How to Serve More Students Faster During Meal Periods

Insights from Michael Egan, Executive Vice President, Multiteria™ USA, LLC

Feeding hundreds—if not thousands—of students during tightly scheduled meal periods is more than just a logistical challenge; it's an art. The complexities of growing student populations, aging infrastructures, and limited budgets require flexible and adaptable solutions.

With over 45 years of experience designing foodservice solutions, I've partnered with K-12 foodservice directors, operators, design consultants, and architects to develop efficient serving strategies that not only improve speed but also enhance the student dining experience. Whether working with older, compact spaces or brand-new cafeterias, well-planned solutions are key to overcoming challenges and meeting the needs of today's schools.

This guide explores six actionable strategies to help K-12 schools serve more students faster—while addressing diverse needs and future-proofing dining spaces.

1. Scatter Design Layouts vs. Traditional Linear Designs

Linear serving lines often cause bottlenecks, leaving students frustrated and eating into valuable time. Scatter design layouts address this issue by distributing serving areas, allowing students to spread out and make selections faster.

Benefits of Scatter Designs:

- **Reduces traffic congestion and long waits** by decentralizing serving points.
- **Serves a greater variety of menu items**, from hot meals to unlimited fruits and vegetables via island-style salad bars.
- **Supports additional serving options** like **condiment counters** in seating areas to improve traffic flow after checkout.

Challenges with Implementation:

For older schools built in the 1960s or '70s, implementing scatter layouts may be difficult due to inflexible architecture. Fixed walls and entry points often require significant renovation costs. However, for newly designed cafeterias, open, flexible layouts are becoming standard, offering the ideal setup for a modern food court-style dining experience resembling that of a one in a shopping mall.

2. Moving Beyond Traditional Linear Designs

As mentioned above, designing modern cafeteria spaces often comes with the challenge of outdated infrastructure – as many existing schools have small, enclosed "shoebox-style" areas with fixed cinder block walls and immovable entry doors. These rigid designs limit flexibility, making renovations costly, time-consuming, and complex.

To address these limitations, architects are increasingly:

- **Focused on creating open, adaptable spaces** that prioritize flexibility and scalability.
- **Moving away from fixed structures** for easier modification and improvements without the need for extensive demolition.

Key Takeaway for Architects:

When designing or renovating school cafeteria spaces, aim to eliminate cramped, enclosed designs like with doors and walls. Prioritize open layouts and flexible features to accommodate future changes with minimal disruption.

3. The Speed Boost of Grab-and-Go Stations

The shift away from traditional cafeteria layouts in schools has brought a new era of efficiency with grab-and-go stations, which dramatically enhance the speed of service in high-traffic dining environments. By leveraging cutting-edge equipment like air screen refrigerators, hot food merchandisers, and heated pizza shelves, schools can utilize vertical space to pre-portion and pre-wrap food items. This approach allows students to quickly select their meals and move effortlessly through serving lines, minimizing delays.

Why this trend is growing:

- **Faster Service:** Pre-wrapped meals and portioned items reduce manual serving time, enabling more students to be served within a limited time.
- **Efficiency in High-Demand Areas:** Schools that struggle with soaring student populations and limited serving staff benefit immensely from this setup.
- **Real-World Example:** New York City Public Schools serve approximately 880,000 meals daily (New York City Public Schools, n.d.) and have increasingly relied on grab-and-go stations to meet demand, particularly since 2020 (Nittle, 2021).

While some operators express concerns about potential theft, these stations present a necessary compromise for districts facing increasing student populations and staffing shortages. The result is an improved dining experience and a solution that balances speed and scale in K-12 spaces.

4. The Role of Technology in Streamlining Service

The integration of technology has become a pivotal element in enhancing efficiency and addressing spatial limitations in school dining environments. By incorporating modern solutions inspired by fast casual restaurants, schools can improve the overall dining experience for students.

