

## CNS Board Update 5.13.2026 Additional Information

### **Celebrating Rosalba Estrada de Martinez**

CNS is proud to report that our friend Rosalba Estrada de Martinez was selected for Sonoma County's Classified School Year Employee of the Year in the Food and Nutrition Category. Rosalba has an incredible gift for connecting with and engaging students in a meaningful and structured way. Rosalba demonstrates a deep commitment to the children of Sonoma County and Steele Lane Elementary School. Rosalba's unique contributions led to a tremendous increase in access to food during the COVID school closure.

Rosalba is a candidate in the statewide contest. Please join us in celebrating Rosalba's accomplishments in supporting the children of Santa Rosa City Schools and Steele Lane Elementary School.

### **Al Puro Centavo**

Al puro centavo is an idiom that means to rise to the occasion and do your best. The CNS team uses this idiom to describe our daily work and to grow so that we can better meet the needs of the children of Sonoma County.

### **Goals**

1. Hire and retain excellent staff.
2. Prepare and serve from scratch food that meets students' needs and reflects the community we serve.
3. Invest in infrastructure to prepare and serve meals that meet students' needs.
4. Nutrition Education and taste testing
5. Local procurement
6. Sustainability and reducing the amount of plastic in schools.

### **Fiscal update**

The Cafeteria Fund, Fund 13, remains in good standing. The CNS program has maintained the maximum allowable reserves for future needs. The CNS program is investing in capital equipment, local foods, and other enhancements to spend down excess reserves.

Gross revenue is approximately the same as the last school year as of February 1, 2026. The year-over-year growth we have historically observed has slowed. This pattern was observed with summer meals as well. Maintaining similar revenues year over year is a positive outcome amid declining enrollment, as it indicates a higher percentage of enrolled students participating in the school meal program. There has been significant growth in the plastic-free elementary lunch pilot program. The plastic-free elementary lunch pilot at Monroe Elementary and Hidden Valley Elementary is estimated to increase gross revenue by \$319,000 annually. CNS plans to

expand scratch-cooking and plastic-free elementary lunches to manage food costs, increase gross revenue, and ensure fiscal sustainability.

The combination of reducing one-time professional services related to hiring permanent employees and scratch cooking has reduced year-over-year ongoing expenses by 1.19% as of February 1, 2026. These initiatives have offset the annual increase in ongoing costs, including step increases in labor costs and column increases in food and other expenses. Additional savings and gross revenue gains are expected from expanding scratch-cooking and plastic-free elementary meals. Plastic-free meals require additional staff to facilitate higher participation at schools. We will need to fill the open positions posted on Edjoin to expand the number of plastic-free elementary school sites.

The CNS department has adopted and updated a five-year multi-year projection (MYP) for the cafeteria fund to guide investment choices. The cafeteria fund holds reserves that reflect the reserve cap based on the average expenditures of the past six months. These reserves and budget projections will help the CNS program invest appropriately, weather changes in supplemental funding opportunities, and improve the food we serve each day. Each meal served by the CNS team is more than a meal. Each meal is an educational opportunity to support healthy lifelong eating habits.

### **Staffing update**

CNS staff continue to inspire and support students, staff, and community members with their steadfast dedication to providing excellent service.

SRCS CNS partnered with Sonoma Family Meals to provide hands-on training for food-service staff across several school districts for the second time. Sonoma Family Meal provided two training sessions at the SRCS CNS Central Kitchen. Cook Chill staff demonstrated tremendous growth in their culinary skills and knowledge, which has greatly expedited the implementation of scratch cooking. The partnership with Sonoma Family Meal provides an excellent opportunity for CNS staff to collaborate with staff at other school districts, expand their knowledge, and increase their confidence in preparing scratch cooking.

