

FUN + DESIGN --- = HEALTH



Putting nutritious food onto school menus has to be matched with good design that encourages students to choose healthy food. Sue Holaday reports on how consultants are leading the way in persuading children to learn good habits

Few would question that healthier choices in school meals should be a given. Yet, in recent years, school nutrition directors have become caught up in arguments between the federal government, First Lady Michelle Obama and the School Nutrition Association over the right way to make those choices become a reality.

At the same time, a movement has sprung up, determined to move the focus from serving healthier food to getting children to choose and eat healthier foods.

Among those leading this charge are foodservice consultants, nutritionists, and local policymakers.

Scott Reitano, FCSI, principal at the Reitano Design Group in Indianapolis, Indiana, moved into the forefront, describing himself as “on a mission to change the way we teach our children through their school food experience”.

Pointing out that the National School Lunch Programme has not changed the way lunch is served significantly since 1946, he declares: “That needs to change. This is not about serving a healthy school lunch. This is about enticing children to eat healthier.”

Three factors are crucial. One third of children in the US are overweight or obese. At the same time, the food industry spends more than \$1.6bn marketing food and drink, often unhealthy ones, to children. Additionally, 40% of food produced in the US is wasted.

Reitano and others argued that the school lunch programme could be used as a platform to promote children to make healthier food choice, while also cutting food wastage. Reitano suggests that design can play a significant role in bringing about this level of change.

On the serving line, for example,



First Lady Michelle Obama at Parklawn Elementary School, Alexandria, Virginia

food placement plays a major role. When nutritious foods are placed at the front of the line, purchases typically rise by 15%. The first three items chosen account for around 68% of the food that ends up on a child’s plate.

“Choice architecture” is another key factor, says Reitano. “When offered carrots and celery, students are much more likely to purchase vegetables.” The final factor is the issue of trays versus no trays. Students without trays buy fewer salads and no ice cream.

Power of persuasion

The average school lunch period is 23 minutes. Where food is placed on a cafeteria line, the way it is served, and how it is prepared are all under scrutiny as school foodservice operators look for new and creative ways to bring healthy options to the fore, while also making them appealing, and even exciting.

At the same time, the timing of school lunch has also come under review, as schools have found that bringing recess forward to the period before lunch brings hungry students

to the table, and returns them to class more attentive and ready to learn.

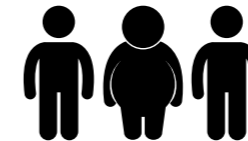
A group called The Smarter Lunchrooms Movement, part of the Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Program, researches and promotes the design of K-12 school lunchrooms using behavioural science, persuasive design techniques, ergonomics, social psychology, and other sciences and design methods. Simple tactics such as putting healthier foods within easier reach and at the front of the line – when students’ trays are empty and their pockets are full – while taking the reverse approach for junk food can make a big difference.

Schools in San Francisco to Seattle, Salina, Kansas; Greenville, South Carolina and Arcadia, Indiana; are taking steps to transform cafeterias from traditional to creative, attractive, and engaging. The idea is to move from a monotonous and boring design setting to one that engages and stimulates.

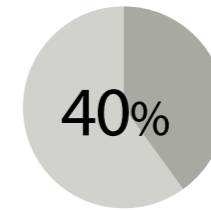
Joe Urban, nutrition director for Greenville County Schools, oversees a programme that responds to the



