

WHITE PAPER: FALL 2023 COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION SCHOOLS OF CHOICE EQUITY CONVENING

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO SCHOOL CHOICE: SCHOOL MEALS



PREPARED IN COLLABORATION WITH THE COLORADO
LEAGUE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS



COLORADO
Department of Education



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INTRODUCTION

The passage of Healthy Meals For All Public School Students -SB22-087- signified an opportunity for the Equity Advisory Committee to clarify best practices, lessons learned, and ways to best align resources for providing healthy meals effectively and equitably. The CDE SOC 2023 fall equity convening, Equitable Access to School Choice: School Meals and Nutrition, gathered School Food Authorities (SFAs), executive chefs, food nutritionists, school leaders, and researchers to uncover best practices for driving nutrition and equity through school kitchens across the State of Colorado. Pre-convening research included a local (Academy 360 Charter School and Denver Public Schools) case study and a national (KIPP Texas) case study highlighting the different strategies, approaches, and impacts on healthy meals for all public school students.

The convening findings are organized into four interconnected buckets: Relationships, Food Culture in Schools, Physical and Human Resources Needed for Effectiveness, and Feedback and lines of Communication. Each plays a unique role in providing equitable access to school choice. This white paper provides implications for the implementation of Healthy Meals For All Public School Students aligned to each bucket, resources, and next steps toward food equity.

Organizations

Academy 360 Charter School, Denver, CO.

Charter Choice Collaborative, Denver, CO.

Charter School Institute, Denver, CO.

Colorado Department of Education School Nutrition Unit, Denver, CO.

Colorado Department of Education Schools of Choice Unit (CDE SOC), Denver, CO.

Colorado League of Charter Schools (CLCS), Denver, CO.

Denver Public Schools Food and Nutrition Services, Denver, CO.

Donnell-Kay Foundation, Denver, CO.

Nourish Colorado, Denver, CO.

School District 51 Food and Nutrition Services, Grand Junction, CO.

St. Vrain Valley School District Department of Nutrition Services, Longmont, CO.

The Pinnacle Charter School, Federal Heights, CO.

Case Studies

Local Case Study Academy 360: Building Partnerships to Increase Food Equity. (2003)

National Case Study KIPP Texas: Impacts of Scratch Cooking. (2023).

Fall 2023 Advisory Committee Panelists

Parker Baxter, University of Colorado Denver

Cassandra Berry, Eastlake High School

Dan Schaller, The Colorado League of Charter Schools

Terry Croy Lewis, Charter School Institute

Jess Welch, Charter School Institute

Chad Miller, The Pinnacle Charter School

Steven Bartholomew, New Legacy Charter School

Kerri Link, Colorado Department of Education School Nutrition Unit

Megan Johnson, Colorado Department of Education School Nutrition Unit

Event Panels & Presentations

- *Keynote:* Why Food Matters | Ulcca Joshi Hansen, Educating Potential
- *Presentation:* The Landscape of School Food in Colorado | Jessica Wright, Nourish Colorado
- *Panel:* Healthy Meals for All Now and in the Future | Moderator: Rainey Wikstrom, CLCS Wellness Consultant, Panelists: Jenny Herman, CDE; Britton Knickerbocker, Charter Choice Collaborative; Ilene Agustin, CSI; Jess Wright, Nourish Colorado
- *Conversation:* Case Study Highlight: Exploring Promising Practices in School Nutrition | Moderator: Aaron Massey, Educational Consultant, Panelists: Becky McLean, Academy 360; Teresa Haffner, Denver Public Schools Food and Nutrition Services
- *Breakout:* Culturally Relevant School Meals | Kelley Dillon, The Pinnacle Charter School & Theresa Spires, St Vrain Valley School District
- *Breakout:* Solving Infrastructure Challenges | Moderator: Taber Ward, Donnell-Kay Foundation, Panelists: Rainey Wikstrom, CLCS Wellness Consultant; Ilene Agustin, CSI; Jess Wright, Nourish Colorado; Dan Sharp, D51 School District
- *Breakout:* Food Partnerships | Yari Landa, The Pinnacle Charter School & Hanna Pelican, Denver Public Schools
- *Breakout:* Federal Programs: Summer Feeding and Snacks | Megan Johnson, CDE

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

"Across the United States, there are 9.3 million children currently experiencing food insecurity" (Center for American Progress, 2023). The impact of food insecurity on a child's "physical, cognitive, and psychosocial potential" (Gallegos et al., 2021) is sizable, with more detrimental mental health effects (Ling et al., 2022) than their food-secure peers as well as a "predicted impaired academic performance in reading and mathematics..." (Jyoti et al., 2005). Food insecurity poses a severe equity issue.