Food safety certification training has continued to be a focus for staff training. 17 staff members have achieved manager-level food safety certification this school year. The 17 staff members represents 29% of the staff who are required to have the manager-level food safety training. The food safety certifications are valid for five years. Staff demonstrate food safety knowledge and best practices every day; the certification allows them to do so objectively. CNS leadership is proud of the staff who became certified for the first time. Taking the exam for the first time is a challenge, and becoming certified has led to a great deal of confidence and a renewed interest in career growth.

Santa Rosa Junior Senior High School and Montgomery Junior Senior High School had separate meal services and more students to serve each day. To meet these needs, additional staff members were assigned, CNS installed additional equipment and cold storage at the two 7-12 school sites. CNS staff reorganized their workflow to accommodate the adjustments to great effect. The CNS team has developed best practices throughout the 2025/26 school year. Ed Burke and the CNS leadership team are incredibly grateful for the commitment to excellent service.

### **Scratch Cooked Foods**

The Central Kitchen has expanded its offerings of scratch-cooked foods to promote inclusivity and introduce new foods. The two goals of the menu planning process are to act as both a mirror and a learning experience for students. For example, the birria burritos and chana masala served at Elementary schools. The beef birria was immediately recognized and enjoyed by students. The Chana Masala excited students, who enjoyed its moderate spice level. Site staff reported that students trying the chana masala related the tastes and textures to foods they were familiar with.

Scratch-cooked foods are at the core of a great school food program. Scratch-cooked foods offer a level of control not found in purchased products. For example, at school and community events where CNS offered taste tests, parents and students requested specific ingredients to be used instead of others.

CNS started offering classroom pizza parties to Elementary Schools instead of cafeteria lunch service. The pizza parties meet the food and nutrition standards for cafeteria meals and are eligible for reimbursement, similar to field trip lunches. Feedback has been positive, and the CNS staff have greatly enjoyed interacting with the staff and students receiving the food.

Scratch cooking requires more hands and time to prepare and serve products. While the CNS department is increasing labor costs, scratch cooking has reduced food costs, offsetting year-over-year increases. Scratch-cooked foods are a priority, and we have aligned our daily work to support this goal.

CNS Leadership will assess scratch cooking through feedback loops with students and parents regarding menu item choices. Objective assessments will include menu production records and regular updates related to the CNS budget multi-year projection.

### **Infrastructure**

CNS has spent \$360,000 on capital equipment for plastic-free elementary schools, replacing aging equipment and better supporting school-site meal service in the 2025/26 school year. Approximately 68.72% of the funds were spent on serving line units to support plastic-free meals and secondary serving lines to expedite meal service.

The new blast chillers in the central kitchen have supported the significant expansion of scratch cooking. The blast chillers' additional features, such as proofing, have enabled the CNS program to offer new menu items. Croissants that are proofed and baked at the central kitchen are delicious and only possible because of the blast chiller's automated proofing cycles. The blast chiller's primary function is to chill hot food to refrigerator temperatures rapidly. The blast chiller replaces time-intensive manual adjustments and monitoring, ensuring food is chilled appropriately. The time and effort saved by the blast chillers, the assurance of food safety, and the additional features are extremely beneficial to the scratch cooking program at SRCS.

Secondary school sites face a unique challenge that warrants greater consideration regarding their meal service lines. The current configuration of secondary serving lines focuses on "Grab and Go" meals to expedite service and provide as much time as possible for students to eat. Students must have as much time as possible to eat lunch to support healthy lifelong eating habits. Additional serving lines were installed in secondary schools to the extent possible. The space available for the preparation and serving lines at secondary school sites is limited and will be included in the assessment of meal-service flow, staffing needs, and equipment. CNS is participating in the Facility Master Plan regarding these concerns. The infrastructure design process is the preferred approach to addressing concerns about the serving-line efficacy of secondary school sites.

