schneider and Jane Orbeton from the Office of Policy and Legal Analysis.
3. Senate President Alford stated the importance of deciding on what numbers to use to establish baselines and benchmarks for participation in school nutrition programs, as well as determining whether the task force would focus on improving access for all students, or improving access for students that are eligible for free and reduced-cost meals.
4. **Farmers Panel:** Ralph Turner from Laughing Stock Farm in Freeport and Alice Percy from Treble Ridge Farm in Whitefield joined the meeting as panelists to discuss the opportunities and challenges in providing more locally produced/sourced foods in Maine schools. Also joining the panel were Don Todd, Executive Director of the USDA, Farm Service Agency and Tim Hobbins, Maine Potato Board. The task force heard the following:
 - **Challenges:**
 - Infrastructure and equipment needs;
 - Connecting farms with schools;
 - Price;
 - Level of product processing and preparation;
 - Food service employees ability to utilize the product; and
 - Regulatory requirements for food safety.
 - **Opportunities:**
 - Utilizing existing established resources and local, state and federal organizations/agencies;
 - Using farms/farmers to educate students about food;
 - Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program; and
 - Nontraditional partnerships (i.e. Good Shepherd Food Bank and Portland Schools)
 - The panelists discussed the many challenges to using locally produced/sourced foods in schools and the opportunity to use locally produce/sourced foods as a mechanism to end student hunger. Due to Maine's growing season, in contrast with the school year, storage of food presents a challenge. Generally, neither the schools nor farms have the appropriate capacity to store those items so they can be available when needed.

Furthermore, the level of processing for those products was identified as problematic. Not all schools have the facilities, equipment and staff to process products, and even where they do

have the facilities and staff, time constraints in getting meals prepared and served may not allow for that level of preparation. For the farmer, supplying processed products to meet the needs of schools is an obstacle because that takes time and resources for them as well, and may not make good business sense for the farm. This would also likely raise costs, thus the price of the product, making the local farmer even less competitive with large scale producers or distributors.

The panel also discussed the logistics in connecting schools and farms. Are direct relationships between the farmer and the individual school the best route? Is having a distributor in the chain beneficial or harmful overall? Does having a regional coordinating entity make more sense? If thinking about having a coordinator to link the two groups, is using existing resources, such as the Maine Farm Bureau's regional offices, or the DOE's listserv or "Thursday Updates" more effective and efficient than creating a whole new system to foster these relationships? The task force heard that the most logical step might be to look at what resources are already available if the task force decides to recommend that these relationships be fostered as a mechanism to address student hunger.

Panel members said the existing USDA, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, provides some positive benefits. The produce went directly to the classroom, and this provided an educational opportunity for the students, as well as an opportunity for the producer to provide a product that may have been new for many students.

Mr. Turner pointed to Good Shepherd's, Mainers Feeding Mainers program as an innovative model to address student hunger, while using products from local farms. As part of their food pantry network, Good Shepherd contracts with farmers before the growing season to provide a minimum quantity of a particular crop. However, there is generally some flexibility provided, so if a particular crop does not thrive that season, substitutions may be made. This allows farmers to plant what they know they can sell and better use their resources, thus making the price point more reasonable. Good Shepherd has cold storage facilities and a fleet of trucks at its disposal so the farmers do not need to invest in additional infrastructure. The Portland School District has provided assistance with this through offering some processing of the produce, which is then sent to the schools and pantry. The relationship between Good Shepherd and Portland does not create competition for the farmers, like the use of a distributor might. A distributor may compete with farmers it serves by offering products to clients at lower prices, whereas, Good Shepherd and Portland are not in the business of selling produce to restaurants and other markets.

Regulations, such as the Food Modernization Safety Act and Good Agricultural Practices rules may potentially create the need for some farms to invest in costly infrastructure improvements in order to sell their products to schools, which may make seeking schools as customers cost ineffective.

Besides being a supplier to schools, the panel also discussed how farmers could be an avenue to educate students on where food comes from and how it is grown or raised, and could expose students to new foods, and provide them with tools to learn to prepare food. This idea was also echoed during the panel discussion with school food service directors.

5. School Food Services Directors Panel: Barbara Nichols from Westbrook School District, Betty Hayes from RSU 16 (Minot, Mechanic Falls and Poland), and Alisa Roman from Lewiston School District joined the meeting as panelists to discuss the opportunities and challenges in expanding access for students to nutritious foods throughout the year.

▪ **Challenges:**

- Maintaining participation numbers in the summer;
- Addressing pockets of low income areas in a school district, when the district as a whole does not meet 50% poverty level threshold;
- Collecting debts for nonpayment by students who must pay full or partial costs for meals;
- Keeping per meal costs low does not always allow for using local produce/products;
- Social stigma of qualifying for free and reduced-cost meals;
- Reconciling the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) with the need to collect data for the state funding formula and Title I purposes;
- Providing sufficient time for students to eat meals;
- Getting administration and teachers to allow for universal breakfast programs in the classroom; and
- Holding administrators and teachers to wellness policy.

▪ **Opportunities:**

- Utilizing community recreational activities and other local opportunities for summer feeding sites;
 - Universal eligibility programs;
 - Community Eligibility Provision;
 - Eliminating the reduced-cost category, to lessen the need to collect payments and better direct time and resources;
 - Offering a variety of choices so there is more participation;
 - Having recess before lunch so students are more hungry and don't skip eating to socialize instead;
 - Better educating students about food and how to prepare it; and
 - Sharing knowledge through existing listervs, etc.
- The panelist described their programs, including what has been successful for them in their districts, and what has been challenging. The directors all stated that they had pockets of poverty in their districts.

