

Current State of Rural Charter School Meal Programs and Kitchen Infrastructure in Colorado

A Rural School Kitchen Infrastructure Assessment

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Introduction

Many rural charter schools in Colorado face significant barriers to providing high-quality school meals. Limited kitchen infrastructure, inadequate equipment, and the absence of full-service food preparation facilities can restrict meal quality and reduce participation in the National School Lunch Program.

Unlike traditional district schools, many charter schools occupy repurposed buildings that were never designed to support comprehensive food service operations. For example, one rural charter school in southwest Colorado is housed in a former police station. Even when charter schools construct new facilities, kitchen infrastructure is often underprioritized in favor of instructional spaces and other immediate educational needs. As a result, schools may install kitchens that meet current requirements but lack the capacity to support expanded meal programs in the future.

These early facility decisions can create long-term challenges. Schools seeking to improve meal quality often discover that existing kitchens lack the space, ventilation, plumbing, electrical capacity, or equipment necessary to prepare fresh meals on site. Compounding the issue is a lack of clear guidance regarding how kitchen design and infrastructure align with different levels of meal service. Without this information, school leaders may underestimate future needs during facility planning and construction. Once operational, schools often face difficult budget decisions, with limited resources directed toward instructional programming rather than costly kitchen renovations or infrastructure upgrades.

Geographic isolation further compounds these challenges by limiting access to reliable food service vendors and distribution networks. While these barriers are frequently cited by school leaders, the extent and nature of infrastructure needs across rural charter schools had not been systematically assessed.

With support from a mini-grant funded by the Colorado Trust, the Colorado League of Charter Schools conducted a comprehensive Rural School Kitchen Infrastructure Assessment to better understand food service capacity, equipment needs, and vendor-related challenges across Colorado's rural charter school sector. Through one-on-one interviews with leaders from 29 rural charter schools, the assessment gathered information on current kitchen operations, facility limitations, equipment priorities, and barriers to accessing nutritious meal options. The assessment also explored school readiness and interest in pursuing future funding opportunities to improve kitchen infrastructure through an existing League grant initiative.

Although five eligible schools did not participate due to competing priorities or a lack of interest in kitchen improvements, the assessment achieved participation from 85% of the targeted schools. Participating school leaders expressed strong appreciation for the opportunity to share their experiences and identify potential solutions to longstanding food service challenges.

Next Steps

Findings from this assessment will inform the selection of up to five schools to receive targeted kitchen infrastructure investments. Through the continued support of the Colorado Trust, Year 4 funding will expand the initiative from 12 to 17 participating schools, extending the program's reach to an estimated 1,000 additional rural students.

Beyond direct investments, the findings will help guide future funding decisions, inform data-driven policy recommendations, and strengthen the Colorado League of Charter Schools' long-term advocacy efforts related to facilities and school nutrition infrastructure. Collectively, these efforts aim to expand equitable access to nutritious meals and enhance educational outcomes for students in rural communities across Colorado.

Executive Summary

Key Findings

Rural Schools Are Committed to Meal Quality

School leaders overwhelmingly expressed a strong commitment to ensuring students have access to nutritious meals. Many schools reported significant improvements in meal quality over the past several years through partnerships with districts, CSI, local vendors, community organizations, and previous kitchen infrastructure grants funded through the League. Leaders frequently cited increased student participation, improved meal quality, expanded healthy options, and positive feedback from students and families as indicators of success.

Several schools highlighted innovative approaches to student nutrition that extend beyond traditional meal service. Examples included hydroponics and aquaponics programs that provide fresh produce for school cafeterias while creating authentic learning opportunities in science, mathematics, sustainability, and career exploration. Other schools reported success with salad bars, scratch-made menu items, and locally sourced foods that have increased student access to fresh, healthy meal options. Many schools that do not currently offer these opportunities expressed a strong desire to enhance meal quality through similar initiatives but cited labor, facility, and equipment limitations as significant barriers.

