

November • December 2023

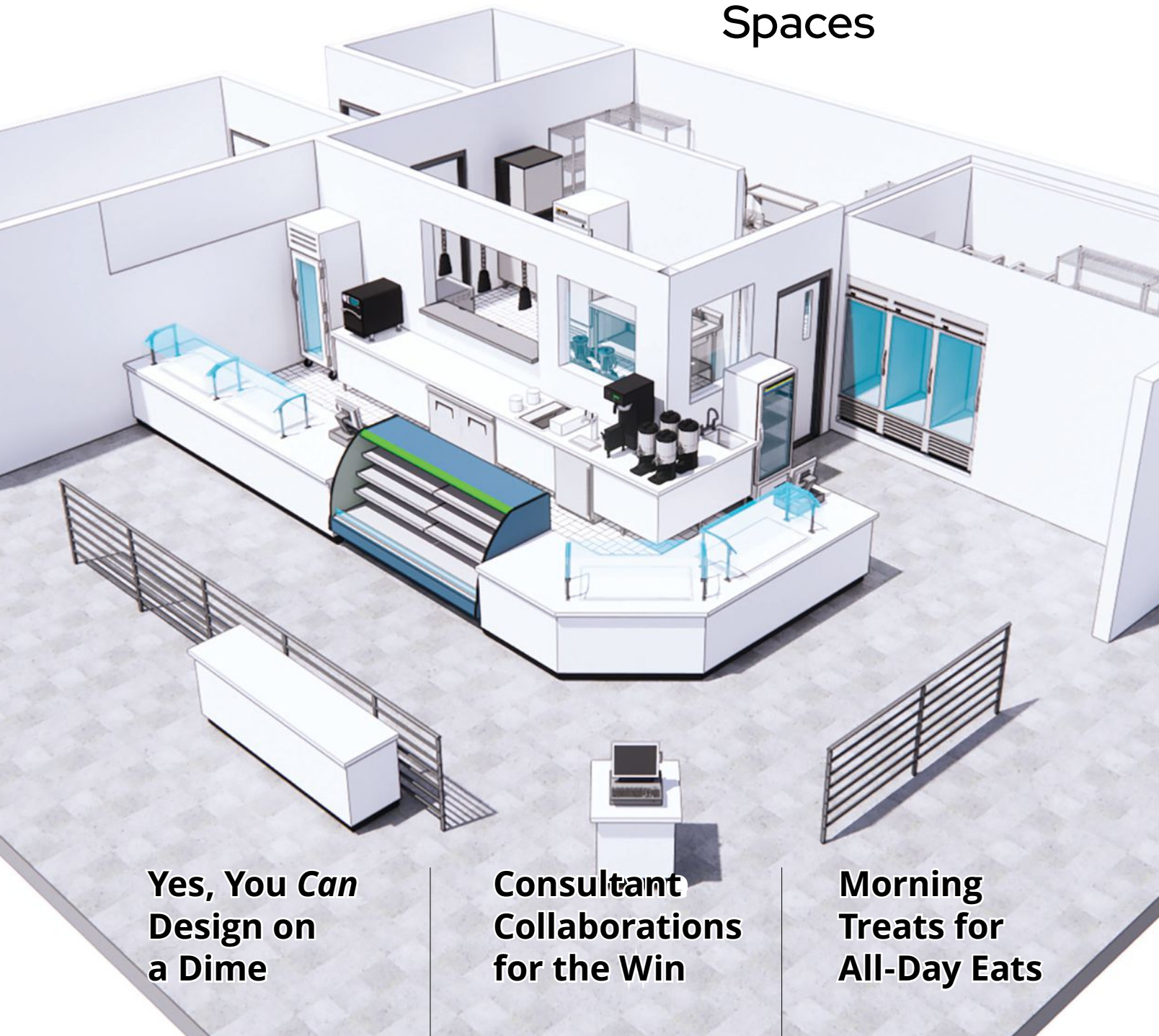
SN

SCHOOL NUTRITION

The Official Publication of the School Nutrition Association

New and Renewed

Strategic Solutions for Impactful Cafeteria Spaces



**Yes, You Can
Design on
a Dime**

**Consultant
Collaborations
for the Win**

**Morning
Treats for
All-Day Eats**



Designs on Facility Design Success

BY DYLAN ROCHE

Whether it's brand-new construction or a major renovation, when it comes to the design of your school foodservice spaces—the storage, the prep kitchen, the serving line, the dining area—there are going to be a lot of parties involved, from the architect of the overall school building to the powers that be in the school administration and your local board of education who determine the budget. But there's one perspective that matters a lot, even if it doesn't feel like it sometimes. That perspective, of course, is *yours*, as members of the foodservice and nutrition team.

You are the ones who ultimately must work in the space or—as the case may be—make the space work for you. Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for a school construction project team to exclude key foodservice staff from meetings, input and decisions. But an expert foodservice designer, one who specializes in creating these workspaces, can be your greatest advocate and go-between for you and the other parties involved in the building project.

In new school construction especially, the architects have a lengthy list of priorities to accommodate—all very different from one another. They are expected to determine needs for standard and specialty classrooms, office space, auditoriums, gymnasiums, the library, lounges, plus such factors as projected enrollment, foot traffic flow, safety/security, ADA-compliance, sustainability, utilities, HVAC, budget

(of course) and much more. If yours isn't among the louder voices in the room—or you're not in the room in the first place—your needs are at risk of being low on the priority list.

EXPERTISE AND ADVOCACY

Scott Reitano, Principal of Reitano Design Group, based in Indianapolis, has spent 18 years in foodservice design, doing more than 65% of his business in schools. He describes his job as being about supporting communication. “The architects are designing the whole school, so our job is to listen and learn about what the foodservice operator needs to be successful, so we can translate that to the architects,” he explains.

This is true no matter what the status or stage of the construction process—but even foodservice design consultants can be left out of the loop until late in the game. It's something

