

Lunch is Served

How a school redesigned its cafeteria to make better use of space

BY DIANE K. SCHWEITZER

Ninety minutes a day, 180 days a year. If that's all the time your school cafeterias are in use—and if they're only being used for meal service—you're not making the best possible use of a valuable resource. School cafeterias are usually spacious and sparsely furnished, and they typically have one function only. But today, more and more schools are changing the image of the old-fashioned lunchroom by actively encouraging investment in cafeterias for a broader scope of use. School dining rooms today must be adaptable for multiple functions, such as community meetings, social dances, art fairs, or reunions and parties.

The School City of Hammond in Hammond, Ind., is one example of a district changing the perception of single-use "lunchrooms." Realizing that using cafeterias exclusively for student dining was a concept of the past, we set out to create a facility that could be used for both school and community activities. The result is the successful redesign of the George Rogers Clark Middle School/High School cafeteria, an upscale-style dining area where students do more than just "have lunch."

When in need

Concern about student safety was the primary driving force in redesigning the cafeteria at Clark. The decision came two years ago when parents attended a school board meeting and petitioned the board to close all campuses at lunch time. Parents were upset because students were leaving the building in

speeding cars and coming back to school late, if at all. There were also discipline problems. Some students cut afternoon classes or returned late and disturbed classes that were already in progress. Others hurried off campus for a quick smoke.

But to convince students to stay at school during lunchtime, we knew we had to redesign the cafeteria to make it an appealing place to eat. Clark's cafeteria had been built in the early 1960s when students generally went home for lunch (and mom was generally there to make it). Today, with a population of 1,151 students, the dining room was not large enough to seat even one-third of the student body at any one time.

Not only did we need to create more space to serve all our students, we also had to provide a variety of choices for lunch. In the mid-1970s, the United States Department of Agriculture mandated a concept known as "offer versus serve," which required schools to offer students choices of foods to promote good nutrition. Before that, choices were limited to the basic meal components of the menu—an entrée, one vegetable, one fruit, milk, and dessert—so no additional space was needed. The serving area at Clark did not have space to offer and display these food choices. We wanted to offer bottled and canned beverages and prepackaged snacks, but the facility was entirely too small to accommodate these various products.

A design team concluded that a complete demolition was necessary because the existing space could not accommodate a facility as large as we needed. The dining area was too small, and both the serving and storage areas were not large enough. The community realized that the cafeteria was in dire need of

demolition and supported our efforts to redesign the facility. Voters passed a “floating” bond that increased property taxes so the school district could make needed renovations to Clark’s cafeteria.

A design for the future

The new cafeteria at Clark Middle/High School was completed in January 2001. The redesign and renovation took a little more than a year and cost \$3 million. The district considered a number of factors in redesigning the cafeteria so that it would serve a variety of purposes. It was important to get everything right—where to place equipment, what kind of lighting and floor covering to install, what the decor should be—to make our old “lunchroom” into a facility of the future.

The new cafeteria has a combination of natural lighting and indirect lighting, giving the room a bright and cheery feel. The lights are wired on dimmer switches, which can be turned down for functions such as school dances or concerts. Flooring was also important. We decided to place carpet in some areas of the cafeteria to absorb the sound of students talking and chairs sliding across the floor. Carpeting also has a calming effect—it adds warmth to the room and is pleasing to the eye.

One of the most essential elements in the redesign was seating for students. We found that while most school cafeterias have long rows of tables with bench style seating, that configuration does little to promote positive interaction between students. At Clark, we installed smaller tables to encourage small-group discussion and assist in promoting personal interaction. The standard bench-style seating was replaced in favor of comfortable booths and sturdy chairs, including stylish bar stools. The new space seats 439 students.

We also added a “fruit and dairy bar” to the Clark cafeteria. It consists of two refrigerators, a small freezer, an oven, a microwave, a three-compartment sink, a coffee pot, a cappuccino machine, food warmers, an electric can opener, and a hand sink. The addition of the fruit and dairy bar provides a small kitchen facility that outside organizations can use so they need not have access to the main food-prep area. Students have access to food and drink available at the bar but are not permitted to use the equipment.

