

Customizable: Stop Compromising, Get What You Want

Insights from Marianne Schussler-Yenor, National Sales Manager, Lakeside® Foodservice

School cafeterias are vital to student life. Beyond simply providing meals, they encourage social interaction, support nutritional health, and foster a sense of community. However, many K-12 schools struggle to keep their foodservice programs relevant to today's fast-moving students. The dining options feel static, inconvenient, and sometimes uninspiring.

Students are no longer solely motivated by convenience—they're influenced by choice, accessibility, healthfulness, and the identity created around food. Schools that adapt their programs to address students' preferences and movement patterns can see a sharp uptick in participation, healthier eating habits, and student satisfaction.

One solution that takes center stage is "merchandising in motion." Customizable grab-and-go carts (i.e., breakfast carts, merchandising carts, mart carts, etc.) bring food to where students are beyond the traditional line, making experiences feel fresher, healthier, and more inviting. This paper examines how such carts address school foodservice challenges and transform everyday dining into tailored, vibrant experiences.

The Challenges in Creating Adaptable Foodservice Spaces

Designing foodservice programs that engage students isn't as simple as putting milk in a cooler and sandwiches in a bin. Schools face significant barriers, including rigid infrastructure, logistical design challenges, and budgetary constraints.

Infrastructure Constraints

Most school cafeterias were constructed in an era where dining was confined to a single space. Fixed lines, immobile counters, and limited serving stations make it nearly impossible to adjust setups. This rigid infrastructure fails to support the movement of students throughout their day, making food less accessible in high-traffic or outdoor areas.

Design Challenges

Many schools share spaces for multiple utilities. For example, I've witnessed cafeterias that double as event halls, requiring staff to move entire serving lines daily for assemblies or plays. This repeated effort hinders efficiency and dampens morale. Add in cramped layouts, which cause bottlenecking during lunch rushes, and you've got an experience that frustrates both students and staff.

Budgetary Roadblocks

Although schools may want to improve their foodservice programs, tight budgets often force them to prioritize basic needs over upgrades. Current equipment must be stretched well beyond its lifecycle, and decision-makers may lack awareness of more innovative solutions, leaving them stuck in a cycle of dated approaches.

Meeting Students Where They Are—Physically

One of the greatest strengths of customizable carts is their ability to go where students already are. Hallways, library entrances, sports fields, or gymnasiums can all become food hubs. Instead of students having to seek out the cafeteria, the cafeteria effectively comes to them.

Imagine carts stationed a few steps away from busy lockers or classrooms during lunch breaks, offering stacked yogurts, smoothies, and fruit cups. Or carts sitting by the school entrance every morning, helping students grab toast, bagels, and juice as they dash to their homeroom. The convenience factor here is unbeatable—students are far more likely to participate when options come to them.

For stretches of the day when cafeterias would otherwise sit dormant, carts can also bring offerings to outdoor spaces—especially during school events or activities. Their portability ensures no area is off-limits, dramatically increasing student access to balanced choices. Make sure your cart is equipped with durable casters designed for outdoor surfaces such as concrete. I'd recommend reaching out to your trusted supplier—they'll help you find the perfect fit for your needs!

Promoting Student Engagement & Supporting Staff Efficiency

Student Wellness

Customizable carts don't just feed students; they guide them into better eating habits. By thoughtfully curating healthier options in dynamic layouts, schools can nudge students toward better nutritional decisions. Clear and appealing visuals encourage participation while helping students form positive associations with the act of eating well.

Staff Support

For cafeteria teams, carts lessen the burden. Their flexibility reduces the need for constant reconfigurations of cafeteria spaces—staff can simply roll products into place instead of completely dismantling setups. Additionally, mobility alleviates the challenge of running food between prep spaces and service areas efficiently. Ergonomic customizations also protect staff from preventable injuries caused by improper counter heights or awkward workflows.

Making Healthier Choices Irresistible Through Presentation

Reaching students is one step, but customization hits its stride when tied to presentation. Getting students excited about healthier food often means rethinking how those items are showcased.

Visual Appeal

A plain bowl of granola might not turn heads, but layer it with fruit and serve it in a clear container? Suddenly, it's a hit. Adding colorful packaging that signals freshness or healthiness can have an instant impact. For drinks, carts can include eye-catching ice bins filled with chilled juices or infused waters—visually bold and inviting.

Signage

Signage plays a critical role in luring students. Bright, easily readable graphics tied to school colors or mascots can spark pride and generate attention. Some schools even involve students in designing signage, creating ownership in the process. It's a simple yet effective way to pair emotional engagement with foodservice.

Student-Centric Displays

Placement also matters. Younger students may need lower counters, while high schoolers value sleek, modern setups. The goal is to create displays that feel accessible, appealing, and part of a larger student-centric effort rather than an imposition.

Harnessing the Versatility of Customizable Carts

Customizable carts shine because they respond to diverse needs without creating logistical nightmares. Schools can tailor carts with features like:

- **Adjustable Shelves:** Perfect for varying product types, from grab-and-go breakfasts to boxed lunches. This is especially helpful in schools that serve both younger and older students so they can have easy accessibility to grab their meals.
- **Magnetic Graphics:** Swappable designs allow schools to rebrand carts instantly for any occasion, from lunch rushes to athletic events, without the need to invest in new equipment.
- **Compartmentalized Storage:** Adding insulated compartments for hot and cold food storage ensures a flexible menu rollout.
- **Mobility and Power Assist Technology:** Lightweight or motorized carts reduce staff strain during busy school days. They can also be rolled and spaced out beyond the traditional serving line, helping to eliminate those frustrating bottlenecks.

For instance, a cart might serve as a nutritious breakfast station in the morning, then transform into a refreshment hub for a theater production in the evening. These multi-use designs allow schools to stretch initial investments much further.

Designing for Success

What to Keep in Mind:

- **Visibility and Appeal:** Make sure everything is well-stocked, attractively displayed, and easy to replenish.
- **Height and Accessibility:** Customize adjustable cart and serving line heights to fit your students' needs (K-5 vs. 6-12) while keeping things ergonomic for your staff.

- **Strategic Placement:** Space out carts strategically within or beyond serving lines to avoid bottlenecks and keep things moving smoothly.

Why Customization Matters:

- **Versatility and Reusability:** You can use one cart for multiple purposes—breakfast, lunch, events, or even fundraisers—by swapping out magnetic graphics and adjusting features.
 - **Engagement:** Partner with local farms to showcase fresh, diverse menu options that excite your students.
 - **Staff-Friendly:** Motorized options and ergonomic designs make life easier for your team.
 - **Condiment Integration:** Add built-in condiment or flavor stations to make your carts even more functional.
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Be There For Your Students – One Day at a Time

When you focus on meeting students where they are, incredible things happen. Customizable grab-and-go carts offer a new frontier for foodservice—creating opportunities to reach students not just physically, but with healthier, better-presented choices that excite and engage.

At their heart, these carts represent more than functionality. They epitomize adaptability, innovation, and the drive to make meal experiences both nourishing and unforgettable. For schools, they're a chance to foster wellness, culture, and practicality in a single solution.

By reimagining how food is served—rolling it into busy hallways, stadiums, and beyond—schools can send one powerful message to students, one plate at a time: “We’re here for you—wherever you are.”

Partnering for Long-Term Impact

The possibilities for customizable grab-and-go carts like these are endless, but success depends on finding a trusted partner. A good partner will work closely and patiently with schools to design carts that address specific needs, from improving meal programs to enhancing student engagement. The investment in tailored, multi-functional equipment can deliver significant long-term value for schools.

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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.