The CNS leadership team is preparing the planning process for implementing dishwashing machines in high schools with higher meal counts. Washing dishes by hand takes time and effort from preparation and service activities. Washing machines are a substantial change to the kitchen layout and will require close collaboration with the facility plan review team at the Sonoma County Department of Public Health. The facility plan review may require additional investments and changes to the kitchens and dishwashing machines to get approval. The purpose of these reviews is to ensure that the installation of the dishwashing machine supports the safe preparation and service of food to the students of SRCS. Santa Rosa Junior Senior High's dishwasher will be installed in the near future.

The CNS leadership team has developed a capital equipment replacement plan based on the estimated useful life of kitchen equipment. The capital equipment replacement plan enables the CNS program to ensure that adequate funding is available to replace capital equipment valued at over \$5,000. CNS estimates approximately \$ 3.05 million in equipment replacement costs over the next ten years. The average expected capital equipment replacement cost by year is approximately \$300,000 per year. CNS leadership will hold reserves each year to replace capital equipment. The creation of the 10-year plan enables the CNS leadership team to save and make funds available for expected replacements.

### **Nutrition Education**

In partnership with Erica Lipanovich, Physician Assistant and parent volunteer, kindergartners have learned that kale gives them superpowers. Erica Lipanovich and Ed Burke are reaching

out to schedule nutrition education lessons with TK and Kindergarten classes at elementary school sites. The lesson plan included a presentation about the benefits of eating the rainbow, a wonderful sing-along song featuring ASL signs about the benefits of eating kale, and a taste test of kale chips. TK and Kinder students have loved the presentations and shown great enthusiasm for trying new foods at the cafeteria salad bar afterward.

We are so grateful for the support and collaboration with students and staff at SRCS. Kaylin Wen, a senior at Maria Carillo High School, provided a thoughtful and professional assessment of the correlation between nutrient density associated with fat, salt, and sugar and student choices. The report was a well-crafted assessment of menu production records, nutrient information, and the popularity of entrees selected by secondary students. Kaylin has continued to provide feedback and suggestions related to surveys.

The students and staff at Piner High School have been providing feedback and discussions related to menu choices and survey designs. Ed Burke has enjoyed the opportunity to discuss menu offerings and what improvements are needed. Student email follow-ups have enabled ongoing discussions and updates that have been very helpful to the CNS leadership team.

CNS is in the process of designing several surveys and ongoing discussions with students, staff, and parents. CNS is designing a paper survey to distribute to students to gather input from a larger, more diverse sample of the student population. A faculty thought partner suggested partnering with teachers to conduct the survey in class. The survey will be optional, and its distribution in class will be at the teacher's discretion. An online survey of students eating lunch will be published. The online survey will capture students' email addresses and reduce the amount of demographic information collected. Regularly scheduled meetings will be held with parents and community members to solicit feedback regarding school meals.

The CNS team is offering reimbursable pizza parties featuring whole fruits and vegetables to elementary school students at no cost. The meals are offered in place of the cafeteria lunch and have received excellent feedback. Classroom pizza parties are an opportunity to have fun and promote fruit and vegetable consumption.

The CNS team joined the Helen Lehman Career Fair on April 17, 2026, chatting with students about the benefits of trying new foods and chefs' career paths. The CNS team encouraged students to eat the rainbow of fruits and vegetables. There was a significant increase in students trying blanched asparagus after adults role modeled eating the vegetable.

The CNS team is grateful for our partners' continued support in fulfilling the needs of Santa Rosa City Schools students. Each partnership represents a unique opportunity to engage with students, parents, and other stakeholders who interact with the school community. Taste tests and nutrition education can transform students' consumption of whole grains, lower-sodium foods, fresh fruits, and vegetables.

Every goal listed in this board report impacts the efficacy of the nutrition education program. Nutrition Education will be less successful without the ability to control the ingredients used, the equipment to prepare and serve meals with minimal packaging, and the staff to perform these tasks. As such, each barrier is not only a barrier to that particular goal but also to teaching and reinforcing lifelong healthy eating habits.