Specifically in Colorado, in 2019, an estimated "...one in 10 Coloradans did not have enough money to afford the food they needed" (Gilbert, 2020). Moreover, Coloradans that disproportionately are impacted by food insecurity are "people with lower incomes, rural residents, young adults, black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx people" (Gilbert). This "unequal burden," as Julia Gilbert of the Colorado Healthy Institute calls it, disproportionately impacts the general health of Coloradan students. Specific to nutritional food, a staggering "1 in 6 [Coloradan] children (16%) are not getting adequate nutrition" (Hunger Free Colorado, 2021).

School meals play an essential role in combating food insecurity. Federal School Nutrition Programs, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program, the Afterschool Snack Program, and the Summer Food Service Program, have helped ensure students receive food and adequate nutrition during the school day and beyond. These federally funded programs have provided free and reduced-priced meals to low-income families who qualify since the 1940s. NSLP has evolved over the years, specifically with the passing of the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act in 2010, to improve food procurement, food safety, and food quality based on nutritional standards from the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences (Perez-Carrillo et al., n.d.). Despite access to many federal programs, some students and families do not participate. The stigma around eating free meals if all students do not have free meals (Cohen et al., 2023), the lack of diversity of meal options, and food quality (Center for American Progress, 2023) are just some common reasons why students might not participate in school meals -- albeit free.

The benefits of feeding children at school extend beyond filling hungry bellies. Research has concluded that “a well-nourished child is more likely to be at school, is a better learner, and is more willing to participate in the classroom” (Girouard et al., 2019, p. 3). When students are hungry, their academic performance, attendance, and behavior suffer.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, schools were able to offer free meals to all students, regardless of family income, through federal support. Schools and districts experienced benefits when feeding all children, including increased food security and academic equity. The stigma of receiving a free meal was eliminated. However, once federal funding expired, most states had to revert to free and reduced-priced meals for only those who qualified. In response, several states, including Colorado, have enacted universal school meals through state support to reclaim the benefits discovered during the pandemic. During the 2023-2024 school year, eight states offered universal free meal programs, with many more considering a similar approach (Goldstein, 2023). Colorado passed Healthy Meals For All Public School Students - SB22-087 during the 2022 November general election. Healthy Meals For All Public School Students allows School Food Authorities (SFAs) to provide free meals to all students starting in the 2023-2024 school year. However, allowing free meals to all public school students and actually *servicing* free meals to all public school students are different.

Despite the profound evidence supporting the benefits of providing healthy meals at school, barriers exist in some public charter schools that prohibit offering high-quality school meals or meals at all. Lack of food vendors, insufficient school and kitchen facilities, and difficulties transporting food are just a few. Providing a food program accessible to all students is the cornerstone of ensuring that schools become a choice for every family. When charter schools offer inclusive food services, they eliminate barriers and open doors for families who might overlook a school that best caters to their child's needs. Moreover, nutrition and food service support school choice and bolster student attendance, retention, and overall well-being, ultimately leading to stronger academic outcomes. While meals are free for all, only some public charter school students can access this program in the 2023-2024 school year.

While legislating healthy meals for all public school students is a critical step in increasing access and equity, how to roll out such an expansive program is challenging and requires further exploration.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Fall 2023 Equity Convening *Equitable Access to School Choice: School Meals and Nutrition* gathered School Food Authorities (SFAs), executive chefs, food nutritionists, school leaders, and researchers to uncover best practices for driving nutrition and equity through school kitchens across the State of Colorado. The findings and implications for implementation are organized into four interconnected buckets: Relationships, Food Culture in Schools, Physical and Human Resources Needed for Effectiveness, and Feedback & Lines of Communication.

