

WHAT'S FOR LUNCH?

Community Roots

**Western Nevada County School Districts' Food
Service Program**

2024-2025 Nevada County Civil Grand Jury

Report Date: May 19, 2025

Table of Contents

Summary.....	1
Approach.....	1
Glossary.....	2
Background.....	2
Approach.....	3
Discussion.....	3
A. Nevada Joint Union High School District	4
B. Grass Valley School Unified District.....	5
II. Government Funding.....	5
III. Challenges.....	6
A. Planning	6
B. Facilities.....	6
C. Funding	6
IV. Food Participation Rates and Why They Are Important.....	6
Findings.....	7
Recommendations	7
Request for Responses.....	7
Appendix A.....	9
Appendix B.....	10

Summary

In School Year 2022–23, California became the first state to implement a statewide universal meals program for school children. The California Universal Meals Act (Education Code § 49501.5) requires public schools, county offices of education, and charter schools to provide breakfast and lunch to TK-12 students requesting meals, regardless of their federal eligibility for free or reduced-price meals. In May 2022, the superintendents of nine western Nevada County school districts created a Joint Powers Authority (JPA)—The Nevada County Food Service Agency—to provide scratch-cooked, high quality, locally sourced, and nutritious food to their schools. In late 2024, the Agency developed a draft business plan and changed its business name to “Community Roots.”

From May 2022 through June 2024, there was little progress developing and implementing the food program, but the work has recently gained momentum and achieved important successes. Community Roots is scheduled to begin operating the consolidated program on July 1, 2025. Owing to ongoing Community Roots’ Board of Directors’ efforts, events may have overtaken some of this report’s findings and recommendations. The jury welcomes that continuing progress.

Sierra Harvest is a local non-profit organization that works to “improve the health and well-being of Nevada County” Its website describes part of its current program as:

Supporting the transformation of food served in school cafeterias. This will provide a scratch cooked meal program featuring fresh, whole foods that meet the dietary needs of all students from pre-K through 12th grade—increasing meal access for 43% of the student population in Nevada County.

The Chef Ann Foundation is a non-profit organization characterizing itself as “dedicated to promoting whole-ingredient, scratch-cooking in schools. Scratch-cooking enables schools to serve the healthiest, tastiest meals so that kids are well-nourished and ready to learn.”

In 2019, Sierra Harvest funded a study by Chef Ann of the food programs in western Nevada County public schools, the “Foothills Fresh Onsite Assessment” (“Chef Ann Report”). Among other things, the report recommended that the school districts in western Nevada County form a joint powers authority to provide a unified food program focused on providing fresh, scratch-cooked, locally sourced meals to public school students. Chef Ann described the project in detail on its [website](#). The Chef Ann Report provided specific recommendations for each school’s existing serving facilities, but its overall recommendation was that Community Roots operate a central kitchen to produce meals for all sites efficiently.

Nine districts agreed with the recommendation and, in 2022, created the JPA then known as “Nevada County School Food Services Agency,” now doing business as “Community Roots.” By late 2024, Community Roots had developed a business plan, which provides the steps and structure to help ensure the program can carry out its mission of providing “students of Nevada County with fresh, locally sourced, and scratch-made meals while fostering health, sustainability, and a deep sense of community.”

The Nevada County Civil Grand Jury began this investigation in the summer of 2024 after receiving information that the consolidation of the food-service programs was not moving forward in a timely fashion.

Approach

The Jury interviewed school officials and others involved with school food services and development of Community Roots. The Jury reviewed the Chef Ann Report, the Community Roots business plan, meeting agendas, minutes, correspondence, financial records and other online information. The Jury obtained relevant previous years’ data from the California Department of Education (Appendix B).

Glossary

Business Plan	Community Roots Draft Business Plan
Community Roots	Western Nevada County Food Program JPA
County	Nevada County
CAF	Chef Ann Foundation
GVUSD	Grass Valley Unified School District
JPA	Joint Powers Agreement
Jury	2024-2025 Nevada County Civil Grand Jury
NCFS	Nevada County Food Service
NCSOS	Nevada County Superintendent of Schools
NSLP	National School Lunch Program
PC	California Penal Code
Scratch-cooked	Food prepared from fresh ingredients, not prepackaged.