Nutrition Education activities will be evaluated by the entrance and exit assessments, the amount and variety of fresh fruit and vegetables consumed at breakfast and lunch, and students' ability to articulate the benefits of healthy eating choices.

### **Local Procurement**

- FEED Sonoma
- AgLink
- Direct purchases
  - EarthSeed Farms
  - Tri-L Ranch
- Support provided by
  - Conscious Kitchen & The Alice Waters Foundation
  - Shared Plates Strategies
  - Community Alliance of Family Farmers

CNS has committed to continuing to procure local foods from our partners. The amount of local procurement is similar to the prior year. Local apple growers provided exciting and new apples from FEED Sonoma, such as the strawberry parfait apple. The Asian Pears from EarthSeed Farms have become juicier and more delicious year over year.

As food prices increase, so too does the pressure on local farmers. The SRCS CNS programs want to spend Santa Rosa dollars as close to Santa Rosa as possible. Sonoma County tastes amazing!

Local and organic procurement will be evaluated objectively by the amount of produce purchased from local and organic producers, the impact of investments on the five-year multi-year projection, and assessments conducted with partners. Subjective assessments will include feedback from the SRCS community.

### **Sustainability and reducing the amount of plastic in schools.**

The CNS team has tested a new bulk cereal dispenser with an organic, low-sugar cereal choice at several elementary schools. The bulk cereal dispensers replace sealed cartons of cereal with a lower-sugar-content cereal. Students were excited by the change. The planning for implementation at all elementary school sites is underway.

An ongoing goal to reduce plastic waste and promote healthy, lifelong eating habits is replacing juice with fresh, whole fruits and vegetables. Every child is required to take a fruit or a vegetable with each meal. If a student does not take a fruit or vegetable, the meal is not eligible for reimbursement, and the CNS program loses revenue for the entire meal. 100% fruit juice is a compromise intended to entice secondary students to take a fruit or vegetable. There is a great deal of pressure to serve meals as quickly as possible to ensure students have adequate time to eat. At this time, 100% fruit juice is the preferred choice in the serving lines for both time efficiency, labor input for preparation, and meeting the reimbursable meal requirements. Comparable alternatives to the shelf-stable 100% fruit juice are limited to frozen 100% fruit juice boxes, which are more expensive per unit, require considerable freezer and refrigeration space, and demand additional staff input. A more comprehensive solution to both problems of practice is to focus nutrition education on the benefits of whole fruits and vegetables, such as fiber, at secondary school sites.

Share Tables or “No Thank You” tables are a best practice for students to place unwanted foods that are fit for eating. CNS has provided new carts to make the use of the Share Tables more effective at the Elementary School. Staff will direct students to take a fruit or a vegetable to complete their meal as needed. Foods placed on the “No Thank You” or Share Tables are offered to all students and staff.

Plastic-Free Elementary meals reduce the amount of plastic used at Elementary schools. Foods prepared without plastic are more appealing, taste better, and result in less food and supply waste. CNS is using compostable trays and utensils. When food is prepared and served with love, there is an observed reduction in post-consumer food waste.

The reduction in waste and single-use plastic will be assessed through several measures: the impact on the number of meals served, the number of single-use plastic items purchased, the amount of food served but not eaten, and feedback from students and parents.

Teachers, if you are interested in hosting nutrition education activities in your classroom, please check out the resource Abundant California from the Center for Eco-Literacy [HERE](#). To discuss other nutrition education opportunities, please contact Ed Burke at [eburke@srcs.k12.ca.us](mailto:eburke@srcs.k12.ca.us).

### **Thank you**

Thank you for your continued support of the children of Sonoma County. Please contact Ed Burke at 707 890 3807 or [eburke@srcs.k12.ca.us](mailto:eburke@srcs.k12.ca.us) with questions, concerns, invitations to chat with students, and for CNS to participate in school events. Al Puro Centavo!