

Trusted to Lead: A Peer's Playbook for Upgrading Serving Lines in K-12 Foodservice

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If you're reading this, you're likely considering (or already starting!) a major equipment upgrade or serving line redesign, and that can feel daunting. I know this because I have stood exactly where you are. As a former K-12 foodservice director, I have experienced serving line transitions from every possible angle.

Why is this important?

- A well-designed serving space directly affects student participation.
- Visual appeal matters: students “eat with their eyes” and are more excited for meals in inviting environments.
- Creating a café-style space takes more than fresh paint or new counters. It requires connecting your vision with internal stakeholders at every step.

This playbook will help you:

- Strengthen your leadership presence
- Align your team through collaboration
- Utilize proven training resources
- Let change become a source of pride and progress

I created this playbook to give you a shortcut to success with proven strategies that work. No extra effort required. Let's dive in!

Section 1: Connecting the Dots with Internal Stakeholders

Bringing change always raises some fear and anxiety, so your role is to help your team through the transition. Success depends on making sure everyone feels included.

How to involve key internal groups:

- **Managers and Servers:**
 - These frontline staff dictate flow “back of house to front of house.”

- You don't need all 25 staff at every planning meeting.
- Pick key team members (like your kitchen manager) to represent the group, walk the line, and bring issues or ideas forward.
- **Menu Planners:**
 - Need to see first-hand where bottlenecks and slow-downs happen.
 - Align their choices with equipment capability for a smoother operation.
- **Maintenance and Facilities Teams:**
 - Loop them in during planning—these are your problem-solvers when it comes to equipment, flow, and utilities.
 - Early involvement helps prevent long-term headaches.
- **Teachers and Building Administration:**
 - Give voice to a small task-force rather than the entire faculty.
 - Ensures your serving line plan works within the school's daily schedule and reduces later pushback.
 - Principals and superintendents also play a crucial role in the buy-in process.
 - Be sure to involve them in the discussion, as their alignment is essential in determining which equipment best suits the staff's needs.

Bottom Line:

- Start by listening from the “bottom up.”
- Understand and address frontline challenges as you work your way up to administration.

Section 2: Strengthening Your Leadership Presence

Championing big changes requires collaborative leadership, not top-down control. You'll find more buy-in when people know their input matters.

Ways to strengthen leadership and morale:

- **Be collaborative:**
 - Don't fight resistance, bring people into the process.

- Let everyone know their perspective counts (even if they disagree with you).
 - **See strengths in differences:**
 - Encourage differing opinions to see them as assets, not threats.
 - Build on the skills your team already excels at; don't focus only on weaknesses.
 - **Advocate and invest:**
 - Employees work better with reliable equipment and proper staffing.
 - Invest in training and workshops. It shows you respect and value your team.
 - **Celebrate growth:**
 - Empowering your team helps them see they are growing right alongside the department.
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Section 3: Training Resources and Peer Learning

Training isn't just about learning new skills, it's about creating buy-in and curiosity among your staff.

Where to look for great resources:

- **The Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN):**
 - Free online modules and resources for FSDs and frontline staff.
- **School Nutrition Association (SNA):**
 - Comprehensive training and articles tailored for K-12 operations.
- **Surrounding District Tours:**
 - Touring other districts encourages “out of the box” thinking and inspiration.
- **Networking and Community:**
 - Group chats, email chains, and conference connections hold real value.
 - Building a network means you always have help for tough questions or new ideas.

- Follow social media pages dedicated to CN (Child Nutrition) or even professional K-12 keynote speakers that can encourage and inspire your staff.

Tips:

- Let your team attend workshops and conferences.
 - If you're not able to afford this option due to money or staff coverage, I highly suggest the following:
 - Try fun ways to make it a competition; select a few staff members each time rather than everyone going at once, which helps with labor coverage.
 - Consider tying the opportunity to attend conferences to metrics or accomplishments that matter for your program (for example: certified in sanitation, SNA Level 1 certification, etc.).
 - Reach out for help by asking state and national SNA groups about grants and scholarships.
 - Don't hesitate to approach industry partners and let them know your needs; sometimes programs like Cool School Points can help fund professional development.
 - Encourage staff to learn from others and bring fresh ideas home.
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Section 4: Workflow Redesign and Total Team Alignment

True teamwork means every perspective (from menu planner to server) shapes the workflow redesign.

Proven strategies:

- Bring frontline staff to the factory/showroom to see and touch the equipment. First-hand involvement drives genuine buy-in.
 - When people are included and feel heard, they tend to support initiatives, feel pride in the overall project, and become your advocates.
- Communicate the “why” of layout changes to everyone. When people understand the reasoning, friction drops.

How to communicate benefits:

- **To Administrators (Principals/Superintendents):**
 - Share hard data: modern serving lines can boost student participation by 10–12%.
 - **To Staff:**
 - Highlight how upgraded equipment, better flow, and improved environment make their jobs less stressful and more enjoyable.
 - Remind everyone: a pleasing space is good for both staff and students.
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Upgrading a K-12 serving line is about more than replacing old counters:

- It's a chance to bring your staff together, streamline how you work, and enhance the student experience.
- Remember to listen to your servers and kitchen team, collaborate with planners and maintenance, and use the best resources available.
- Focus on strengths. Invest in your people and give them the tools—and the environment—they deserve.

Use this playbook to guide your upgrade, and you'll see participation and pride in your department reach new heights. You don't have to know everything; help is just a reach away!

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About the Author:

With over 25 years in the foodservice industry, Tracie brings a well-rounded perspective shaped by hands-on experience. As a previous K-12 foodservice director, then moving into the equipment side as a manufacturer's representative, Tracie has seen the industry from every angle. Now at Lakeside/Multiteria, that experience fuels a deep passion for solving real-world challenges with practical, customer-focused solutions.