



St. Matthew's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Goffstown, NH

February 7, 2025

Dear members of the House Education Funding Committee,

I write to urge your support of House Bill 665, relative to school lunch funding and serving our students with an adequate education.

I write to you because of the unique experience that Goffstown has had with lunch funding in this academic year. While I am not an educator or an administrator, I am the Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Goffstown. At our church we have a mission to serve and feed everyone in our community.

At our August school board meeting, business administrator Scott Gross announced that he had taken to court families with unpaid school lunch balances. His decision to sue families of school children for their lunch money led to a number of consequences in the Goffstown community.

First, each court case had legal fees connected to it. Even if some of the smaller balances were received due to legal action, the fees would make the resulting income negligible. I cannot help but wonder how much staff time was spent on the project of filing court cases instead of more worthy administrative tasks. This action was not fiscally responsible for the students or the taxpayers.

Second, each court case was public and announced the names of each of the families to the public. Normally, pains are taken when trying to protect the privacy of those on free and reduced lunch or the names of those with negative balances. The court action violated the privacy of those students and could have negative social consequences when the broader community learned those names.

While not an issue in Goffstown lunch policy, many districts do punish students who have negative balances with an alternative lunch, such as a peanut butter sandwich. Serving an alternative lunch has strong negative social repercussions. When a student sits down with a peanut butter sandwich while everyone else has a hot lunch, it is obvious as to why. Again, the student's privacy is not respected and they can more easily be singled out for ostracization and bullying.

A final consequence was that, with the leadership of the Rector and parishioners of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, the Goffstown community rallied to raise the money required for those unpaid lunch balances. We quickly set up a web page where people could either make a donation or request payment for their lunch balance, no questions asked.

Working with Superintendent Brian Balke, we ensured that people requesting funds would receive an email to refer them to the online Free and Reduced Lunch application. We recognized the challenge of getting families to sign up for Free and Reduced lunch and I believe that these bills can make that easier.

Once we made the call for donations public, our district, our church and our town received a lot of media attention¹. Some of the media attention was directed negatively on the business administrator personally. Other parts of the media attention helped to bring in more donations to help students with negative balances.

This far into the academic year, our church has paid out around \$5,000 from those donations. We celebrate the generosity of the community, the cooperation of the superintendent and the readiness of our church volunteers. But we all recognize that this will be a model difficult to sustain on charity alone.

This is why I write to ask you to support this school lunch bill in your hearing on February 7. I believe that these bills can create a sustainable system that support students' academic and social needs for relatively little impact on the state budget. I believe we can avoid future unnecessary lawsuits, negative media attention and leaking of family names with a better system than what we have now. Our students need expanded access to Free and Reduced meals with online applications and without fear of alternative meal punishments. Our students deserve at least this as part of their adequate education in the Granite State.

I regret that I cannot be with you in person for the hearings on these bills scheduled for Friday, February 7. I am more than ready to speak with any of you on the details of our Goffstown story and to hear your questions. Please do not hesitate to contact me at (603) 497-2003 or rector@stmattsepiscopal.org.

Yours in faith,

Rev. Jason Wells
Rector, St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Goffstown

¹Available: <https://indepthnh.org/2024/09/13/goffstown-turns-down-gift-and-sues-families-over-lunch-debt-instead/>