Four Key Implications for Implementation of Healthy Meals For All Public School Students

- **Relationships:** Relationships between and among the school, the school district, families, students, and SFAs both establish and guide what is possible for nutritional food programming in schools.
- **Assessment, Lines of Communication, & Feedback:** Just as relationships are meaningful, how often and how well communication between students and staff, school and district, kitchen staff, and the school staff at large plays a unique role in making adjustments when needed.
- **Intentionality & Physical and Human Resources:** A well-designed kitchen (or well-thought-out adjustments if a school does not have a full kitchen) is critical to serving all students effectively. Equally critical is having a well-trained kitchen staff.
- **The Link Between Schools and Health Equity:** "Health equity is the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Health equity starts in schools.

RELATIONSHIPS

Stakeholder relationships play a crucial role in uncovering each entity's values, ideas, beliefs, and goals in providing healthy meals to all public school students. In a panel discussion between Theresa Haffner, Enterprise Management School Food Authority for Denver Public Schools and Charter Schools, and Becky McLean, Executive Director of Academy 360, Becky highlighted her deep passion for healthy food options for her students. She noted that some of her students would attend school solely because that was one of the few healthy meals they would receive that day. Healthy food is a fundamental human right and that school is an ecosystem that relies on healthy food for its nutritional value as well as its communal value. Becky did not shy away from that conversation with Theresa. In turn, Theresa communicated her values in providing healthy meals for all public school students. She firmly believed that facilities should not determine a student's ability to eat healthy food. Moreover, a student with dietary restrictions due to physical needs or religious beliefs should have options that fit their needs. Their relationship led to a partnership that has endured for more than ten years.

The school and district relationship is not the only relationship that is critical. Staff at Academy 360 are also held to the same standard as students. For example, staff can not bring in Takis - a popular but unhealthy chip among students across many age groups- since students cannot bring them in. Teachers modeling what it looks like to eat healthy food creates a relationship of mutual admiration between the staff and students. Students can talk to teachers more authentically because they are not perceived as "above the law."



Relationships between and among all stakeholders, including students, allow everyone to learn from each other on ways to improve healthy meals. Communication among stakeholders leads to a process of what improvement science calls the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle – "a systematic process for gaining valuable learning and knowledge for the continual improvement of a product, process, or service" (The Deming Institute, n.d.). By establishing and nurturing relationships of mutual understanding, all stakeholders can learn from each other on how to improve healthy meals in their schools.

Moreover, keynote speaker Ulcca Joshi Hansen highlighted food's unique power in building relationships among people and how that leads to getting all the nutrients we need. She tells a powerful story of having a "soul cafe" in her childhood home that brought people from different places, religions, political spaces, and perspectives to cook together and eat together at crowded tables. Ulcca relayed how they all ate the whole meal together instead of selecting just one aspect of a multi-course meal. She noted that what people may not realize about the multi-course meal is that each course adds its unique nutritional value to the meal overall. The people who shared this meal were all healthier by coming together and building relationships through food.



Image Credit: Building the Future of Smart, Ulcca Joshi Hansen

ASSESSMENT, LINES OF COMMUNICATION, & FEEDBACK

Similar to the importance of Relationships between and among all stakeholders is the importance of Assessment, Lines of Communication, and Feedback. In breakout sessions with Kelley Dillon, licensed dietician and Nutrition Services Director at The Pinnacle Charter School, and Theresa Spires, School Wellness Coordinator at St. Vrain Valley School District, they highlight the importance of culturally preferred foods. Food and Nutrition Leaders should assess the gaps in food programming through customer-based needs assessments, participation, and available resources. Once an understanding of the landscape is achieved, stakeholder engagement should follow. In other words, School Food Leaders should discuss various food options and recipes that are possible with customers (students), vendors, and staff. This critical step allows Food and Nutrition Leaders to make sense of initial assessments.

For example, tracked data may indicate that students are not eating certain meals, and various reasons may be the cause. However, when lines of communication are opened and stakeholders' interests are uncovered, food providers and schools may discover there needs to be more diversity in food options. Solving that problem would look different than solving the problem of low-quality food. Once data is assessed and stakeholders are engaged, continuous feedback helps kitchens thrive.

