

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.