Background

Federal and state funds support public-school food programs through the National School Lunch Program and the California Universal Meal Program at stated reimbursement rates per meal served. Federal reimbursement depends on how many children in each district are from families below specified income levels.

Since 2022, California’s program provides food in public schools without charge to students by increasing the state reimbursement rate to cover the difference between the federal reimbursement per meal and the actual cost per meal. Public school students no longer have to purchase school meals.

Sierra Harvest is a local non-profit organization that works to “improve the health and well-being of Nevada County,” Its website describes part of its current program as

Supporting the transformation of food served in school cafeterias. This will provide a scratch cooked meal program featuring fresh, whole foods that meet the dietary needs of all students from pre-K through 12th grade—increasing meal access for 43% of the student population in Nevada County.

The Chef Ann Foundation is a non-profit organization characterizing itself as “dedicated to promoting whole-ingredient, scratch-cooking in schools. Scratch-cooking enables schools to serve the healthiest, tastiest meals so that kids are well-nourished and ready to learn.”

In 2019, Sierra Harvest funded a study by Chef Ann of the food programs in western Nevada County public schools, the “Foothills Fresh Onsite Assessment” (“Chef Ann Report”). Among other things, the report recommended that the school districts in western Nevada County form a Joint Powers Authority to provide a unified food program focused on providing fresh, scratch-cooked, locally sourced meals to public school students. Chef Ann described the project in detail on its [website](#). The Chef Ann Report provided specific recommendations for each school’s existing serving facilities, but its overall recommendation was that Community Roots operate a central kitchen to produce meals for all sites efficiently.

Nine districts agreed with the recommendation and, in 2022, created the Authority as “Nevada County School Food Services Agency,” now doing business as “Community Roots.” By late 2024, Community Roots had developed a business plan, which provides the steps and structure to help ensure the program can carry out its mission of providing “students of Nevada County with fresh, locally sourced, and scratch-made meals while fostering health, sustainability, and a deep sense of community.”

The Nevada County Civil Grand Jury began this investigation in the summer of 2024 after receiving information that the consolidation of the food-service programs was not moving forward in a timely fashion.

Approach

The jury interviewed school officials and others involved with school food services and development of Community Roots. The jury reviewed the Chef Ann Report, the Community Roots business plan, meeting agendas, minutes, correspondence, financial records and other online information. The jury obtained relevant previous years' data from the California Department of Education (Appendix B).

Discussion

I. The Current Situation—Different Schools' Programs and Facilities

Western Nevada County's larger districts manage their food programs independently and contract to provide food to many of the smaller districts. Most smaller school districts lack facilities to serve scratch-cooked food and rely primarily on prepackaged food. Grass Valley School District's central kitchen provides under contracts with each school not in the Grass Valley district.