Kitchen Infrastructure Remains a Significant Barrier

Despite these successes, inadequate kitchen infrastructure remains one of the most significant barriers to expanding meal quality and access. Many schools continue to operate with limited facilities that support only warming and serving functions rather than food preparation. Common infrastructure challenges included:

- Lack of full-service kitchens
- Limited food preparation space
- Insufficient storage capacity
- Inadequate plumbing and sink configurations
- Residential-grade equipment not designed for commercial food service

- Aging or inefficient appliances
- Lack of dishwashing capacity

Multiple schools reported relying on transported meals because they lack the facilities necessary to prepare food on-site. Leaders consistently noted that expanded kitchen capacity would allow them to provide fresher meals, increase menu variety, reduce dependence on processed foods, and better respond to student preferences.

Transportation and Geographic Isolation Create Ongoing Challenges

Transportation emerged as a recurring challenge for many rural schools. Schools located significant distances from meal providers reported difficulties maintaining meal quality and temperature during transport, increased labor requirements, rising transportation costs, and limited flexibility when vendors experience disruptions. Geographic isolation also limits the availability of vendors willing or able to provide food service in rural areas.

Strong Interest in Greater Local Control

A notable theme throughout the assessment was a desire for increased local control over meal programs. Many schools expressed interest in transitioning from vendor-based or district-provided meal models to on-site meal preparation. Leaders reported that local control would allow them to:

- Increase meal quality and freshness
- Expand healthy menu options
- Better accommodate student preferences
- Improve cultural relevance of meals
- Reduce transportation dependence
- Increase participation in meal programs
- Strengthen connections to local agriculture and food systems

Several schools specifically identified future goals of operating their own meal programs while maintaining support from district or CSI School Food Authorities.

Equipment Investments Yield Immediate Results

Schools that previously received kitchen infrastructure grants consistently reported positive outcomes. Investments in equipment such as combi ovens, refrigeration units, dishwashers, salad bars, slicers, and food preparation equipment were frequently linked to improvements in meal quality, operational efficiency, and staff capacity.

Many leaders noted that relatively modest equipment investments enabled substantial program improvements and increased their ability to prepare fresh foods on site. These schools often served as examples of how targeted infrastructure investments can produce meaningful and sustainable impacts.

Priority Needs Identified Across Schools

The most commonly identified infrastructure and equipment needs included:

- Commercial ovens and ranges
- Refrigeration and freezer capacity
- Dishwashers
- Three-compartment sinks
- Food preparation equipment
- Expanded serving and salad bar stations
- Kitchen renovations and build-outs
- Additional staffing capacity
- Facilities designed for meal preparation rather than meal warming

Schools also expressed interest in funding opportunities that would support long-term sustainability, including operational planning, equipment replacement, maintenance, and staff training.

Participating School Profiles

Name of School: Alta Vista Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 134

Grades Served: K-6

Meal Provider (if applicable): Chartwells

The current state of their school meal program:

Alta Vista is offering free meals to kids every day.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

They would like to improve choices and decrease the reliance on processed foods like corn dogs and chicken nuggets.

Name of School: Animas High School

Authorizer (District or CSI): CSI

Enrolled Students: 250

Grades Served: 9-12

Meal Provider (if applicable): CSI

The current state of their school meal program:

Leader reported incremental improvements in meal quality and variety, largely driven by expanded salad bar offerings. However, limited kitchen infrastructure and equipment remain significant barriers to further enhancing meal options. The school also expressed interest in creating a more engaging cafeteria environment to improve the overall student dining experience.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

The school's vision is to operate a fully equipped kitchen with on-site staff preparing fresh meals, including locally sourced food when possible. Leaders hope to offer a rotating menu with greater variety and student choice, eliminate the need for pre-orders, and establish a comprehensive cafeteria program that better meets student preferences and needs.



Name of School: Battlerock Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): CSI

Enrolled Students: 91, but will be serving KCA (k-6) and Kiva as well (k-8).

Grades Served: K-6

Meal Provider (if applicable): SFA is CSI, they cook own meals

The current state of their school meal program:

The school has successfully developed a commercial kitchen and expanded meal quality, cultural representation, and local food offerings through significant volunteer efforts and local investment.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

Leaders hope to expand services to additional charter schools, strengthen summer meal programming, and leverage their commissary kitchen as a community hub that increases access to nutritious, warm meals for students and families, particularly during the summer months.

Name of School: Carbondale Community School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 144

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): Roaring Fork/and Mountain Development Services

The current state of their school meal program:

The school currently receives meals from the district but would like to improve meal quality, freshness, and nutritional value.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

Leaders identified challenges with maintaining meal temperature for later lunch periods and noted a need for additional kitchen equipment, including a new stove and microwaves, to better support food service operations.