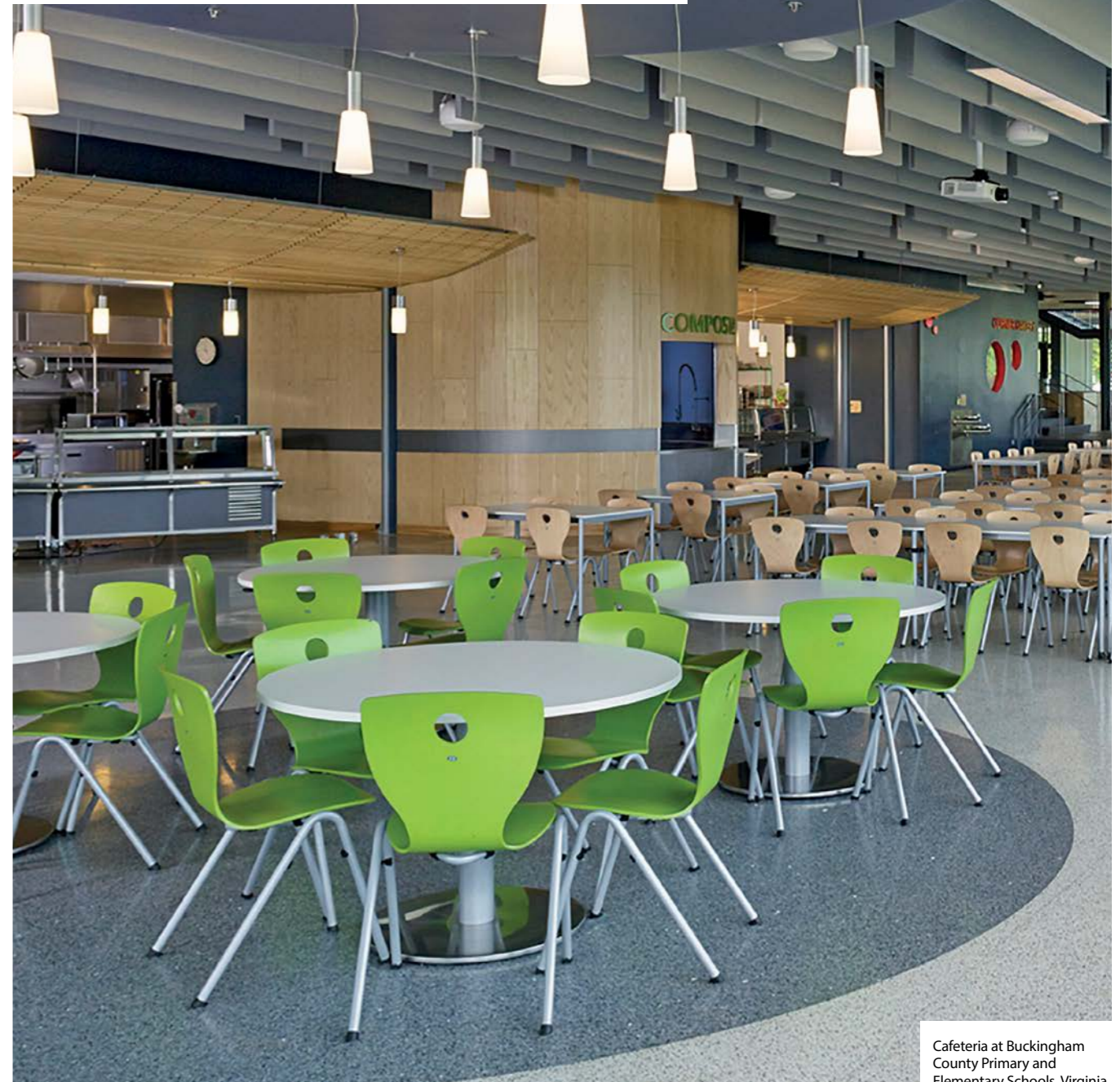
the average lunch period



1 in 3 children in the US are obese



40% of food produced in the US is wasted



SAUL LOEB / AFP GETTY IMAGES, ALAN KARCHMER

Cafeteria at Buckingham County Primary and Elementary Schools, Virginia

Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) and the recent implementation of the Smart Snacks in Schools regulations. “School foodservice programmes are charged with managing profitable schemes at a time when the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has dramatically changed the rules in which we must operate,” says Urban.

Today, school food must be lower in calories and sodium, and include wholegrain products – yeast rolls, brown rice and pastas – while also being welcomed by students. The Smart Snacks in Schools regulations led Greenville to “dramatically revamp our a la carte menus,” says Urban. These menus, brought in before the HHFKA regulations came into effect, have been deemed to be among the nation’s healthiest, and received a Golden Carrot Award from the Physicians Committee on Responsible Medicine.