10 tips for maximizing your collaboration with a foodservice design consultant.



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Luke Green, President of Midwest-based Rapids Solutions Foodservice Contract and Design, sees far too often. “Sometimes, we’re brought to the table at a time that I feel is entirely too late,” he reports. “Foodservice was an afterthought, and then we’re stuck in a corner of a building or pigeonholed into a poor design.” But even in such cases, a foodservice consultant is a valuable partner in using their expertise to help you make the best of any situation or space configuration.

As a school foodservice administrator, if you’ve been frozen out of the project and the architect has already moved forward with blueprints and floorplans (or if you’re working to renovate an existing building with poor space allocation and layout), a good foodservice designer will know how to work within those confines to meet as many of your needs as possible—even after the process is well underway. And if you’ve been working in the same facilities for much of your school nutrition career, you may not be fully aware of all the options that *should* be on your wish list when it comes to modern school foodservice kitchens and cafeterias. Herein lies even more value for developing a positive partnership with an expert in this area.

The ideal situations are those in which a school nutrition director has a place at the table from the start. If that doesn’t happen, find out who will be managing foodservice design. Often, the architect of the school construction has an established professional history with a particular foodservice designer, one who may be subcontracted or recommended to the project. “We work with architects in the area to manage expectations,” Green says. “As soon as the architects get those contracts, we want to get in there. Foodservice is a huge component of a building, whether all the stakeholders realize it or not.”



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A skilled foodservice design consultant will waste no time seeking your input. It’s important not to be passive. Be prepared to answer their questions—and ask plenty of your own. But before you start discussing how many cashier stations there should be or whether you want foldable tables with bench seating or if a tilt skillet makes sense for your menus, you need to think broadly about the overall school meal program and what you see as its mission and goals at this particular site. “The biggest question we want to ask early on is what role does food play in this school? How long are the kids here? What are we trying to accomplish?” Reitano asks.