Name of School: Cardinal Community Academy

Authorizer (District or CSI): District School

Enrolled Students: 178

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): No meal provider

The current state of their school meal program:

The school does not participate in the National School Lunch Program. Instead, it offers limited meal options through partnerships with local vendors twice per week, with proceeds supporting eighth-grade class trip fundraising efforts.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

As part of a planned facilities remodel, the school is exploring opportunities to enhance its food service capacity. Existing kitchen infrastructure includes refrigeration, an industrial sink, and warming equipment, providing a foundation for potential future meal program expansion.

Name of School: Children's Kiva Montessori

Authorizer (District or CSI): Cortez SD, soon CSI

Enrolled Students: 126

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): Cortez currently but changing to CSI

The current state of their school meal program:

The school partners with the district to provide breakfast and lunch, transporting meals daily for student service. While the model requires significant coordination, transportation, and labor, school leaders report that it is functioning effectively and that the district has been a supportive partner.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like to develop an on-site kitchen to increase independence and expand their food service capabilities in the future.

Name of School: CIVICA Academy Colorado

Authorizer (District or CSI): District School

Enrolled Students: 126

Grades Served: 6-12

Meal Provider (if applicable): District provides meals

The current state of their school meal program:

The school relies on district-provided meals through Sodexo and lacks a full-service kitchen, with only warming and washing capabilities available on site. Leaders reported limited menu options and occasional food shortages that impact students' access to meals.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like the ability to prepare food on site, expanding meal options and ensuring students have equitable access to the same quality and variety of meals available to other students within the district.

Name of School: Crestone Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 100

Grades Served: K-12

Meal Provider (if applicable): District

The current state of their school meal program:

The school operates a highly successful meal program, serving lunch to approximately 90% of students and breakfast to about one-third. Through a partnership with the district, the school has significantly increased student access to meals, though transportation and meal service costs remain substantial and continue to rise.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders are exploring long-term facility solutions that could include expanded kitchen capacity through a district facilities initiative or a proposed community center adjacent to the school. These efforts could improve meal service infrastructure, though implementation remains several years away.



Name of School: Gardner Valley Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 80

Grades Served: Prek-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): Huerfano County (Walsenburg RE-1)

The current state of their school meal program:

The school reports a positive meal program experience, with students enjoying the food and a strong relationship with food service staff. District support helps manage the operational and administrative aspects of the program.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like greater transparency and understanding of food service costs, including food bills and ordering processes, to better inform decision-making and program oversight.

Name of School: Georgetown Community School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 88

Grades Served: Prek-6

Meal Provider (if applicable): District

The current state of their school meal program:

The school reports significant improvements in both meal quality and student engagement. A hydroponics program provides fresh produce for the cafeteria while creating hands-on learning opportunities across multiple subject areas. Students take pride in growing and serving food, and leaders report strong student and parent satisfaction. The kitchen has benefited from a skilled chef, supportive district partnership, and recent infrastructure upgrades, including equipment and climate improvements.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders hope to sustain and expand the hydroponics program by investing in ongoing maintenance, supplies, and system enhancements. They also envision extending participation across additional grade levels while developing long-term plans for summer operation and sustainability.



Name of School: Guffey Community Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): Park County RE-2

Enrolled Students: 13

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): School provides meals

The current state of their school meal program:

The school provides a lunch program supported by community partnerships, including donations of nonperishable food from a local church and a dedicated budget to assist families who cannot afford meals. Leaders report that the current model effectively meets student needs despite limited enrollment.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders are satisfied with the current approach and plan to continue adapting the program based on annual enrollment and student needs. Given ongoing enrollment challenges, they remain focused on maintaining a sustainable program year by year.

Name of School: High Rockies Community School

Authorizer (District or CSI): CSI

Enrolled Students: 50

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): None

The current state of their school meal program:

The school reports significant improvements in both meal quality and student engagement. A hydroponics program provides fresh produce for the cafeteria while creating hands-on learning opportunities across multiple subject areas. Students take pride in growing and serving food, and leaders report strong student and parent satisfaction. The kitchen has benefited from a skilled chef, supportive district partnership, and recent infrastructure upgrades, including equipment and climate improvements.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders hope to sustain and expand the hydroponics program by investing in ongoing maintenance, supplies, and system enhancements. They also envision extending participation across additional grade levels while developing long-term plans for summer operation and sustainability.