One clear example of this is the use of digital menu boards, which offer multiple benefits:

- **Faster Selection**: Digital menu boards allow students to view options and make decisions before reaching the serving station, significantly reducing wait times. This model mirrors the success observed in fast casual restaurants, where advanced menu visibility helps move customers through the line more quickly.

- **Enhanced Engagement**: The vibrant and flexible nature of digital displays makes it easier to update menus in real-time, providing both clarity and visual appeal.

While K-12 schools are unlikely to adopt remote order kiosks due to simpler, more compact menus, these technologies are increasingly present in higher education and retail applications where greater menu variety and higher volume demand higher efficiency.

5. Designing for Diverse Student Populations

When designing school dining spaces, addressing the diverse needs of different age groups is essential for creating an inclusive and functional environment. Modern designs now emphasize flexibility and adaptability, particularly for schools that serve a broad age range, such as K-12 institutions. Serving lines, for example, can be tailored to accommodate younger age groups while maintaining functionality for older students.

- **Customizable Serving Heights**: Manufacturers can design serving counters with lower tray slides, such as 28”-30” for younger K-3 students, while maintaining the main counter height at 34” for staff to seamlessly pass the trays to the students.
- **Serving Lines for Mixed Age Groups**: Many districts prioritize designing for younger students, as older students can more easily adapt to lower counter heights than vice versa.
- **Adjustable Serving Lines**: Advanced options include serving lines with height-adjustable mechanisms, using mechanical hand cranks or pneumatic levelers, to cater to varying age groups dynamically.

While offering lower serving lines enhances accessibility, it’s crucial to balance this with considerations for staff ergonomics, as excessively low work heights could lead to strain. By incorporating thoughtful design and modern customization options, K-12 dining spaces can effectively serve diverse populations.

6. Future-Proofing Serving Counter Designs

The evolving K-12 foodservice landscape places serving counters at the intersection of functionality and style. With continuously shifting student preferences and operational needs, designing adaptable, future-ready serving counters has become critical.

Key considerations for future-proof serving counter designs include:

- **Modular Counter Flexibility**: Selecting modular counters ensures the adaptability to evolving menus and dining themes, minimizing disruptions during updates or changes.
- **Customization Challenges**: Custom duty-fabricated counters often lack flexibility, making them harder to modify or reconfigure as needs evolve.
- **Upgrade-Friendly Exterior Finishes**: Choose colors and materials that are easy to replace or refresh, allowing the dining environment to stay current with trends and maintain its appeal over time.

By prioritizing flexibility in design and material choices, serving counters can evolve with ease to meet the changing needs of K-12 spaces while extending the life of the dining infrastructure.

Building a Faster, Smarter School Cafeteria

Serving more students faster is not just about efficiency – it's about creating a space where students feel welcomed and valued. From thoughtful layouts to vertical grab-and-go stations, every design decision plays a role in improving the dining experience.

For decades, I've dedicated myself to advancing foodservice design to enhance operator efficiency and foster a sense of community. If you're looking to improve your foodservice operation or just have some questions, feel free to reach out. Sometimes, all it takes is a quick chat to spark great ideas.

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About The Author:

For the past 17 years, Michael has had the privilege of managing the Multiteria™ brand, a subsidiary of Lakeside® Manufacturing. During this time, he has played a key role in its growth as a leading manufacturer of retail serving line counters, specializing in the K-12, College & University, Healthcare, and B&I segments.

Before joining Multiteria in 2008, Michael enjoyed a successful 22-year career with a leading foodservice design-consulting firm in White Plains, NY. In that role, he provided design-consulting services to many leading hotel chains, world-class destination resorts, and restaurant companies. He also had the opportunity to consult with numerous public and private K-12 school districts across the country.

With over 45 years of experience in food service, Michael has developed a unique understanding of foodservice operations, equipment application, space planning, and delivering creative solutions for architecturally challenging spaces.

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