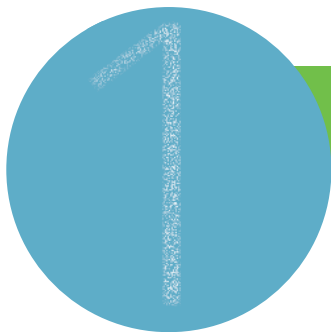
In many districts today, schools are quasi community centers, with various activities scheduled early in the morning, well into the evening, on weekends and sometimes even during vacation breaks. As a result, he sees more districts seeking to

provide a campus commons where students have meal or snack opportunities before the bell, during school or after school. This means providing points of sale that can be accessed around the clock without requiring significant labor for service, such as vending machines, beverage bars and grab-and-go kiosks, along with eating spaces with convenient trash disposal and that feel secure during off-hours.

Knowing the food and nutrition culture your school has (or that you'd like for it to have) provides a good canvas to help

you and your foodservice designer begin to drill down on the many other details for the project and determine what will work best. Your school nutrition operation isn't a one-size-fits-all program, so why expect that of your foodservice space?

Experiences with a foodservice design consultant also vary, but here are 10 tips to help you collaborate with a foodservice designer for the best possible outcome:



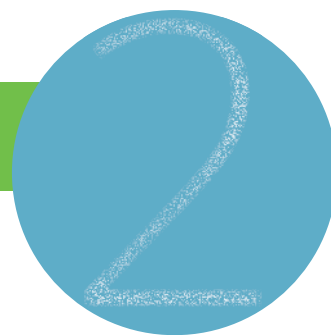
Do what you can to have a say in hiring a foodservice designer who will likely be the best fit for you and your project.

A design consultant can prove helpful even if you are planning only a modest makeover of a single cafeteria or kitchen. Such smaller-scale projects will give you greater autonomy in finding (and budgeting for) an expert. (Be sure to write the costs of such services into any grant application for a refresh!) You may not be able to afford a firm on the scale of Reitano or Rapids, but there are plenty of smaller outfits with school nutrition bona fides that may be perfect for the job. Many of these make a point to present education sessions and/or exhibit at SNA national and state affiliate conferences. Also, check with neighboring districts for recommendations.

For major construction projects, ask to be on the team that will review proposals and vet candidates for the contract. Be respectful, but make the case for your unique perspective here. Remember, it rarely hurts to ask! If your request is denied, stay on top of the selection process so that when a final decision is made, you can start researching the firm that won the business without delay. Visit its website and review past projects. This will help you identify the initial round of questions you want to ask the representative assigned to your project, establishing your vested interest in a collaborative effort.

Be realistic about what can be accomplished with your budget.

Even with a budget based on a school construction bond, few school districts have the funds to build the foodservice space of their dreams. Smaller projects might have even tighter budgets. A foodservice designer can help you plan accordingly, so you can make the most of the funding you have available. "It's all about setting those expectations right away," Green says. "I've worked with several customers who say, 'We want to do X, Y and Z, but we don't have the budget for X. How do we make that work?' Maybe we take some features and benefits away, or maybe we plan for you to get Y and Z and establish the infrastructure so that you can get X at a later date."





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Ask for a discovery meeting with your designer.

The blank slate of opportunities might make it difficult for you to envision and articulate exactly what you want. In these situations, the process might start with a discovery meeting, or what Green sometimes describes as “a design kickoff,” to brainstorm together. “I want to understand what the school’s wants and needs are,” he says. “I want to get their thoughts out and onto paper.”

It’s often helpful to bring in other stakeholders so they can understand why certain foodservice design choices become a priority. To begin, don’t limit this initial conversation to the district director and other team members in the central office. Be sure to invite the current school manager, and maybe even other managers or employees who have earned a reputation for creative, but practical, thinking. Also consider others beyond the cafeteria. “When I have those conversations and it’s more than just the foodservice staff there, it turns on more lights in people’s heads,” Green says. Consider inviting the school principal, representatives from the parent-teacher organization and the chief custodian.

4

Don’t be afraid to ask for the “plain language” version of anything.