The bottom line for the directors is to keep costs per meal low. This often means that they cannot use locally sourced products, because the price points are too high.

The directors indicated that when there are community recreational activities and other locally organized activities, these are place where summer meal programs are more successful. Linking summer meals programs with organized activities is a way to increase participation.

The directors also felt that eliminating the reduced-price category would be helpful in addressing student hunger. Some students who are only qualified for reduced-cost meals still cannot afford to pay, even though costs for these meals are lower. This leads to the directors having to collect debts, because the students are still served; however, if they

cannot recoup that money, it can have a negative financial impact, and strain programs. If all meals were free instead, this would eliminate the need to use resources to collect debts, and would mean less record keeping as well.

The task force was told that receiving applications from parents and guardians for reduced-cost and free meals is difficult and is always an issue. The directors said that using the Community Eligibility Provision would eliminate the need for applications and administrative work so that resources can be better allocated to focus on feeding students. However, the reporting associated with Title I, and the current tracking system for reduced-cost and free meals is used as part of the state funding formula. This makes schools leery of changing to CEP because of the fear they will lose state funding.

During the panel discussion the point was made that student hunger and performance are linked, and that studies have shown that students who are hungry have a more difficult time focusing in the classroom. The task force was told that this may also perpetuate poverty, because poor performance in school may hinder a student's opportunities in life and keep the student in poverty as an adult.

Another difficulty identified in ensuring that students are eating is that they are not given sufficient time to do so. This is especially problematic at the elementary school level. Some schools only allotted 20 minutes for lunch. By the time the student goes through the line and sits down to eat they have very limited time. Young children are also easily distracted, and recess is often scheduled directly after lunch; therefore, student wind up eating very little, even when they have access to food. The directors expressed that they have asked school administrators/teachers to hold recess before lunch so that the children have an opportunity to expend energy, socialize, and build up an appetite, making them more focused on eating lunch during the allotted lunch period.

- Both panels seemed to recognize that if relationships between producers and schools are to succeed both sides may need to give a little bit. The give would need to come mostly in context of costs and the level and location of product processing. As pointed out during the panel discussion with farmers, a regional approach may be beneficial. Farmers could work together on needed infrastructure, pool resources, and use existing resources and infrastructure.

The task force was told that it would be helpful to look at what is being done elsewhere. Are there innovative approaches out there that have not been contemplated? What facilities are needed to make using more local products feasible? Are there particular crops that would be needed and would be cost effective to produce and use in schools? While there may be opportunities, there may need to be changes in how things are done by both producers and directors in order for both groups to be successful. Their success can then help in feeding students, and having those students more connected to the foods they are consuming.

6. Public Comments: Ralph Turner spoke again during the public comment period and expressed further that there are many entities in existence that can help coordinate a school-farm relationship, including the county boards of the Maine Farm Bureau, AGCOM, the Maine university system, and government agencies.

Jim Hanna of the Cumberland County Food Security Council spoke of past studies on the issue of student hunger. Looking at these studies could provide a good historical context for the current work of the task force. He stressed that starting with good data was essential to the success of any plan, so that baselines and benchmarks can be established, and success can be measured. Mr. Hanna also felt that legislative buy-in to any proposal was key to success. Lastly, he stated that the task force should not be afraid to recommend small investments because small investments could lead to big differences.

Jennifer Johnson from Waterville reiterated the need for good data, because hunger can be combatted with good data. She said the issue is not that people are indifferent to student hunger, it is that they sometimes are unaware of the scope of the problem. When the community becomes connected to the issue, there is greater buy-in and any program becomes more successful due to increased participation by the community. She discussed the success of the in-school pantries and how they have been funded through unsolicited donations from the community in Waterville.

Amy Gallant from Preble Street, Maine Hunger Initiative stressed that CEP is something the task force should focus on and that the panel format was very helpful. She suggested that a panel discussion with children and parents who utilize programs may be helpful to learn what are their obstacles, why they do or do not participate in programs, etc.

7. Information request/data discussion: DOE provided data that showed how many students were enrolled in each school, and of that total enrollment, how many were eligible for reduced-cost and free meals. This table had all schools that participate in the free and reduced school lunch program. Some questioned whether there was loss of data because of the sometimes drastic changes in numbers between elementary school participation within a district and high school participation. It appears that the numbers drop off the higher the level of school. It was explained that some of this variation could be due to older students being less likely to bring in applications, and loss of student who choose to no longer attend school.

While the numbers presented by DOE are not perfect, some expressed that these may be the best to use to establish baselines and to set benchmarks. Actual participation numbers will need to be included. DOE has a new computer system that will likely be able to combine eligibility and participation so the task force has a clearer picture of the issue.

During this portion of the meeting the group also discussed CEP and it was suggested by Sen. President Alfond that a recommendation in the task force report may be to form a stakeholder group to look at, and come up with solutions to deal with the issue of reporting and its link to state funding, so that CEP may become a more viable option for all districts.

In looking at the data submitted by DHHS, the task force decided that the focus should be solely on the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) - at-risk afterschool meals - instead of all facets of the CACFP. It was also suggested that the task force look at childcare facilities that are not participating in CACFP to find out why they do not participate.

8. Future Meetings: The next task force meeting will be held on Tuesday, September 9, 2014, beginning at 9:30 at Bangor High School. The last two meetings will be held on Monday, October 6 and Monday, December 8.