A. Nevada Joint Union High School District

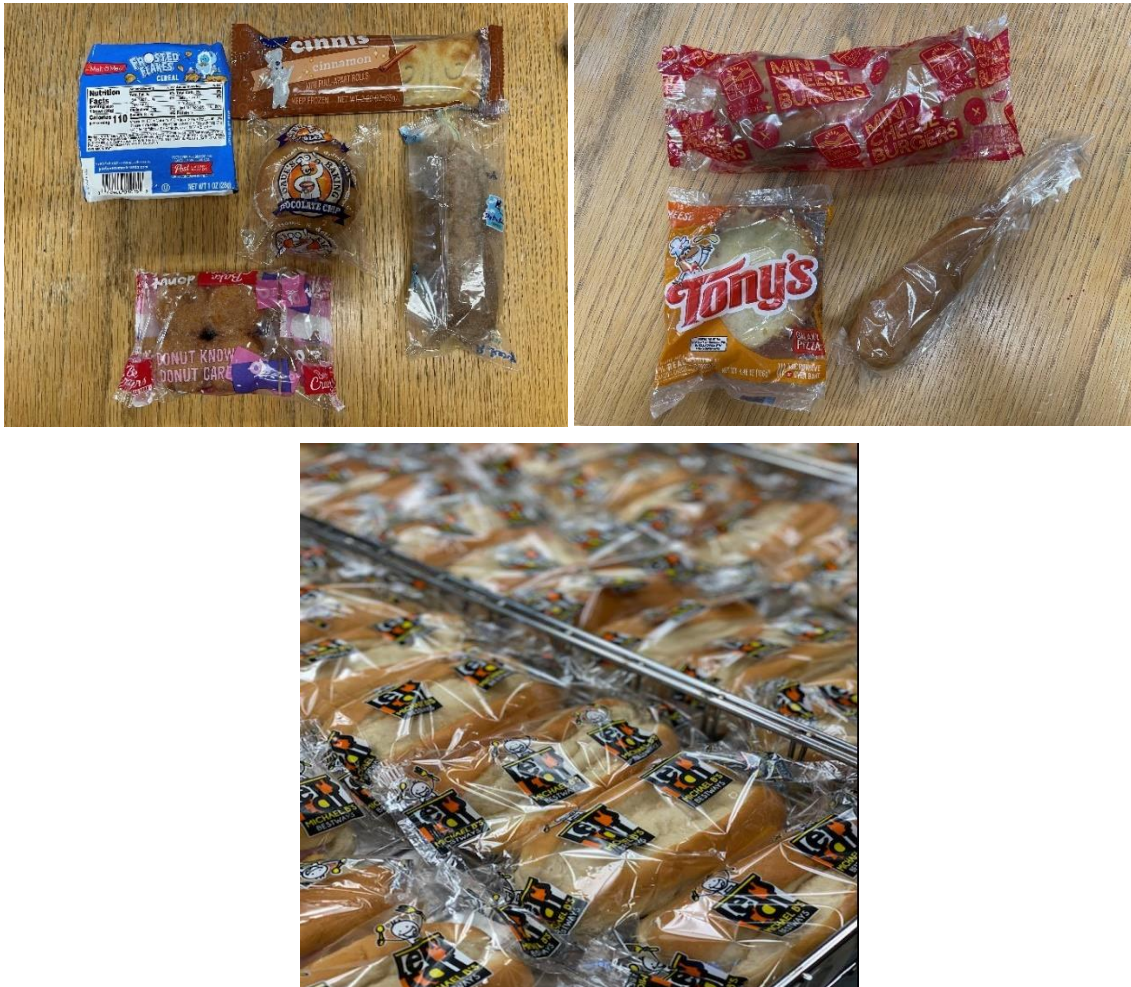
Nevada Joint Union High School District (NJUHS) has five schools at four locations. Several years ago, it began a scratch-cooking program (pictures below), which has been successful, self-supporting, and has seen significant increases in students participating in the meal program (“student-participation rates”).



The Chicago-Park district, which had previously purchased food through the Grass Valley central kitchen, recently discontinued that arrangement and now receives its food from NJUHS's kitchen.

B. Grass Valley School Unified District

Grass Valley School District's central kitchen serves sixteen schools (Grass Valley's four schools and twelve schools in other districts). The central kitchen repackages bulk-purchased items (pictures below) into individual meals and delivers the meals to the schools each day.



The central kitchen is a 2,500 sq. ft. leased facility. In August 2023, although the lease still had two years to run (and in the midst of planning for a Community Roots central kitchen), the district purchased a 4,864 sq. ft. building to replace it. That building required considerable work to turn it into a satisfactory food-service facility. The work is nearing completion.

II. Government Funding

Public-school food-service programs receive state and [federal funding](#) through a reimbursement program based on numbers of meals served. Federal reimbursement is through the NSLP. The USDA and California Department of Education manage distributing the reimbursements. Before California's new program, students could get free or reduced-price lunches based on household income. Reimbursement for free and reduced-price meals depended on the number of meals served to students meeting the income criteria.

California began the universal meal program in 2022 to supplement the federal reimbursement programs and required all schools to offer free meals to all children. California reimburses schools for the costs that federal reimbursements do not cover. All children can get free meals regardless of family income.

It is concerning that the ongoing cuts in federal programs could significantly affect the reimbursements schools receive to provide meals to students. If the current federal funding is reduced or discontinued, the state or the districts either will have to fund a larger portion (perhaps all) of the meal costs or discontinue the universal meals program and return to schools charging for meals.