No cafeteria is completely modern without the addition of a little technology. Electrical outlets and data ports for connecting to the Internet were placed on all the perimeter walls near the booth-style seating areas. Students now are able to use their laptop computers for homework and research on the Internet during breakfast and lunch. A large, high-definition television is located at the center of the room for instructional purposes, and smaller, flat screen televisions are available throughout the room. All the televisions are capable of receiving cable and satellite programming or instruction by way of videotape or Internet. Also, small and unobtrusive security cameras in the dining room ceiling help us monitor the activity of students and guests in the cafeteria.

The new design now serves four times what the former cafe-



The newly renovated Clark Middle/High School cafeteria features smaller tables, booths, and sturdy chairs to encourage small-group discussion and positive interaction among students.

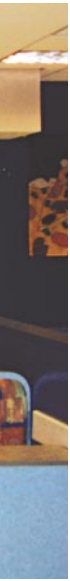
teria did and no new dollars have been added for student supervision. The new design is so efficient that only one additional food service staff person was needed.

Something for everyone

The purpose of the serving area is to meet students’ nutritional needs by offering a wide variety of choices. Fast-food franchises have spent millions of dollars in marketing to students. We knew we had to offer some of these same choices, too. Therefore, at Clark we decided to serve meals in the style of a food court.

Pizza, including individual pan pizzas, is still the number one choice of entrée, but an increasing number of students prefer the low-fat entrees such as pasta, salads, and tortilla-wrapped sandwiches. Home-style meals are also available, along with favorite grill items such as burgers. Menus are posted on the district’s Web site (<http://hammond.k12.in.us>) and accessible by going to the scrolling bar and clicking on “School Lunch Menus.” They also can be found throughout the school to help students decide their lunch meal in advance. Some of the featured menu items are read during the daily announcements. Our next goal is to post the nutritional value of each meal on the Web site.

The food service staff understands the need to get students in and out of the cafeteria quickly. The food court arrangement allows students to be served in less than 10 minutes. Students serve themselves some items, while other food is served to them. Because students are served quickly, without long waits in line, they have more time to eat their meal, visit friends, do homework, or purchase an additional snack item from the fruit



and dairy bar. The quick service also helps curb the discipline problems that often arise when students are waiting in line.

The use of scanner guns speeds up the movement at the cashier station. Students scan their own ID cards for the cashier. (If students forget their ID cards, they can key in their ID numbers on a numeric keypad.) We encourage students to deposit money into their meal accounts to save time at the cashier, where the price of their meal is automatically deducted from their account with no money changing hands.

A team effort

Students aren't the only ones enjoying the new facility. The cafeteria at Clark Middle School/ High School has been used for a number of activities, including Kiwanis meetings, dances, and choral concerts. There are also plans to use the area for student testing and adult education courses.

A number of factors contributed to the successful redesign of the cafeteria. One of the most important was the absolute support of the board and the community.

Another key element was the teamwork that took place among the different agencies involved in the project. The cafeteria was designed in partnership with a team consisting not only of architects, construction managers, and school administration leaders, but also of teachers, parents, students, and a food service staff liaison. Students, especially, were involved in

determining what they wanted in a multi purpose room, designing the food court, and deciding the menu selections and style of service.

Communication was essential in bringing it all together. If there is one thing we learned from the Clark Middle School/High School experience, it's that to be successful, the key stakeholders must be included in the design process. Otherwise, the project will be doomed to failure. At Clark, we communicated openly with all groups and listened to their opinions. When the cafeteria was finished, everyone who had contributed to the planning and everyone who would use the space felt a sense of ownership in the successful design and renovation of the facility.

The success of the Clark project has prompted the district to redesign the cafeterias of three other high schools and a middle school. And Clark Principal Aletta Hicks reports a positive change in the students, describing them as "very well-behaved and very respectful of their new facility." Students no longer speed away from campus in search of that perfect fast-food spot to hang out. They now hang out in the "lunchroom," which they say is "cool, like eating in a restaurant."

Diane K. Schweitzer (dkschweitzer@m1.hammond.k12.in.us) is director of child nutrition for the School City of Hammond in Hammond, Ind.