

Business Case Set C: Central Kitchen / Commissary Model

District-Wide Compliance, Cost Control, and Consistency

Summary

Central kitchens play a critical role in modern K–12 foodservice operations, enabling districts to scale scratch cooking, control costs, and deliver consistent meals across multiple schools. As USDA nutrition standards—shaped by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans—continue to emphasize whole foods, lower sodium, and reduced reliance on ultra-processed items, central production facilities are under heightened scrutiny. This business case outlines targeted equipment investments that support compliant, high-volume production while protecting district-wide federal meal reimbursement and operational continuity.

Policy & Funding Background: Why Central Kitchens Carry District-Wide Risk

USDA nutrition standards tied to the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) apply to every meal served, regardless of where it is produced. For districts operating a central kitchen or commissary model:

- production failures can affect multiple schools simultaneously,
- non-compliant preparation methods can trigger district-wide audit findings, and
- food safety or documentation gaps can put all associated reimbursement at risk.

Auditors and state agencies increasingly evaluate whether central facilities have the equipment capacity and controls necessary to support compliant large-scale production—not just compliant menus on paper.

Bottom line: central kitchens are not just operational hubs; they are compliance and funding control points for the entire district.

Operational Reality in Central / Commissary Models

Central kitchens typically operate under these realities:

- high-volume batch cooking across multiple menu items
- production schedules tied tightly to delivery windows
- coordination between cooking, chilling, storage, and transport
- limited tolerance for downtime or rework
- heightened expectations for food safety, traceability, and documentation

Equipment in these environments must prioritize capacity, reliability, safety, and consistency at scale.

Recommended Equipment Focus for Central Kitchens

C1. Tilting Skillets & Kettles

The Backbone of Large-Scale Scratch Production

Estimated Cost Range (planning): \$20,000–\$40,000+

(Varies by capacity, gas/electric configuration, controls, and installation scope. See attached quote.)

Why this matters for compliance and funding

Tilting skillets and kettles enable central kitchens to prepare soups, sauces, grains, and proteins in large, consistent batches using USDA-compliant cooking methods. These units are foundational for scratch production at scale and are frequently reviewed during audits for food safety, consistency, and workflow control.

What tilting equipment enables

- Large-batch production with uniform cooking results
- Controlled cooking methods that preserve nutritional integrity
- Safe transfer and portioning of hot food
- Faster production cycles with fewer steps

Why districts value tilting skillets and kettles

Safer batch cooking

- reduced lifting and pouring injuries

Improved throughput

- fewer batches needed to meet volume requirements

Consistency across schools

- uniform recipes and portions district-wide

Operational reliability

- built for continuous, high-volume use

Operational impact leadership cares about

- reduced injury risk and workers' compensation exposure
- predictable production timelines tied to delivery schedules
- consistent execution that supports audit readiness

See Attached Quote for recommended size, capacity, utilities, installation scope, and final pricing.

Fill-In Notes (Tilting Skillets / Kettles)

- Number of schools served: _____
- Average daily production volume (meals): _____
- Menu items produced centrally (soups, sauces, grains, proteins):

- Current production bottlenecks or safety concerns:

C2. High-Capacity Combi Ovens

Scalable, Multi-Function Cooking for District-Wide Menus

Why this matters for compliance and funding

High-capacity combi ovens allow central kitchens to roast, steam, bake, and reheat large quantities of food with consistent results. This flexibility is critical as districts move away from processed foods and toward scratch-prepared entrées and sides that must remain compliant across all receiving schools.

What high-capacity combi ovens support

- Large-batch roasting of vegetables and proteins
- Steaming items while retaining texture and nutrition
- Baking whole-grain products consistently
- Reheating prepped items without quality loss

Why central kitchens rely on combi ovens

- one platform supports multiple menu components
- consistent results across shifts and staff
- reduced waste due to overcooking or variability
- flexibility to adapt menus without changing equipment

See Attached Quote for capacity, rack configuration, accessories, utility requirements, installation scope, and pricing.

Fill-In Notes (High-Capacity Combi Ovens)

- Menu items produced using combi ovens: _____
- Volume per batch / per day: _____
- Production schedule constraints: _____

C3. Blast Chilling, Refrigeration & Freezer Systems

Food Safety, Waste Reduction, and Cook-Chill Compliance

Estimated Cost Range (planning):

- Blast chiller: \$15,000–\$50,000+
- Cold storage expansion: varies by size and configuration

(Final pricing and system design provided in attached quote.)

Why this matters for compliance and funding

Central kitchens often rely on cook-chill or extended hold strategies to meet production and distribution demands. Without proper blast chilling and cold storage, districts face:

- increased food safety risk,
- HACCP documentation gaps,
- higher spoilage and waste,
- emergency purchasing at higher cost,
- elevated audit exposure.

Operational needs addressed

- rapid cooling to safe temperatures
- controlled holding prior to transport
- adequate refrigerated and frozen storage for batch production
- documentation support for HACCP and audit reviews

Typical system components

- Blast chiller sized for daily production volume
- Walk-in coolers/freezers or expanded reach-in systems
- Integrated workflow between cooking, chilling, and staging

See Attached Quote for recommended blast chilling capacity, cold storage configuration, installation scope, and final pricing.

Fill-In Notes (Cook-Chill & Cold Storage)

- Cooling capacity required (lbs / pans per cycle): _____
- Average hold time before distribution: _____
- Distribution windows (time between production and service): _____
- Food safety or waste issues today: _____

Recommended Approval Language

These equipment investments are recommended to ensure the district's central kitchen can consistently produce USDA-compliant meals at scale while maintaining food safety, operational efficiency, and audit readiness. Approval is requested based on the attached quotes, which provide detailed pricing, specifications, and installation requirements.