You’re not a designer or architect, so you shouldn’t feel embarrassed if you don’t understand the jargon being used by a design consultant. There might be vocabulary or concepts you don’t understand—don’t pretend that you do. Go ahead and ask your foodservice designer to explain it to you in simple terms.

Reitano tells a story about a time during his days as a manufacturing rep when he met with a consultant who complained that foodservice directors don’t know how to read a design plan. “I’m looking at this piece of paper, thinking to myself, ‘Dude, if I didn’t know Number 13 was a combi-oven-steamer, I would think that was a square on a piece of paper,’” Reitano recalls. His approach is always to make sure foodservice teams understand the plan and the process, so they can ask questions and provide input every step of the way. “This is *your* facility,” he emphasizes. “You’re going to be making certain decisions. You should have a voice during each phase, and you should understand what they’re asking you during each phase of the process.”



5

Visit other schools for ideas and inspiration.

There are sure to be equipment options out there that you didn't know existed or that you have not realized are incredibly useful until seeing them in action. To collect ideas to fill your wish list with options that have the greatest potential to elevate your program, Reitano recommends some more homework: Take a few field trips.

"Go visit other school sites and learn what you like and what you don't," he says. "It's very possible you will walk into another school's kitchen and think, 'That would be great!' But you also might walk into a kitchen and realize, 'That wouldn't work for us. We should avoid that.'" You should find most neighboring school districts will be receptive to giving you a tour. Visit in teams of two or three, so you can discuss your impressions and conclusions together. Take pictures and videos and make notes. You want to be prepared to explain to your consultant why different equipment, layouts and so on resonated.

Also, make a point to check out the offerings of equipment vendors who exhibit at national and state tradeshow. This is beneficial even if you don't have a construction project pending. It's good to start familiarizing yourself with what's brand-new today, as it may become the gold standard by the time you are in a position to purchase new equipment, furnishings, serving lines and so on.

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Consider the needs of your team (yes, your entire team) above all.

When it comes to manufacturer reps, remember that their job is to sell equipment. They're going to tell you that their product is something you absolutely need, even if it isn't. One of the benefits to working with a foodservice design company is that they can and should provide objective guidance in this regard. "Our job is to have our client's best interests at heart," Reitano says. "I don't care if I make Manufacturer Rep A mad or if Manufacturer Rep B doesn't like us. Don't get me wrong—we play well in the sandbox. But the only agenda we have is to say, 'We want this foodservice team to get what they need to be successful at what they do.' That's it."

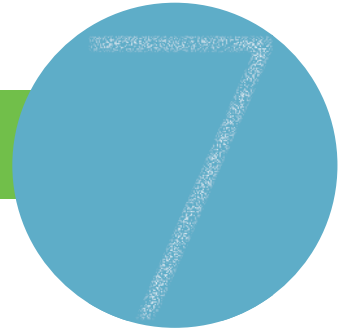
But what is it that you *do* need? It won't be easy to sort through all the diverse opinions that may rise among your own foodservice team. Avoid letting any one member have the dominant voice. Even if you have a leading and respected staff member who has been with your program for many years, that longstanding veteran could retire or transfer to another school or district, leaving you with a kitchen custom-designed to his or her needs and not necessarily the best fit for everyone else.



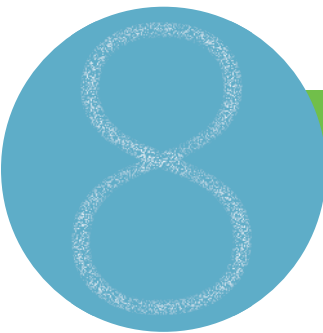
RAPIDS SOLUTIONS FOODSERVICE CONTRACT AND DESIGN

Get updated and detailed 3-D renderings frequently throughout the planning process.

