



AASA LEARNING 2025 Lighthouse System Vignette: Montrose County School District, Colorado

As the second largest rural district in Colorado, Montrose County School District serves just over 6,000 students in the geographically isolated region of West Central Colorado. The district achieved AASA Lighthouse District status as a result of its sustained commitment to preparing future-ready learners, including a Pre-K-12 approach to innovation and creative educational programming designed to prepare all learners for post-secondary education and the 21st century world of work.

Its core values include the goal of being a beacon of innovation, equity, inclusion, and community engagement. Montrose County's deep commitment to innovative approaches to future-ready learning reflects the challenges and opportunities of its geographic isolation. A major aspect of this process is its comprehensive approach to procuring funding from external organizations and agencies to implement transformational initiatives such as Outer Range, Career Pathways, and Project Spark—programs that aim at preparing all learners for a constantly changing society and world.

The district's approach to preparing future-ready students is reflected in its multiple creative programs designed to promote rigor, engagement, and equity. Outer Range, for example, is a groundbreaking Pre-K-12 outdoor school whose mission is to foster joyful, shared experiences that awaken students' curiosity, problem solving, and decision making skills. Students in the program are immersed in outdoor learning activities, reinforcing their sense of efficacy and community.

Similarly, the district launched in 2022 a groundbreaking Career Pathways initiative to prepare students for the rapidly changing workforce landscape. It has partnered with local businesses and industries to create real-world learning experiences aligned with students' interests and aspirations. Students now have access to a diverse range of pathways, including STEM, agriculture, the arts, and entrepreneurship, allowing them to explore their goals and passions while gaining practical skills.

Career-related community partnerships extend beyond the Career Pathways program to provide multiple opportunities for both students and their families to explore career opportunities throughout the region. Activities include a Construction Trades Fair, Manufacturer's Expo, and STEMposium as well as an eighth-grade Career Fair, Outdoor Industry and Tourism student excursion at Switzer Lake, and work-based learning internships as well as a future set of registered apprenticeships.

Another unique component of the district's approach to future-readiness is its Rural Co-action Grant Program, known as the Western Slope Schools Career Collaborative—launched by the Colorado Department of Education following the pandemic. Montrose led three surrounding school districts in receiving a \$2.3 million grant to emphasize Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses in the areas that the region identified as having the most demand for jobs and potential for hiring students after graduation. A

major goal is to “equalize the playing field” for students even more geographically isolated than those in Montrose.

Professional development also plays a significant role in the district’s approach to preparing future-ready students. In the spring of 2023, for example, Montrose launched Project Spark with the goal of creating a safe place for educators to engage in dialogue around taking risks, innovating in the classroom, and identifying pathways for making sustainable change in district schools. Funded by the Gates Family Foundation, the project promotes innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and design thinking. Diversity of thought thrives in this space where creative ideas can incubate for evaluation and potential implementation at scale.

Cutting-edge pedagogy also reinforces the district’s commitment to future readiness. Equity and inclusion, for example, are key principles that empower all learners and help them to become co-authors of their own educational journey. Student voice and choice are key, complementing by technology-enhanced learning and analytics to bridge gaps and ignite cognitive growth. The result is a decrease in pull-out programming, with education provided in non-traditional settings. The district has also reformed its grading and homework practices in kindergarten through high school, addressing student input and feedback and reducing chronic absenteeism at all levels.

For students with special needs, the district has replaced pull-out programs taught in isolation and has embraced co-teaching and inclusion as a controlling practice. The result is enhanced achievement by a range of students, including those with IEPs, English Learners, and Gifted and Talented. The co-teaching model has also provided support staff and general educators with professional learning and coaching to become every more effective in dealing with diverse populations.

At the heart of Montrose County School District’s journey is an unwavering commitment to community engagement and safety. It weaves the elements of social, emotional, and cognitive growth into all its programs, emphasizing prevention, protection, and a culture of vigilance. Structural supports include the implementation of School Threat Assessment Teams, Safety and Wellness Teams, and a range of intervention programs designed to promote student safety and well-being.

The “culture of vigilance” extending from this process emphasizes the building of relationships with students and staff as well as the wider community. According to district leaders: “Being vigilant is ensuring our students, families, staff, and community how we see and care about them so that they trust us with their concerns.”