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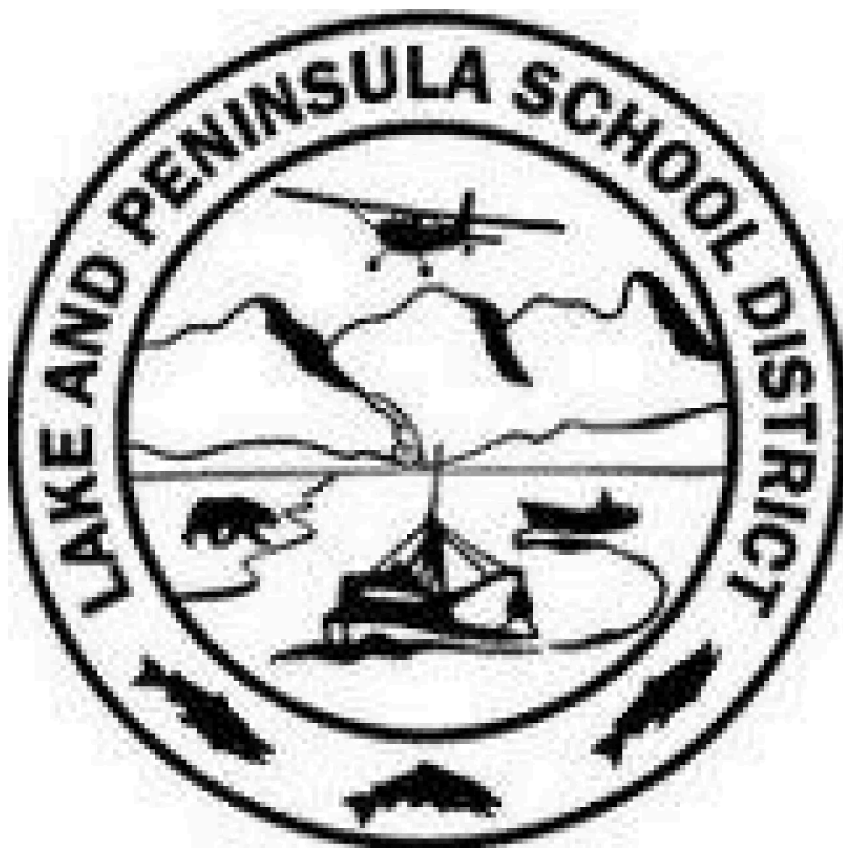
The Lake and Peninsula School District will cut school meal program come January

KDLG 670AM | By [Margaret Sutherland](#)

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The Lake and Peninsula School District will no longer provide school meals come January. As the district's 10 communities scramble to fill the gap, many are exploring options to source food and funds locally to ensure meals remain available for their children

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When parents of the Lake and Peninsula School District, or LPSD, received a letter via email in August announcing the termination of school meals come January, many were taken aback.

Evelynn Trefon is a parent from Newhalen and a member of the Newhalen Local School Advisory Committee, or LSAC.

“The Newhalen School LSAC had a meeting in August and we came together and basically the community said ‘What the heck? This is surprising news, nothing has been really relayed to us.’ There's this big budget shortfall that we are having,” said Trefon.

Trefon has not sat idly. She has been on the phone with government officials and state departments. She says it's important they know what this means for their community.

“For a lot of kids, the school lunch program and breakfast program is the one guaranteed nutritious meal they have a day, you know, because our area is not food secure and there's a lot of food insecurity,” said Trefon. “There's definitely the worry that we are not able to provide something for them come January.”

This is not the first time in recent years that the LPSD has faced a budget shortfall.

The district was not able to provide comment at this time, but in the announcement letter, district Superintendent Kasie Luke said the system has been facing financial hardship since 2016.

She said state funding for schools hasn't kept up with inflation. With rising costs, Luke said the budget couldn't continue to support the program.

The federal government partially reimburses schools for providing meals. Last school year, that covered 44.8% of the Lake and Peninsula School District's costs. The district still had to come up with about \$430,000 for the school meal program.

Rachel Lord is the Advocacy and Policy Director for the Alaska Food Policy Council, which works statewide to strengthen food systems. She says budget shortfalls are a problem across Alaska.

“There are no easy cuts left on the table. Every cut that you see is going to be one that

Lord says cost of goods, inflation, supply chain vulnerabilities, and state budget realities make providing school meals logistically and financially challenging for districts.

"It impacts different areas of the state differently, but it's definitely impacting everybody across the state," said Lord. "When we see chronic under-

funding and under-resourcing of the school systems and high vacancy rates at state departments, that stresses all kinds of resources around the state including the nutrition programs at our schools."



Students in Kokhanok processing a moose for school lunches

Each of the 10 communities of LPSD are making individual decisions on how to move forward.

Three villages, including Igiugig, a community on Lake Iliamna with about 70 residents and 20 school-age children, have opted to shift away from LPSD school lunches and towards a locally sourced and supported menu.

Christina Salmon is the Administrator for the Igiugig Tribal Council.

"So we will keep our cook on staff still paid for by the school system but with a partnership between the Igiugig Village Council, LPSD, and a lot of community members who are willing to support us, we've chosen to 100 percent make sure we are in charge

She says the community jumped into action and is making the most of it.

"We basically reached out to everybody we knew: processors, hunters, local fishermen, local subsistence fishermen and we were actually just very overwhelmed with the amount of local food we got," said Salmon. "And at the end of the day, we were like, 'Wow this is really good quality food.' We were all kind of relieved that we were serving our kids better food than previously.

Salmon says this is not necessarily a permanent solution. She says in the future they may revisit a USDA-funded school lunch program, but that after seeing what it looks like to source locally, they might not want to go back.

In Newhalen, Trefon says that the Tribal and City governments are searching for grant funding while also brainstorming ways to raise the money within the community to continue the USDA school food program.

"So their solution was to offer a couple of nights a week for whatever profits they make at the bingo games to go towards the Newhalen lunch program," said Trefon.

"And then to have the kids come into the bingo with a chaperone and cook meals to serve to people playing at bingo to fund their lunch program but it's just like why are we asking the kids to fund their own lunch program?"

Trefon says she's worried that this approach could strain community resources.

"There are only so many dollars in a community and when you are asking a community to divert funding from whatever it's already going to, it's just going to hurt the community in my opinion," said Trefon.

Lord, with the food policy council, says the problem goes back to the state level.

"I think that is clearly a sign that we need to get our ships righted at the department and as a state," said Lord, "to figure out, how are we going to address this in a way that is sustainable and make sure our kids aren't going hungry at school?"

The base student allocation in Alaska has only risen about half a percentage point since 2017, according to [Alaska Public Media](https://www.kdlg.org/news/2024-10-28/the-lake-and-peninsula-school-district-will-cut-school-meal-program-come-january), and a Legislative attempt to increase the BSA

Despite the uncertainty, no schools in the district have decided to cut the school lunch program altogether.

The Lake and Peninsula school district will continue to provide school meals until December 20.

News



Margaret Sutherland

Margaret Sutherland is a local reporter and host at KDLG, Dillingham's NPR member station. Margaret graduated from College of Charleston with a degree in English, and went on to attend the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies in Radio and Podcasting. She is passionate about the power of storytelling and creating rich soundscapes for the listener's ears to enjoy.

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