

A Guide to Enhancing Flexibility and Efficiency in Foodservice with Alternative Serving Lines

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Every school day, foodservice professionals tackle the significant task of feeding hundreds—if not thousands—of students within a brief window of time. It's a logistical dance intertwining time management, nutritional requirements, and operational efficiency. Yet, outdated traditional serving lines often make this task more difficult than necessary.

My goal is to help reimagine what a school cafeteria can be. By adopting flexible, efficient serving solutions like grab-and-go kiosks and utilizing innovative designs such as portable expandable serving counters, we can eliminate bottlenecks, adapt to diverse student needs, and elevate the dining experience for all. As a K-12 foodservice director or consultant, you have the opportunity to drive this transformation. This paper explains how.

The Challenges of Traditional Serving Lines

Lack of Flexibility

Traditional serving lines are fixed and immobile systems that fail to accommodate food trends or diverse dietary needs. Our cafeterias are no longer simple lunchrooms—they are extensions of breakout dining areas that now might feature vegan salad bars or ethnic-themed stations. Keeping them versatile is essential as trends shift. Yet, rigid setups struggle to keep up with these demands, resulting in long queues, limited options, and logistical inefficiencies.

Traffic Jams and Inefficient Flow

The singular focus of traditional lines creates choke points during peak hours, leading to long wait times and reducing the time students have to eat. Another pain point is the location of cashier stands—often contributing to the congestion. Bottlenecks can frustrate staff and students, lowering meal participation rates.

Limited Utility Across Campus

Schools can extend mealtime options by taking foodservice beyond the cafeteria. However, without mobile or modular systems, staff cannot adapt to outdoor needs or distribute meal service across satellite locations like libraries or athletic fields, leaving valuable opportunities untapped.

The Solution

Flexible Serving Concepts

The transformation begins with solutions designed specifically for flexibility and adaptability. Grab-and-go carts and portable expandable serving counter units allow foodservice directors to meet students where they are while customizing solutions for cafeteria needs.

Portable Expandable Serving Counters

Portable expandable serving counters allow for a modular, mobile approach to meal service. What makes them expandable? Typically, it's the expandable section that effortlessly rolls out to provide additional counter space. These units can be positioned outside the primary serving area, offering quick access to specialty items like beverages or prepackaged meals. During peak hours, this flexibility can improve efficiency by enabling staff to manage smaller, localized setups instead of relying on one area.

Practical Benefits in Real-World Scenarios:

- **Versatility for Pop-Up School Retail:** Whether it's setting up a grab-and-go breakfast station in the hallway or hosting a cooking demonstration for a nutrition education program, these serving counters adapt to a variety of school needs.
- **Effortless Workspace Expansion:** The slide-out counter stays compact during storage or transport but extends to provide extra room for prepping meals, organizing supplies, or serving students during busy lunch periods.
- **Optimized Counter Space:** With ample room for utensils, snack displays, or even self-serve beverage dispensers, the extended counter helps streamline service and reduce wait times for students.
- **Mobility for Flexible Use:** Easily move to underutilized spaces like hallways for snack service, outdoor areas for field day events, or gymnasiums during school dances or sports games.
- **Temperature Control Options:** Optional hot and cold wells ensure that hot meals like soups or pasta stay warm, while cold items like milk or fruit remain chilled, meeting the diverse needs of school meal programs.

Grab-and-Go Carts

Grab-and-go carts make it easier to decentralize meal service and reduce wait times. These compact carts can be located next to cashier stands for added convenience, allowing students to pick up last-minute items like chips or desserts without restarting at the beginning of the serving line. By positioning these carts strategically, schools can improve traffic flow and increase revenue and participation opportunities.

Examples of Grab-and-Go Carts

Grab-and-go carts come in various types, including breakfast carts, mart carts, and merchandising carts. Here's a closer look at each:

- **Breakfast Carts:**
Designed as grab-and-go kiosks for serving breakfast items to students, these carts feature spacious interiors, adjustable-height overhead shelves, and perimeter bumpers to protect walls and doorways. They can be strategically placed at school entrances during morning arrivals or

near high-traffic areas like libraries or gyms during afterschool activities. Stock them with popular items such as granola bars, whole fruit, and beverages like water or milk.

- **Mart Carts:**
Compact and versatile, mart carts are ideal for grab-and-go operations. They often include removable shelving for flexible storage of both hot and cold items, while their smaller size allows for easy navigation through elevators and school corridors. Overhead shelving compartments can store utensils and supplies like cups, making them a practical choice for various school settings.
- **Merchandising Carts:**
Typically positioned near cashier stations, merchandising carts are designed to encourage upselling and to break up long lines and bottlenecks. Lightweight and easy to move, they can be stocked with a variety of snacks such as chips, cereals, and whole fruit, offering a convenient solution for both staff and students during meal periods.

