

Evelynn Trefon

[REDACTED]
Newhalen, AK 99606

April 29, 2025

Representative Himscoot
Representative Andi Story
Representative Maxine Dibert
Representative ed Eischeid
Representative Jubilee Underwood
Representative Rebecca Schwanke
Representative Bill Elam
State Capitol Room 106
Juneau AK, 99801

Dear House Education Committee,

Thank you for taking testimony on HB 12: FREE BREAKFAST & LUNCH IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS. School lunch should not be a line-item option.

I am writing to express my strong support of it. Implementing guaranteed free breakfast and lunch programs in public schools across Alaska will have an immeasurable impact statewide. Ensuring that every child has access to nutritious meals is crucial for their academic success and overall well-being.

In our community, an estimated 80% of residents rely on SNAP benefits, highlighting the significant level of food insecurity that families are facing. Asking families to send home lunches is not a feasible option.

The increased costs of fuel, electricity, and insurance are draining our school funds leaving not even scraps left over to feed our children. These required expenses are non-negotiable and beyond the control of all school districts. For the Iliamna/Newhalen area, costs of food and freight have skyrocketed with increases of 35% in the past five years. Electricity costs are now up to 65 cents per kWh. Unleaded gas has risen from \$7.25 to \$7.50 per gallon. Diesel #1 heating fuel from \$5.35 to \$6.99 a gallon. The fuel prices have increased this much in just the past 3 weeks.

For many years, Lake and Peninsula School District (LPSD) has been part of a universal free breakfast and lunch program for all students regardless of income. In August of 2024, our school district sent out a notice that the funding for our school breakfast and lunch program would cease to exist. In an additional letter to the communities dated September 19, 2024, it states,

"Since 2016, the Lake and Peninsula School District (LPSD) has faced financial challenges. We have not received increased sustainable funding from the Alaska Department of Education's Base Student Allocation. With rising costs due to inflation, our school board has had to make tough decisions to balance our budgets, including reducing programs and adjusting operations.

One of our biggest challenges is funding our food service program. In the 2023-24 school year, the district-supported cost was estimated at \$430,000, with a USDA grant covering only 44.8%. LPSD had to cover the remaining 55.2%" - From Superintendent Kasie Luke.

Three options were given to our ten schools to feed our children from January until May 2025:

Option 1: Traditional school meals, but local funding is required. Each local village/community comes up with a way to pay for the traditional USDA breakfast and lunch program. For Newhalen School, this means that would need to come up with \$9/day for 150 school days for each student or \$1,350 for students for the year. Meals would be prepaid would be prepaid directly to LPSD. They would plan the menus, order the food, pay the freight, pay for the cook and their benefits, and other misc. costs such as dish soap, silverware, etc. Funding options for this were:

- A. Ask each parent or guardian to pay \$1350 per child upfront for the years' worth of lunches or
- B. Ask for large donations from individuals and businesses or
- C. Local government pays for the cost (Tribal, Village, and City)

Option 2: Hybrid- The parents/community purchase all the food/freight, be responsible for the meal planning, etc. The district would continue to pay for the cook(s) and all other associated costs of those employees.

Option 3: No school meal program- All students pack lunches. No school lunch or breakfast programs are offered.

At the September, 2024, LPSD School Board Meeting, the board voted to go ahead and fund the 1st semester of the entire district's school breakfast and lunch program. This was received as a great relief to our school community as Newhalen School is the largest school in the district with 85-95 students enrolled throughout this school year. Once the cost is determined for the continuation of the USDA food service program for food service from September 2024 through December 2024, the district office will be putting forth a resolution for withdrawal from the Borough Assembly Endowment in support of funding this expense.

At the January, 2025, LPSD School board meeting in the superintendent's report, it was advised that food service update for:

The communities of Nondalton, Chignik Lake, Perryville, and Levelock are all continuing to participate in the USDA NSLP from January through May 2025. These communities used village funds, or COVID monies needing spent, or from other tribal resources to fund their program. LPSD will continue to employ a cook, order food, and provide menus and record keeping to ensure this program continues.

In Newhalen/Iliamna, Port Alsworth, Kokhanok, Port Heiden, and Igiugig communities are providing food through a variety of resources and LPSD is continuing to fund their cook(s) position January – April (May), 2025.

In Chignik Lagoon - families will provide food for their students, and no cook is necessary to be employed January – April (May), 2025.

Additionally, that report stated that looking ahead to the next school year for 2025-2026, principals have been instructed to have conversations with Local School Advisory Committees (LSAC), parents, and communities to plan for the continuation of a locally supported food service program for the next school year as planning for next year begins. In other words, there are no plans for our school district to provide money to our school to feed our students next school year either.

The communities of Newhalen and Iliamna chose option two to feed our students at Newhalen School. Beginning in September of 2024, we received donations of excess food such as cereal, canned vegetables, and some freezer items from local hunting and fishing lodge who were closing for the season. The next month, we began fundraising for money to buy food to feed our students. Through silent auctions filled with donated items from our community to dedicated nights of Bingo profits donated by the City of Newhalen and approved use of the opioid settlement funds from SouthCentral Foundation via our tribal and village councils, we have

access to enough buying power to purchase food and pay for the freight to feed our community the rest of this school year.

Since our school is no longer part of a USDA program, we have lost access to the additional funding or the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program offered through the State of Alaska via federal funds. This was an additional \$800/month of funding that we are no longer able to use to help feed our kids.

Through the Alaska Farmer's Market Association in partnership with Nilavena Clinic, we were given access to funds through a federal grant called the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Grant. In December through this grant, we were able to buy a cow from Homer, have it processed on the peninsula, arrange for it to be driven to Anchorage and flown to Iliamna. We were able to acquire almost 200# of ground meat to help fill our freezers. Unfortunately, due to the federal executive order issued in February, we have lost this funding source. We appreciate their partnerships and dedication that helped us to acquire not only Alaska grown beef but also Alaskan grown potatoes and cabbage in January.

A byproduct of being able to offer a healthy meal to the students in school, some school sites can offer an Elder meal program. Elders from the community can come to the school and have a school lunch or opt for a to-go home-delivered lunch. This program is an amazing way to help another food-insecure and vulnerable population in our communities. These meals are reimbursed by Bristol Bay Native Association from a program that they have access to. Without student lunches, we would not be able to offer the Elder lunches either.

I urge you to prioritize this initiative and champion policies that will secure funding and resources for school meal programs. Together, we can combat food insecurity and ensure that no child goes hungry during the school day, ultimately enhancing their chances for success both in academics and in life.

Thank you for considering this pressing issue. I look forward to your support in making a positive change for our children and our community.

Sincerely,

Evelynn Trefon
Mother of a 6th grader/Wife
Community Member
President, Newhalen School LSAC
Board Member, Alaska Farmer's Market Association
Secretary, Newhalen School