Since the Chef Ann Report, there have been changes made to improve the production kitchens as well as at some of the smaller schools allowing them to increase the quality and freshness of the food served. For example, many schools now have salad bars that they did not have before. Community Roots' goal is to provide better quality, fresher food to all students.

III. CHALLENGES

A. Planning

As Community Roots' business plan recognizes, the transition from district-level food-program management to a centralized operation for a student enrollment that exceeds 11,000, has a budget projection with revenue and expenses exceeding \$5 million per year, serving over 300,000 meals per year requires thoughtful planning, expert management, and adequate funding to be successful.

B. Facilities

Retrofitting and managing a new centralized facility for food prep for all Community Roots' schools also requires significant resources, qualified staffing, planning and cooperation. In late 2024, the County Board of Education purchased a building with space for a single centralized food service facility. The Board will lease part of that building to Community Roots for \$1/year, and Community Roots is preparing plans to develop the space for the food service program. Community Roots plans to have the new central kitchen ready to operate for the 26-27 school year. Community Roots' Board plans to use the current production kitchens at GVUSD and NUHS under Community Roots' direction beginning July 1 of this year and continuing until the new food service facility is ready. Community Roots is developing facility use agreements with each of the districts that have kitchens.

C. Funding

The Community Roots business plan states that funding will come from state and federal reimbursement programs, private donations and sponsorships, and contracting to supply food for events unconnected with school programs. The current budget refers only to government reimbursements. The business plan does not have additional details about other funding sources.

Schools do not receive reimbursement as quickly as they need to purchase food, especially at the beginning of each school year, so districts maintain several months of buffer funds to allow operation. Much of Community Roots' startup funding will come from consolidating the districts' existing food funds.

Community Roots' board meeting minutes from January 23, 2025, show that Scott Lay, County School Superintendent, has committed the County Board of Education to cover operational funding deficits for the first five years of program. The Jury has seen no documentation that confirms the commitment; nor the commitment to lease the new central kitchen location for \$1 per month. There is no Nevada County Board of Education resolution addressing these matters. The Jury has no details regarding the funding source to support the commitments.

IV. Food Participation Rates and Why They Are Important

Food participation rates are important measures of student acceptance of food service programs, and one of Community Roots' objectives is to increase rates. High student participation

rates help food-service program solvency because federal-government funding varies according to the number of meals schools serve to income-qualifying students.

Food-program participation varies widely among schools. Appendix C shows the 2023-2024 participation rates for Nevada County schools. Community Roots business plan's "Revenue Projections" spreadsheet refers to a fresh scratch-cooked meal trial program, which showed a large increase in participation rate. Tracking student-participation rates is important to measure the program's success. If food quality improves, more students will use the meal program. The business plan has a target participation rate of 70% for K-8 districts and 65% for the high school within three years. The current average participation rate for western Nevada County schools is about 48%. The California average is 61%.

Western Nevada County Schools student enrollment for 23-24 was 11,245. The Public Policy Institute of California estimates Nevada County's K-12 enrollment will increase by 4% over next 10 years.

Findings

Finding 1: The jury recognizes that the Community Roots' business plan continues to evolve. The Community Roots business plan to date provides an excellent overview of the program objectives and design. Budget projections and costs for the next three years are available as of the Community Roots meeting of March 27, 2025.

Finding 2: The jury has no evidence that the Nevada County Board of Education has approved Scott Lay's commitment to cover operational funding deficits for the Community Roots program for the first five years, or ratified the \$1 per month lease of the new kitchen facility.

Finding 3: Community Roots is now moving in a good direction and has identified sufficient available start-up funding to meet Community Roots' budget, which should continue to improve the quality of food available to students in Nevada County.

Finding 4: The Joint Powers Agreement is out of date because it does not reflect changes in the Community Roots program from 2025.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Community Roots should update the Joint Power Agreement to reflect changes that have occurred since formation of the Joint Powers Authority, because the present form of the agreement speaks to the business model before the districts agreed to transfer their food funds to Community Roots.

