

It is Time to Transform the School Food Experience



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We have all had virtually the same school foodservice experience, right? You get dismissed for lunch, you walk down the stainless steel line, the lunch lady puts food on a five-compartment tray (whoever invented that item must be rich) and you choose white or chocolate milk. As you got older, perhaps you had an additional choice of entree or you could purchase an a la carte item. Extra fries, anyone?

Unfortunately, that is still the perception of school lunch, and for a great deal of children, it is still their experience. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was introduced in 1946. It has been largely uniform and unchanged in the way it serves children for 70 years.

What has changed are the expectations placed on foodservice professionals in the PK-12 market. The NSLP is no longer only a lunch program. Beyond the 31 million



These images show how one school foodservice operation transformed from a more traditional format into an inviting, engaging and fast-moving experience.

children eating a free or reduced-cost lunch, 14.5 million children eat breakfast on the program, and a burgeoning number of children receive after-school snacks, dinner and/or backpacks full of food before extended school breaks. Many more children also eat at schools but do not participate in the NSLP. The demand for school foodservice is steadily increasing.



With the increase in this demand comes a brighter national spotlight. The USDA raised the nutritional standards for the NSLP in 2010, and the challenge to “serve healthier lunches” began. I argue this endeavor is not just about serving healthy food at schools. Rather, this is about enticing our children to eat healthier. If we serve healthier food and nobody eats the food, we did not win. If they eat healthier at school, transfer that to their home and *choose* healthier food items in retail settings, then the story begins to change. Then we begin to win.

As foodservice design and equipment professionals, we have a role to play in changing the perception and the execution of school foodservice. If you are working on a school foodservice project and see the standard straight

line and five-compartment tray design, know that it is time to look deeper at the design. Question the client, and try to influence the direction of the design *and* the school food program. As our customers change their preferences, the food we serve and the way we serve it needs to follow suit.

As members of Generation Z, today’s children are hyper-connected, highly creative and globally aware. They expect their voices to be heard and hold significant sway with their parents. Gen Z desires cool, convenient, entertaining and fast-moving experiences.

Unfortunately, a majority of Gen Z are also destined to be overweight when they hit adulthood by 2027. We are the only country in the world to simultaneously have a childhood obesity and a childhood hunger problem. Recent research also indicates that this

For nearly 70 years, the way children receive their meals through the National School Lunch Program has remained the same. To encourage healthy eating, school foodservice needs to move away from traditional serving lines like this to provide a more dynamic experience for students.

generation may have a shorter life span than their parents.

It’s time to stem the tide. What if the true goal is healthy children? We know that the right fuel leads to better performance. Through enticing children to eat healthier, we can set our children up to succeed academically and put them on a path to a longer, healthier life. Ultimately, this healthier generation will positively affect our country and our world. So, let’s get started — now.

Watch for Reitano’s views next month in FE&S as he provides examples of how schools can strive to transform the foodservice process to entice students to eat healthier.

What Does Transformation Look Like in School Foodservice?



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The primary education system (grades pre-K and K-12) within our country and across the world is undergoing fundamental changes. A tremendous amount of research into how children learn and a close examination of the public school system have led to tremendous upheaval and change. A proliferation of private schools and charter schools caused public school systems to reinvent themselves as well. Parents have a growing number of choices when deciding where to educate their children. As the educational model evolves to be more adaptable to learning behaviors of the students they serve, it also becomes more responsive to the world in which these students will enter upon graduation.

Forward-thinking architects, school foodservice nutrition professionals, and school administrators are beginning to understand the important way food contributes to student success. The net result: a transformation of foodservice spaces to better align with the new generation of educational facilities.

So, what does this look like?

In Kokomo, Ind., the community experienced a significant economic downturn as the auto industry moved out in the '80s and '90s. Today, more than 70 percent of the student body receives its lunch free, or at a greatly reduced cost, via the National School Lunch Program. This past summer, the kitchens and serving spaces of two middle schools and one elementary school were renovated. Through the vision of Superintendent Dr. Jeff Hauswald and the way Director of Food Services Jack Lazar and his team executed that vision, each of these schools has transformed the foodservice and dining experience for their students. The changes have resulted in



Top: Just as when serving adults, food presentation plays an important role with children. Central Middle School shows it's possible to serve healthier fare and make it look appealing.

Above: Displaying food in a thoughtful order, and in a manner that speaks to its freshness, has helped Central Middle School drive participation in its foodservice program.

participation increases of 18 percent to 20 percent and the reduction of food waste to virtually zero.

At nearby Pendleton Heights High School, Food Service Director Lindsey Hill has created a serving environment that provides a variety of food choices for students, highlights the menu's freshness through visible food prep and cooking on the front



line, and promotes healthy eating through the placement of two fresh food bars in the center of the servery. Every student has to pass the healthy food offerings on their way to check out of the space. A commons area complete with banquettes, round tables, and high-seat community tables compliments this atmosphere to provide a true dining experience. This makeover has resulted in a 20 percent increase in meal sales and a 10 percent increase in the purchase of a la carte items.

These schools represent just two examples of the exciting and necessary transformation taking place in school foodservice. You can find similar success stories throughout our country. The commonalities in all these transformations lie in lessons learned.

Transformation Lessons Learned

Some proven areas that helped evolve school foodservice programs:

- **Presentation matters.** It is not just the order in which we place the food that provokes healthy food selections, but also how we present the food. Our children eat with their eyes, just like we do. Does the servery provide an environment that encourages healthy eating?
- **Menu matters, too.** I recognize that as foodservice equipment and design professionals, we do not have as much control in this area. We can, however, act as a resource and encourage our clients. No market segment is more generous with their ideas and sharing their success stories (and failures) than the school nutrition community. We can point them to other operators, we can provide tours of other facilities, and we can provide input through our own experiences in the foodservice equipment arena. Do not be fooled by the saying, “Oh, the kids won’t eat that.” Yes they will. Check out Joe Urban, Director of Nutrition Services at Greenville County Schools in South Carolina, as he shares his experiences on social media (@schoolfoodrocks on Twitter and Instagram). It is amazing what children will try and eat in the right environment.
- **Use the research available.** The Smarter Lunchrooms Movement (www.smarterlunchrooms.org) has done a wonderful job of researching the school foodservice environment. They offer proven, documented ideas and sugges-

Right: Pendleton Heights' foodservice operation promotes colorful, healthy menu items that students can quickly take and join their classmates during meal periods. Proper use of foodservice equipment helps showcase menu items and promote food safety.

tions on how to entice our children to eat healthier. Placing fruits and vegetables first in the serving lines, placing white milk in front of chocolate milk, and labeling food items with fun names (X-Ray Vision Carrots, anyone?) are all ways to increase student participation in the school food program.

Just as in restaurant design, the key to success in school foodservice all comes down to the details. As consumers, we don't accept the status quo in our dining experiences and we should not expect our children to accept the status quo in their school dining experience either. By developing dining environments that promote a sense of community and send a message of quality and freshness via top-notch presentation methods, school foodservice can play a leading role in teaching our children to adopt healthy eating as part of their lifestyle.

Below: The high school's open-concept style foodservice approach mimics open-kitchen formats popular in restaurants today.