Name of School: Aspen Community School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 135

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): None

The current state of their school meal program:

The school does not provide lunch. Students bring their own meals.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders are happy with their current meal setup.

Name of School: Juniper Ridge Community School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 175

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): 9R-District

The current state of their school meal program:

The school reports significant improvements in meal quality, with students, families, and staff expressing overwhelmingly positive feedback. Participation has increased, and students particularly appreciate the hot meal offerings. Staff continue to refine program administration and compliance processes as the program grows.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like to expand and enhance the salad bar by offering a greater variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, and toppings. Their vision is to provide students with more choice and access to diverse, healthy food options.



Name of School: Marble Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): Gunnison

Enrolled Students: 33

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): They are their own SFA but didn't provide meals this year because they didn't have funding to pay a dedicated lunch staff member.

The current state of their school meal program:

Students brought their own meals. Canceled HSMA participation due to the cost of labor.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

The school would love to bring back the meal program.

Name of School: Kwiayat Community Academy

Authorizer (District or CSI): CSI

Enrolled Students: 82

Grades Served: K-5

Meal Provider (if applicable): Battlerock Charter School

The current state of their school meal program:

The school reports improvements in meal quality but continues to face challenges related to transporting meals from a distant location. Its rural setting creates logistical barriers that can impact the efficiency and reliability of meal service.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like to establish an on-site kitchen with dedicated food service staff, reducing reliance on transported meals and increasing local control over meal preparation and program operations.

Name of School: Knowledge Quest

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 380

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): District/Sodexo

The current state of their school meal program:

The school is highly satisfied with its meal program and partnership with Sodexo, citing strong meal quality, student choice, and accommodations for dietary needs and allergies. Staff appreciate the support provided by Sodexo, as well as recent equipment improvements that have increased efficiency and allowed more time for food preparation.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders are pleased with the current program and do not identify any significant changes or improvements needed at this time.



Name of School: Merit Academy

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 612

Grades Served: Prek-12

Meal Provider (if applicable): The District, and Chartwells

The current state of their school meal program:

The school is generally satisfied with meal quality but has experienced challenges in its partnership with the district, particularly related to communication and coordination. Leaders believe there may be opportunities to improve meal offerings and increase access to available reimbursement funding.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like to operate their own meal program while retaining their current food service staff, allowing for greater local control, flexibility, and program development.

Name of School: Mountain Middle

Authorizer (District or CSI): CSI

Enrolled Students: 325

Grades Served: 4-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): Local Restaurants, do not participate in NSLP

The current state of their school meal program:

The school uses local restaurants to cater meals.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

The school is working with vendors to see if they can use more sustainable products for lunch service.



Name of School: North Routt Community Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 80

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): Clark Store, but will move to Steamboat SD fall 2026

The current state of their school meal program:

The school currently does not participate in NSLP. Their current vendor is canceling service for the 26/27 school year.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

The school would like to be able to prepare meals on-site or have the school district provide meals. They would like students to participate in NSLP.



Name of School: Pagosa Peak Open School

Authorizer (District or CSI): CSI

Enrolled Students: 130

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): CSI is your SFA, provide own meals

The current state of their school meal program:

The school participates in the National School Lunch Program and offers a limited cold breakfast program. Leaders are pleased with the program's progress and report strong support as they continue to develop and refine meal offerings.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like to expand lunch offerings from a two-week to a four-week menu cycle and enhance breakfast options through a rotating menu. They are committed to continuous improvement and learning more about student preferences while maintaining compliance with program requirements.

Name of School: Pleasant View Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District, but changing to CSI

Enrolled Students: 39, predicting about 50 for next year

Grades Served: K-6

Meal Provider (if applicable): Cortez SD

The current state of their school meal program:

The school operates a highly successful meal program, with strong student satisfaction and minimal food waste. Meals are prepared on site using ingredients provided through a partnership with the district.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like to continue expanding menu variety and healthy options while encouraging students to try new foods and develop broader, healthier eating habits.

Name of School: Ross Montessori

Authorizer (District or CSI): CSI

Enrolled Students: 171

Grades Served: PreK-8 (pre-k does not take lunch)

Meal Provider (if applicable): Roaring Fork SD

The current state of their school meal program:

The school is serving NSLP and breakfast.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

Leaders report that the program is working as is.