Recommendation 2: Members of the Community Roots JPA should continue working together to make locally sourced, fresh, scratch-made meals available to all Western Nevada County students.

Recommendation 3: Community Roots should track and report to the public participation rates to help monitor the school lunch program's success.

Recommendation 4: The Nevada County Board of Education pass a resolution to ratify Scott Lay's commitment to cover operational funding deficits for the Community Roots program for the first five years and the resolution should include the \$1/year rental commitment for the new facility.

Request for Responses

Pursuant to California Penal Code § 933.05, the Nevada County Civil Grand Jury requests responses to the following findings and recommendations from Community Roots' within 90 days of publication of this report:

Findings 1, 3

Recommendations 1, 2, and 3

Pursuant to California Penal Code § 933.05, the Nevada County Civil Grand Jury requests responses to the following findings and recommendations from the Nevada County Board of Education Board of Directors within 90 days of publication of this report,:

Finding 2

Recommendation 4

Responses go to the Presiding Judge of the Nevada County Superior Court in accord with the provisions of California Penal Code § 933.05. Responses must include the information that § 933.05 requires.

Appendix A

Community Roots' Food Program Timeline

GVUSD	2002	GVUSD creates central kitchen in (900 Golden Gate Terrace Suite A Grass Valley) 2500 sq ft space leased to begin delivering vended lunches. No cooking – prep only.
Sierra Harvest	2013	Non-profit community group formed to improve health and wellbeing in Nev Co thru locally grown fresh food.
Foothills Fresh	2017	Non-profit, grass roots community group formed by Sierra Harvest to promote scratch cooked school lunch program.
CA	7/2021	Universal Meals Program mandating free breakfast and lunch to all students (CA EC 49501.5).
Chef Ann Foundation	10/2021	National organization supporting scratch cook school programs. Worked with Foothills Fresh to produce 2021 onsite assessment (Foothills Fresh funded it).
NCFS JPA	7/2022	Joint Powers Agreement to operate Nevada County School Food Services Agency.
GVUSD	6/2023	GVUSD purchases 4,864 sq ft building at 972 Golden Gate Terrace for \$793k, 500K now \$1.2M w/ remodel. <i>Building to be used by community roots as Satellite/Interim. Purchased against advice from NCSOS/JPA.</i>
NCFS JPA	5/2024	Hires Executive Chef Sam K
Community Roots	2024	Rebranded Nevada County School Food Services Agency JPA to Community Roots.
NCSOS	11/20/24	NCSOS purchases 27,000 sq ft building at 848 Gold Flat Road (old Telestream building) for \$2.4M. Leases portion to Community roots for \$1 per year.
Community Roots Business Plan	12/2024	A 5-year draft business plan by Sam Koneffklatt (Community Roots Executive Chef) to eventually serve all (9,000 to 11,000) and more Nevada County students with fresh, locally sourced scratch-made lunches from a centralized culinary center.
GVUSD	8/2025	Lease on original 2500 sq ft central kitchen to end. Not to be renewed.

Appendix B

Selected County Level Data – NEVADA for the year 2023-24 (ref 1?) – can be found at [Free and Reduced Price Meals \(CA Department of Education\)](#).

District Name	District Code	Free & Reduced Price Meals	Enrollment Used for Meals
<u>Chicago Park Elementary</u>	2966316	78 (50.0%)	156
<u>Clear Creek Elementary</u>	2966324	70 (42.9%)	163
<u>Grass Valley Elementary</u>	2966332	993 (64.0%)	1,551
<u>Nevada City Elementary</u>	2966340	244 (34.6%)	705
<u>Nevada County Office of Education</u>	2910298	1,817 (57.8%)	3,144
<u>Nevada Joint Union High</u>	2966357	1,044 (38.1%)	2,741
<u>Penn Valley Union Elementary</u>	2976877	336 (60.2%)	558
<u>Pleasant Ridge Union Elementary</u>	2966373	455 (31.9%)	1,428
<u>Twin Ridges Elementary</u>	2966415	94 (85.5%)	110
<u>Union Hill Elementary</u>	2966407	310 (45.0%)	689
County Totals:		5,441 (48.4%)	11,245
State Totals:		3,599,733 (61.7%)	5,837,690