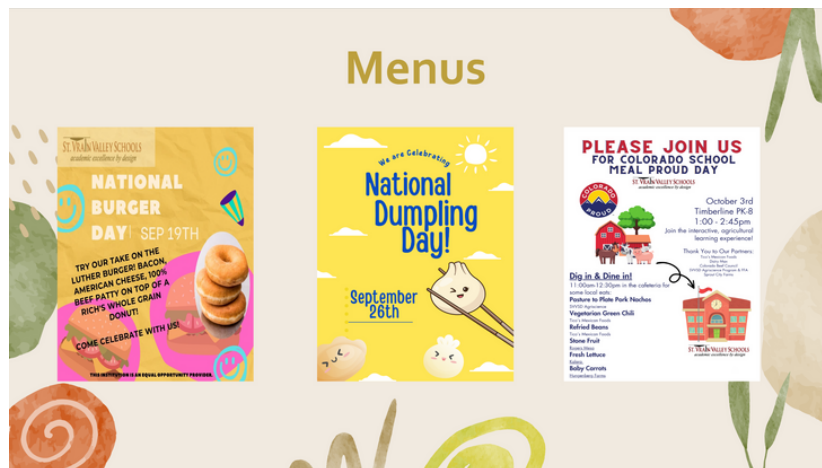


Image Credit: Culturally Relevant School Meals, Theresa Spires, RDN

One model Kelley and Theresa highlighted that combines these efforts is The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model (WSCC). In this model, "schools, health agencies, parents, and communities share a common goal of supporting the health and academic achievement of adolescents" (Centers for Disease Control, n.d.).



Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/wsccl/model.htm>

The image above describes students at the center and the primary focus of the support. The white band around the student describes the integration of assessment, lines of communication, and feedback. In sum, it describes the coordination of supports. The blue section describes the school support necessary for a healthy child. The community bands highlight the constant need for community input and collaboration.

Assessment, Lines of Communication, and Feedback are critical steps in implementing healthy meals for all public school students. Being curious and knowing what is happening with the students that kitchens serve, discussing different possibilities, and constantly getting feedback allows us to learn from each other. All this is in the service of making children healthier.

INTENTIONALITY & PHYSICAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES

During the Convening, Jessica Wright from Nourish Colorado, a non-profit focused on connecting with and between "farms, ranches, and communities so that all Coloradans have equitable access to fresh, nutritious foods" (2022), asked a fundamental question during her whole group session. "How do we change that mindset from slop on a tray to full culinary positions that are woven into the schools, valued and appreciated, and getting kids excited and invested in food?" In other words, how do we go from the old-school mindset of frozen pizza at lunch to vibrant, fresh foods created by school chefs? She noted that when she helped a set of schools make that mental shift, they saw student food participation go from 45% to 80%. That is, initially, 45% of their students participated in the lunch program. After these intentional efforts (described below), 80% of students participated.

Steps to consider as the journey continues...

Authorizers

- Collaboration is key
- Include charters in grant opportunities
- Share staff training opportunities
- Consistency with Food Quality



School Food Authority

- Consider a Farm to School Bid
- Local Food Program funds are available for you as well!
- Invest in your kitchens!!
- Support staff training with a focus on recipe development

School Leaders

- Invest in 20 mins seated lunch time
- Nutrition, Culinary, and Agricultural Education woven into the school day
- BEST Grants for kitchens!
- Leverage CTE programs
- Work together to strengthen the entire school population and include the students voices!

Image Credit: The Landscape of School Food in CO, Chef Jessica Wright

Intentional Effort 1: All food service employees are required to participate in training. Finding time for school staff to test new recipes, gain culinary experience, and think strategically about kitchen budgets has a critical impact. The staff at large begins to see the value and worth of the kitchen.

Intentional Effort 2: Students need time to eat and share culture. Like Ulcca noted, Jessica shares that just as we look at the importance of instructional minutes, so too are nutritional minutes. Students gain an appreciation for the nutritious food they eat if they have time to appreciate it.

Intentional Effort 3: Reserve money to tell the stories of what is working regarding school nutrition in school newsletters, through local papers, or on social media. For example, at Academy 360, the school shares what they are growing in their garden.

Intentional Effort 4: School staff eating school lunch. Like at Academy 360, staff modeling how much they appreciate nutritious food excites students to eat it. Teachers are models in and out of the classroom, including in the cafeteria.

Intentional Effort 5: Rethink and redesign the cafeteria space. Just as a high-end restaurant sets an ambiance that improves the customer's experience, so do students like an ambiance that improves their eating experience.



