

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.