Out with the old

The Greenville programme offers items cooked from scratch, ending reliance on processed foods while increasing the use of whole grains. “It also emphasises fresh fruits and vegetables, a homemade soup and salad bar, and a fresh fruit and vegetable bar, says Urban. “The menu includes many vegetarian entrées such as homemade black bean burgers, vegetable burgers and scratch-made vegetarian lasagne.”

The changes made staff training a top priority, with the hiring of a chef and creating a partnership with the Culinary Institute of the Carolinas to offer a week-long chef’s boot camp covering cooking basics and nutrition. Today all employees wear chef coats as a mark of their professional approach.

Fruit and vegetable programmes have been launched in elementary and middle schools, with the introduction

“We take pride in preparing healthy entrées that are made from scratch, and have taken measures to ensure they are displayed prominently on serving lines”

of fresh fruit and vegetable salad bars.

To cut plate waste, Greenville made changes aimed at cutting food cost, with staff training on USDA reimbursable meal requirements. The result was a district-wide fall in food cost of more than 2% at a time when the actual cost of food was up by more than 2.9%. One school showed a reduction of 12% from its original 61% food cost for the previous year. The reduction in plate waste, Urban notes, was dramatic.

“We take immense pride in preparing healthy entrées that are made from scratch, and have taken measures to ensure they are displayed prominently on our serving lines. We have trained staff on proper pan usage and do not cup food items,” he points out.

As Greenville tackles the design of new schools or renovates existing ones, it is changing the look of the old serving line. Coming in are custom-made display counters with built-in hot wells, cold wells and open beverage merchandisers. Going out are the old modular pieces on wheels with the bulky silver milk box in the corner. “Our new schools and remodelled schools resemble something you would find in a high-end food court,” says Urban. “They are not the dreary lunch lines of the past.”

Reitano adds that schools have to “get off the old bandwagon” and cut the linear look of the lunch line, add colours that “play to turning tables,” and make the line more fun, perhaps by creating a common area with stations.

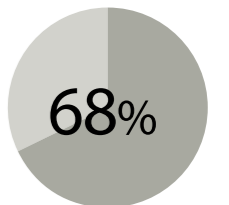


Picking the healthy options at Decatur Central High School, Indianapolis, Indiana



When nutritious foods are placed at the front line, purchases typically rise by

15%



of food that ends up on a child’s plate is taken from the first three items chosen

SCHOOL MEALS

Try before you buy

In Greenville, Reitano points to the use of sampling in the line, where one group of students walking in received apples to taste while another had cookies. The group receiving apples subsequently bought 25% more apples. Additionally, he observes: "Kids come to school lunch hungry. We put vegetables first. If kids see others eating them, they will eat them too."

"We have to make school lunch fun for kids," John Turenne FCSI, of Sustainable Food Systems LLC, says in agreement. "Sampling is a good way to back up the introduction of new fruits and vegetables. Staff in chef coats can tell kids: say 'no thanks' if you don't like something. Don't yuck at my yum!"

"Improved serving lines is a great strategy for getting kids to eat better," he continues. "My focus is systematic and holistic. We need to improve infrastructure but also the back of house operation so cafeteria staff can cook rather than heat food. Design plays a part but it must support cooking food from scratch." Everyone from school administrators to parents and the community must be involved, he adds. Staff training is important as well, along with "respecting fiscal responsibilities and USDA guidelines".

He also points out: "Kids in schools really respect chefs when you get them to understand that good food is cool. They relate to chefs, taste new foods and buy into our new ideas, if we focus on communication."

School gardens play a part, he adds, and could be maintained by volunteer parents during the summer. "The kids can grow fresh herbs, and learn how they entice people with aromas as they are cooked."