Image Credit: The Landscape of School Food in CO, Chef Jessica Wright

These are just some of the intentional efforts schools can take to improve participation in Healthy Meals for All. However, Jessica also provided an apt warning. Physical and human resources are needed to implement healthy meals. Many schools struggle with the physical building they are in. The most ideal situation, she notes, is that chefs have kitchens that give them the ability to make food from scratch. That takes a financial investment and a redesign. A full school kitchen is the best-case scenario. If that is not possible, Jessica says get creative. In a follow-up panel, Jessica discussed different ways to provide healthy food options without a full kitchen with Rainey Wikstrom, Colorado League of Charter Schools Health and Wellness Consultant, Ilene Augustin with the Charter School Institute, and Dan Sharp from District 51 in Grand Junction, Colorado. They described how impactful having portable salad bars or full and half hot boxes, and having food delivered (from a nearby local source) is on students' healthy meal options. Dan has also innovated a model using food trucks that serve 300 kids a day and has also worked with the community to fund mobile kitchens. Another warning to schools is to consider the exact equipment they might need based on the menu they plan to serve. Schools may purchase equipment they do not need based on the recommendations of an architect or equipment salesperson. The above expert panel recommends that schools contact their School Food Authority before making any equipment purchases. Again, the importance of communication is emphasized.



Image Credit: Alternative Meal Service Model, Mesa County Valley School District 51

THE LINK BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND HEALTH EQUITY

Perhaps the most powerful reflection from the CDE Fall Equity Convening, in response to the passage of the Healthy Meals for All Public School Students, is that of Becky McLean of Academy 360. In her interview, she reflected on the importance of seeing healthy and nutritional meals as a means to equitable outcomes and teaching kids at a young age that nutrition matters, where food comes from matters, and how food is grown matters. Researchers call this "health equity." The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines health equity as "the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health." Throughout the convening, each presenter explicitly named or alluded to the idea that health equity starts at the school level – when students are young. To achieve health equity, the CDC suggests, schools and districts "address historical and contemporary injustices; Overcome economic, social, and other obstacles to health and health care; and eliminate preventable health disparities."



Image Credit: Culturally Relevant School Meals, Theresa Spires, RDN



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/Academy360Denver>

Becky McLean uses a powerful phrase to capture what her school did to address historical injustices. Academy 360 operates in a food desert. A food desert is a community with "poor access to healthy, affordable foods" (HealthLine, 2021). Instead of settling for low-quality, low-nutrition foods, she says, "We grow food on asphalt." They grow nutritious foods right where they learn and work with their donated supplies, partnerships (like with the Montbello Organizing Committee), and ingenuity. They teach students how to garden and pick their own vegetables for lunch. They overcome economic, social, and other obstacles by finding a third way to solve a problem. When there is no straightforward solution to an issue as important as healthy meals for all students at Academy 360, they find a way. Eliminating preventable health disparities for all public school students starts by having a bold hope for what is possible for students growing up in inequitable systems. If done right, Healthy Meals For All Public School Students can give a new meaning to the phrase, "Kids, eat your vegetables."

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Relationships

<p>Build relationships with the community at large. That includes students, teachers, chefs, non-profits, School Food Authorities, and School Districts. Those relationships can lead to a more robust food program.</p>	<p>Diversify relationships. Schools and districts can build a network of nutrition enthusiasts that enhance menus, ingredients, and strategies through diversity of culture, opinions, understandings, and beliefs.</p>
<p>School and district relationships with parents are critical in getting buy-in to the school's food programming. Build and nurture that relationship.</p>	<p>Put students in the driver's seat. They can uncover the why behind the data.</p>
<p>Relationships uncover the unknown values of each stakeholder. Build on that.</p>	<p>Nurture relationships by staying curious. Ask questions. Even if those questions are uncomfortable (i.e., Where did this spice come from? What is the cultural origin of this meal?)</p>
<p>Create "human-centered spaces" (Ulcca Joshi Hansen). Human-centered spaces create context and space for young people to exist among each other.</p>	