Pairing Them Up

With a portable serving line and grab-and-go cart, you create a one-stop shop for convenience. For instance, the portable serving line can feature an optional welled bin or well to hold hot sandwiches, while the grab-and-go cart can display chips, candy bars, and even a bin for fresh fruit. An ice bin can also be added to keep bottled water chilled. This setup is highly versatile and can be easily moved into underutilized spaces, such as under a stairwell, to maximize efficiency and accessibility.

Addressing Staffing Limitations

Staffing shortages remain a significant hurdle for many K-12 foodservice programs. Alternative serving solutions can help mitigate this challenge. With their modular design and multifunctional features, portable serving lines and grab-and-go carts streamline operations by enabling a single employee to manage an entire serving station effortlessly.

For taking the action beyond the cafeteria and into outdoor spaces, consider working with a manufacturer that offers electrically motorized grab-and-go carts. These carts often come equipped with insulated ice bins—either as a standard feature or an optional add-on—making it easy to serve cold beverages in any setting. Consider the various caster options and materials with durability in mind. Consulting your manufacturer about these choices can help you avoid frequent caster replacements and save you from long-term hassles.

Additionally, equipment like push-pull carts maximizes labor efficiency by simplifying delivery tasks, such as bringing goods directly into classrooms or setting up remote serving stations. The ability to adapt serving strategies as needed helps minimize labor strain while maintaining high service levels.

Benefits of Alternative Serving Lines

Enhanced Efficiency

By decentralizing meal service, flexible setups like grab-and-go kiosks prevent traffic jams, reduce wait times, and give students more time to enjoy their meals. The result? A more seamless dining experience and reduced operational strain on staff.

Greater Adaptability

Customizable features such as modular designs, magnetic graphics, and mobile capabilities allow foodservice programs to adjust to evolving needs, whether for breakfast, lunch, special events, or athletic programs. Imagine offering nutritious breakfast items at a pop-up kiosk by your school's entrance or setting up a coffee stand near the library to cater to different crowds throughout the day.

Increased Equity & Choice

Alternative serving lines also increase accessibility. Providing allergen-friendly or culturally specific meals at separate kiosks ensures more students can find options they're comfortable with. Satellite service points reduce the stigma shy students feel about going to lunch by offering meal access beyond the cafeteria.

Encouraging Innovation

Flexible systems like portable serving lines encourage schools to develop creative dining solutions. For example, schools can brand and reconfigure carts with custom graphics to offer unique meals for sports events, fundraisers, or other special programs.

Real-World Success

At a high school in a major metropolitan area, one operator implemented breakfast kiosks at both the front and back of their building to make food more accessible and reduce the intimidation of walking to the far end to grab a meal. This approach not only improved convenience but also encouraged more participation by creating a welcoming and efficient experience.

In larger cities, the demand for diverse cultural food options is often greater compared to smaller towns. This is where flexible serving lines and grab-and-go carts become essential. By incorporating individual stations, you can cater to a variety of preferences and dietary needs, ensuring inclusivity for all. Additionally, setting up multiple stations helps prevent bottlenecks and long wait times, creating a smoother and more enjoyable dining experience for everyone.

A Call to Innovate

Innovation doesn't have to mean a complete overhaul of your existing setup. Taking small, strategic steps—such as incorporating mobile merchandising carts or investing in modular serving lines—can pave the way for a more efficient, inclusive, and exciting foodservice program.

Here's how to get started:

1. **Audit Current Systems** – Assess inefficiencies and identify opportunities for improvement.

2. **Consider Student Needs** – Use participation data and feedback to tailor solutions.
 3. **Pilot Programs** – Start with small deployments to test effectiveness.
 4. **Think Creatively** – Look for ways to combine practicality with engaging, branded experiences.
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Closing Thoughts

We're in an exciting era where the possibilities for modernizing K-12 foodservice seem endless. By investing in adaptable, efficient systems, you not only enhance operations but also support the students and staff who rely on these vital services daily. Together, we can make every school meal a seamless, enjoyable experience.

Are you ready to rewrite the rules of cafeteria dining? Start today by reaching out to discuss tailored solutions for your school's unique needs.

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Marianne Schussler-Yenor is a foodservice equipment expert with over 35 years of experience in primary cooking, holding, prep, storage, display, and transport equipment. Throughout her career, she has collaborated with foodservice representatives, dealers, and operators worldwide to facilitate growth, drive innovation, and enhance operational efficiency. She serves on the Industry Advisory Council for the Association of Nutrition & Foodservice Professionals and the Wisconsin Association of Healthcare Foodservice.

In 2019, she received the MAFSI Pros to Know award for her outstanding contributions to the foodservice equipment industry. In 2018, she became one of the charter members of WESSMA (Women in Equipment & Supply Sales Mentoring Alliance). Today, she is the National Sales Manager for the Sandstone Group, which encompasses the Lakeside®, Geneva, Alluserv®, PrisonBilt®, Made to Drain, and Multiteria® brands across the U.S. and Canada.