Name of School: Southwest Open School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 110

Grades Served: 9-12

Meal Provider (if applicable): Cortez SD

The current state of their school meal program:

The school has expanded access to healthier meal options, including salads, fresh vegetables, and made-to-order sandwiches. As a result, more students are choosing to remain on campus for lunch and participate in the meal program.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders aim to secure sustainable funding for their culinary program, develop a fully equipped kitchen, and gain greater autonomy over meal planning and operations. Increased independence would allow the school to tailor menus and services more closely to student needs and preferences.



Name of School: Steamboat Montessori

Authorizer (District or CSI): CSI

Enrolled Students: 178

Grades Served: K-5

Meal Provider (if applicable): South Routt

The current state of their school meal program:

The school operates a successful vendor-based meal program and has invested in additional equipment and staffing to support food service operations.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like to transition to preparing and serving meals on-site while maintaining CSI as the School Food Authority. This model would provide greater control over meal preparation and program operations.



Name of School: Stone Creek Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): CSI

Enrolled Students: 209

Grades Served: K-8 (x 2 campuses) – only serve meals at one

Meal Provider (if applicable): CSI is the SFA/Meals are by vended by Eagle SD

The current state of their school meal program:

The school's meal program is operating successfully, though food service is currently available at only one of its two campuses.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like to expand meal service to both campuses, achieve financial sustainability, and develop the capacity to prepare meals on site.

Name of School: Two Rivers Community School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 400

Grades Served: K-8

Meal Provider (if applicable): Roaring Fork

The current state of their school meal program:

The school reports an effective meal program that ensures students receive meals each day. Breakfast is served in classrooms, helping to increase access and reduce stigma associated with participation.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like to increase student participation while expanding access to healthier meal options and greater menu variety.

Name of School: Vision Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): Delta SD

Enrolled Students: 450

Grades Served: K-12

Meal Provider (if applicable): Delta

The current state of their school meal program:

The school receives approximately 55 meals per day through a partnership with Delta School District. Leaders report that the current arrangement effectively meets the needs of the school and its students.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders are satisfied with the existing model and do not identify any immediate program changes. The only anticipated improvement would be a future facility upgrade that includes an on-site kitchen.



Name of School: Vista Charter School

Authorizer (District or CSI): District

Enrolled Students: 200

Grades Served: 9-12

Meal Provider (if applicable): Montrose SD

The current state of their school meal program:

The school reports significant improvements, including enhanced kitchen equipment and a strong partnership with the district food service team. Leaders are pleased with the program's current progress and operations.

The ideal future state of their school meal program:

School leaders would like to further modernize their kitchen by transitioning from a residential-style setup to a more professional food service operation. Priorities include adding an oven and stove, upgrading the dishwasher, and installing a three-compartment sink to improve meal preparation capacity and efficiency.



Data by School

Detailed school-level data can be found in the linked [Google Sheet](#).

Conclusion

The assessment demonstrates both the progress rural charter schools have made in expanding student access to nutritious meals and the significant infrastructure challenges that remain. While many schools have developed creative partnerships and innovative approaches to food service, a substantial number continue to operate without the facilities necessary to serve the kinds of meals they desire.

Targeted investments in kitchen infrastructure have the potential to significantly improve meal quality, increase participation in nutrition programs, strengthen local food systems, and expand equitable access to healthy meals for rural students. Findings from this assessment will guide future funding decisions, support the selection of schools for infrastructure investments, and inform broader advocacy efforts aimed at improving food service capacity across Colorado's rural charter school sector.

The assessment also highlights the importance of considering food service infrastructure early in facility planning and construction decisions. Many school leaders reported that kitchen limitations stem from decisions made years earlier, when facilities were renovated or constructed without a long-term vision for meal service. As charter schools plan new facilities or major renovations, kitchen infrastructure should be viewed as a strategic investment that directly supports student health, engagement, and learning. Thoughtful planning for adequate space, utilities, ventilation, storage, and food preparation capacity can help schools avoid costly future renovations and create opportunities to expand meal quality and access over time.

Through continued investment, strategic facility planning, and strong partnerships, rural charter schools can expand their ability to provide high-quality meal programs that support the health, well-being, and academic success of students across Colorado.