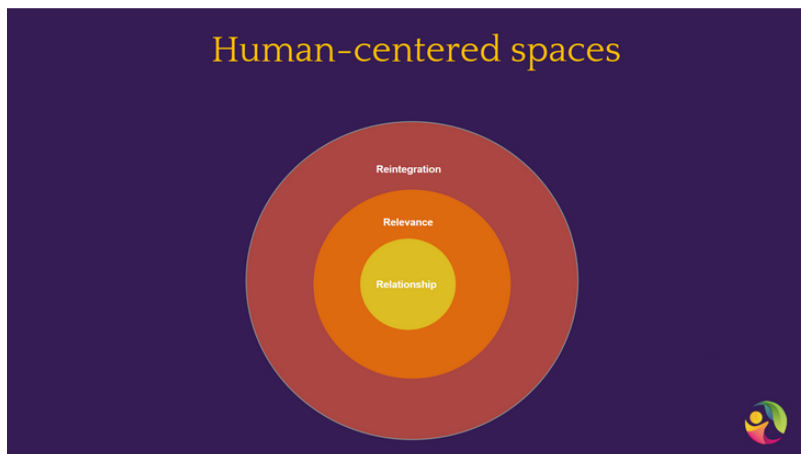


Image Credit:
Building the Future
of Smart, Ulcca
Joshi Hansen

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Assessment, Lines of Communication, & Feedback

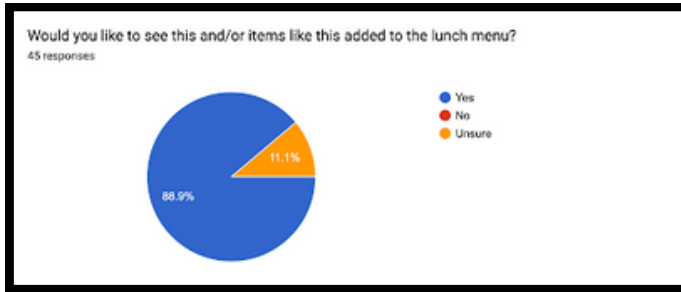


Image Credit: Culturally Relevant School Meals, Theresa Spires, RDN

<p>Assess what matters. If schools and districts care about how many students eat healthy meals at lunch, track it. That data will help facilitate informed decisions.</p>	<p>Get feedback from all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, administration, and the larger community. Each vantage point holds a unique solution to a problem.</p>
<p>Test what matters. After gathering data, ask stakeholders if it is accurate, why, and how they know.</p>	<p>Be prepared to iterate. Schools and districts might not get it right the first time, but they can learn a lesson each time they do not.</p>
<p>Start conversations about nutritional food with the community, teachers, principals, SFAs, nutritionists, and school districts. A school will not get what it does not ask for.</p>	<p>Be prepared to act on the feedback creatively. There is more than one way to serve students healthy food options.</p>
<p>Consider the whole child—a child's traumas with food insecurity, their culture, and their upbringing all matter.</p>	<p>Consider the whole family—their culture, how they receive information about the school food, and family struggles all matter.</p>

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Intentionality & Physical and Human Resources

Training more kitchen staff is one of the most significant investments a school or district can make in providing healthy meals for all public school students.

Stay in the loop with what is happening by joining the CDE's School Nutrition Unit's newsletter, *The Dish*.

Make decisions early about the type of food programming the school wants. Remember, the best option to make healthy, nutritious food is to have a kitchen where chefs can make food from scratch.

Healthy Meals For All Public School Students will cost money. Check out CDE's Healthy School Meals For All Program webpage if schools and districts need resources.

Charter schools in Colorado can become their own School Food Authority.

Refer to the 5 Intentional Efforts on page 13.



Image Credit: The Landscape of School Food in CO, Chef Jessica Wright

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The Link Between Schools and Health Equity

Know that health equity starts in the school building.	Discuss with families what is possible when the whole family eats nutritious food together.
Grow gardens with students, teach them how to tend to a garden, and show them the value of working to produce vegetables.	If there is a need for more nutritious food in the school's neighborhood, consider a third way of solving this problem, like Academy 360, where they "grow food on asphalt."

Programs in CO

- National School Lunch Program (NSLP)
- School Breakfast Program (SBP)
- Afterschool Snack Program (ASP)
- Special Milk Program (SMP)
- Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)
- Seamless Summer Option (SSO)
- CACFP afterschool at-risk


A photograph of a school lunch tray. The tray is green and contains a burrito, a small carton of fat-free milk, a small bunch of grapes, and some sliced carrots. The tray is placed on a purple surface.

Image Credit: When School's Out, Megan Johnson

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