Dina Sorenson, LEED, AP, BD+C,



Kitchen Lab learning at Buckingham County Primary and Elementary Schools, Virginia

a project designer and design research associate VMDO Architects, based in Charlottesville, Virginia, sees a need for better understanding of the role that design plays in helping children to eat healthier. A combination of foodservice strategy, menu planning and design can come together to be effective, she says.

"We have to think deeper where kids have yet to develop a rational capacity to pick healthy choices," says Sorenson. She believes school gardens and composting also play a part in the learning process.

She likes to start by putting the hydration station at a cafeteria position where it helps students to choose water instead of chocolate milk. "When a building is engineered right, kids understand the processes better with a stewardship lesson," she says. "The way we design reinforces the health message." The building, she says, should also be a less sedentary environment, promoting movement.

Sorenson sees posters and design elements as potent ways to communicate a healthy foods message to children, and finds

children are happier in well-designed environments. Schools, she believes, are more and more becoming an oasis for health. "I'd like schools to get out of their silos and expand the dialogue by interfacing with farmers, designers, and others. There are creative opportunities to come up with ways to help kids learn about foods, do tastings, let them choose and engage in the shift," she says.

Better facilities

Hamilton Heights, a creative high school in Arcadia, Indiana, renovated and transformed its dining facilities last year. The school worked with Reitano Design Group to highlight healthy food choices, the development of flexible menu options, and the creation of more effective flow patterns in the serving space.

Lindsey Hill, RD, director of nutrition services for the South Madison (IN) Community Service Corporation, consulted with the Hamilton Heights foodservice department on the renovation and changes. She explains that the project was driven by "a district-

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wide emphasis on the importance of enticing students to eat with us – which is a healthy option!”

The project, she recalls, began because there was no ability to merchandise fruits and vegetables with the existing equipment, layout and setup of the cafeteria at Hamilton Heights.

“We decided we needed to update equipment to make the food already being served look better so that the students want to eat it. That led into a larger project in which we decided we wanted to change the feeling of the cafeteria as a whole.”

The biggest challenges on the way were ones she describes as being “out of our control and unrelated to the project”. Staffing, for example, falls into this category. “But the students and the kitchen staff embraced the changes with a positive attitude,” says Hill.

Made from scratch

Today, the changes are viewed as “the beginning stage of how we plan to introduce more and more scratch-made food choices and improve on the appearance, taste, and selection of the items we offer.”

Hill worked with the school district’s chief financial officer Peggy Jackson, who saw the project begin with responses from students to a survey about their likes and dislikes about the school lunch operation. Jackson’s underlying focus was to move the programme away from processed food to one with cooking-from-scratch, healthy foods and lots more fruits and vegetables.

With rising obesity levels among students, Jackson was determined to create a more fun environment where there was wireless interactivity available for students and teachers alike. “We wanted more of a food court atmosphere,” she says.



Cafeteria breakout space at Buckingham County Primary and Elementary Schools, Virginia

“We wanted the kids to feel that the cafeteria was warm and inviting. I think we can go further. Kids need to understand what celery and watermelon are”

The project was completed two days before the opening of the 2014 school year. Jackson gives credit to Scott Reitano and Lindsey Hill for helping to make the changes a success. “They made a big difference for us,” she says. “We wanted the kids to feel that the cafeteria was warm and inviting – like a restaurant. It was one of the most challenging projects I ever did, but it all worked out. I think we can go further. Kids need to understand what celery and watermelon are.”

In Chicago, Rochelle Davis, the founder and executive director of the Healthy Schools Campaign,

views healthy students as better learners. The group also works with school districts and parents to raise awareness of healthy foods, articulate priorities, and develop action plans.

The campaign group worked with one district to initiate a farm-to-school programme, helping to shift the menus away from processed foods, says Davis. A Cooking Up Change programme for culinary students encouraged children to try new foods they might not otherwise eat and make children “part of a conversation about food”. The group also holds culinary competitions.

“We educate parents too,” she notes, adding that school foodservice has become part of every district’s conversation. “We work for principals on the importance of allowing enough time [to eat] and how putting recess before lunch lets the kids eat more healthily at lunch.” ■