Not all of us can view a 2-D blueprint and translate it into a 3-D picture in our heads. Fortunately, today's design technology makes it much easier to create renderings that provide multiple points of view of how equipment looks, how traffic will flow in the kitchen and the serving line, how much space tables will take up, etc. This allows you to be a more informed partner to identify potential problems with how things are configured. *"Kids taking their trays to the trash bins are going to collide with kids loading up at the salad bar."* *"Is there a short cut if I need to pull a server to staff a cashier station or vice versa? Right now it's a pretty long walk."* Let your design team know you expect to regularly see 3-D renderings that will give you a realistic idea of what it's like to move around in the space.



Invest in equipment technology that you know how to use.



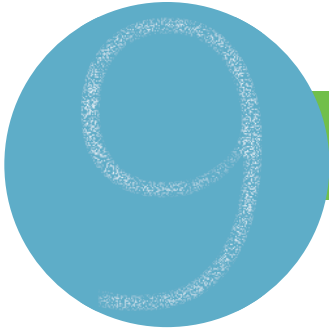
The latest equipment technology is great if your prep team feels comfortable enough to actually use it. There are many anecdotal stories of school nutrition directors visiting renovated or refreshed kitchen sites and discovering that a new tilt skillet is being used for additional pantry storage or a commercial mixer is still wrapped in the plastic it was delivered in. Because Rapids operates in the Midwest, Green finds many of his clients may be a few years behind equipment trends that get an earlier foothold in schools on the East or West Coasts.

New equipment technology, such as combi-ovens (not exactly "new" anymore, but still unfamiliar to many), can improve kitchen efficiency to unprecedented levels. This is something Reitano sees as well, and it's one of the reasons that kitchens with the latest equipment typically have more options when it comes to their menu. "If you have a tilt skillet and a combi-oven, you can say, 'What do we *want* to put on the menu?' not 'What do we have the capacity to put on the menu?'" he explains.

If you're planning to introduce unfamiliar and intimidating equipment, be sure to have a corresponding plan to train staff—multiple times—in how to use it! Green says he doesn't like to push cutting-edge technology on a customer that truly doesn't want to use it. "I'd hate to go back to a school six months after it's open and see they're using a \$40,000 combi-oven as a convection oven just because they're scared of it," he notes. As you move from design to equipment purchasing, be sure the manufacturer or dealer offers a comprehensive training program.

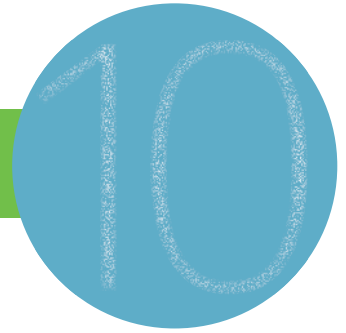


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More isn't always better.

When faced with greater space, which often comes with new facility construction, expansions and, often, renovations, it can be easy to fall into a mindset that more is always better. But that's not necessarily the case. Sometimes, less really is more—or less is just as good, at least. A prime example of this, according to Reitano, is a merchandiser where students can select among grab-and-go options. It might be tempting to select a 6-ft. unit—after all, you can stock it less often. But a 4-ft. display case is easier for most students who are not basketball players and might struggle to view and reach items over their heads. Plus, a unit that is too big and not fully restocked until after lunch service can wind up looking picked-over and half-empty by the time the third lunch shift rolls around. That's certainly less appealing to students who, after a few such encounters, may begin to take their business off-campus.



Above all, keep an open mind.



An effective collaboration relies on your trust in and respect for your designer, valuing their expertise, especially when they must present alternatives to your original, and ideal, vision. “Come to the table with an open mind,” Green encourages. “Have your thoughts and wants jotted down, but be prepared for some difficult conversations and to possibly make some compromises.” This is especially true when it comes to limits and restrictions for which the design consultant has no control, such as budget, equipment availability (supply chain sagas continue), space, utility connections and so on.

The upside is that even if there are aspects of your kitchen/cafeteria vision that aren't possible, an expert foodservice designer is likely to make suggestions that still meet your needs—and maybe even exceed your expectations in other areas! The end result will be a foodservice space that works for you, your students and the entire school community. Collaboration for the win! **SN**

Dylan Roche is an SN Contributing Editor based in Arnold, Md.