

Understanding the Construction Process for Serving Line Upgrades: A Guide for K-12 Foodservice Directors

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Upgrading your serving lines is one of the most important—and complex—projects you'll take on as a K-12 foodservice director. Success goes far beyond picking new counters or equipment; it means navigating the full construction process and speaking up at every step to ensure your cafeteria's needs aren't lost in translation. This guide breaks down the construction process into clear phases and shows you exactly where and how you can influence outcomes—so that students, staff, and your nutrition program all benefit from an upgrade that actually works in the real world.

Key Stakeholders and Their Roles

Understanding who is involved and what part they play will help you advocate effectively throughout the construction process:

- **Foodservice Director & Team:** You know what works and what doesn't. Your real-world perspective on traffic flow, safety, menu variety, and daily challenges is critical in shaping the project from the start.
- **School Board & Administration:** Control the purse strings and approve plans. They often rely on your expertise to justify investments in nutrition facilities.
- **Architect:** Designs the big picture and works to turn school needs into project drawings and specifications.
- **Foodservice Consultant:** Develops specific designs for the kitchen and serving area, typically creates specs that guide purchasing and installation.
- **Manufacturer:** These companies design and build the equipment. They sell through dealers and often work with brokers or reps to promote their product lines. Some manufacturers may also handle project management and installation, which can be a valuable added benefit.
- **Dealer:** Handles equipment sales and is involved in most purchases. They share pricing, oversee orders, and often help coordinate delivery and installation. By partnering with brokers and manufacturers, they help make sure you get the right equipment at the best price.

- **Independent Manufacturer Representatives:** A potential conduit between you and the dealer or manufacturer. Can be utilized as an asset to achieving the project details you are looking for.
 - **General Contractor & Subcontractors:** Handle site preparation, construction, installation, and final finishing.
 - **Your Staff:** Their daily feedback on ergonomics, flow, and comfort ensures the finished project actually delivers on safety and efficiency.
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1. Design Phase

What Happens During This Phase

This is the strategic starting point—where your input shapes what the finished serving line will look like and how it works. It includes:

- **Needs Assessment:** Clarify what you want to solve—think traffic jams, bottlenecks, safety risks, space limitations, or changing menu models (e.g., more Grab & Go).
- **Early Collaboration:** Share your vision and concerns with the architect and consultant. Bring real-world examples and include your staff's input.
- **Concept Drawings & Specs:** The architect and consultant develop drawings and initial specifications. This is your chance to push for features and design elements central to your staff and students' needs before plans are locked in.

Why It Matters

Most decisions that impact daily operations, food quality, and staff safety are made here. Speak up about what matters for your team—from flex space to visibility, storage, or accessibility. Clear, early communication ensures these needs show up in finalized specs—making it much more likely you'll get the outcome you want.

How to Influence

Insist on being part of initial project meetings. Request a walk-through of concepts and drawings and ask questions until you are satisfied that your operational needs aren't being lost in translation. Some consultants may select equipment from a previous project, which may not address your specific needs. This is when you should advocate for yourself by doing proper research.

2. Planning & Pre-Construction Phase

What Happens During This Phase

Here, details are confirmed, and the groundwork is laid for construction:

- **Budgeting & Scheduling:** Final budgets are established based on the design and specs. Installation timelines are often set around school breaks or summer.
- **Value Engineering:** The team may suggest substitutions or cutbacks to save costs. This is a critical moment—features you care about could be at risk.
- **Contracting:** Manufacturers, contractors, and subcontractors are selected. The details of how, when, and what will be installed are worked out.

Why It Matters

Cost-saving measures can sometimes remove essential features, impacting staff safety, student flow, or food quality. Your continued input is key to avoid losing high-value items to budget cuts.

How to Influence

Monitor project updates and review any proposed changes. Advocate for non-negotiable features. Ask how substitutions will impact workflow or staff strain. Align with manufacturers or dealers who will back you up with data or alternate solutions, if cuts are suggested.

3. Construction Phase

What Happens During This Phase

Plans come to life on the ground:

- **Site Prep:** The existing space is cleared, utilities (power, plumbing) are adjusted, and construction begins.
- **Equipment Delivery & Installation:** Dealers coordinate bringing in new serving lines and components. Contractors ensure connections, anchoring, and integration with your space.
- **Coordination Among Trades:** Electricians, plumbers, and installers must work together—misalignment here can quickly cause costly delays.

Why It Matters

Even if everything was perfect on paper, execution in the field often reveals new challenges. Missing or delayed equipment, installation problems, or overlooked safety features can disrupt service and create long-term issues.

How to Influence

Be present during key milestones. Request regular updates, and don't hesitate to flag anything that doesn't look right. Ask to participate in pre-install meetings or walkthroughs. A good manufacturer or dealer partner will help troubleshoot on the spot and make sure your voice is heard.

4. Performance Monitoring & Staff Training Phase

What Happens During This Phase

Now it's about making sure everything works as planned:

- **System Testing:** Installers run through every feature—line temperature, safety stops, accessible layouts, etc.—to confirm specs were met.
- **Staff Training:** Your team gets hands-on instruction on cleaning, operating, and troubleshooting the new equipment.
- **Punch List Creation:** Any incomplete or incorrect items are documented for final fixes.

Why It Matters

A serving line is only as good as your staff's ability to use and maintain it confidently. Missing training, unclear manuals, or skipped checks can lead to service bottlenecks and premature wear.

How to Influence

Ensure all staff are present for training. Ask for demonstration on all features and get warranty and service documentation in hand. Use the punch list opportunity to note every concern—no detail is too small if it could affect daily service.

5. Project Closeout & Ongoing Support

What Happens During This Phase

Wrapping up and preparing for smooth, ongoing operation:

- **Final Inspections:** School and project leaders confirm the installation meets all specs, permits, and safety codes.
- **Official Handover:** The space is ready for use, and you receive all as-built documents, manuals, and service contacts.
- **Warranty/Service Setup:** Lean on your rep, dealer, or even manufacturer for issues or questions for how ongoing support will be handled.

Why It Matters

Thoughtful project closeout ensures issues are resolved before service resumes and gives you confidence in running the line for years to come.

How to Influence

Request walkthroughs, double-check that all training is complete, and ensure you have all documentation. Provide feedback to your project team—your experience will help future projects run better for other schools.

Make Your Vision Reality

Every step of a serving line upgrade is a chance for you to champion what matters for your team and students. When you understand the construction process, you're empowered to ask the right questions, anticipate challenges, and insist on solutions that keep school meals running smoothly and safely. Work with partners who listen and educate, not just sell. Your early and persistent involvement is the secret to building a cafeteria line that stands the test of time, keeps your staff happy, and sets your nutrition program up for true success. If you ever want a partner who'll listen, advise, and help you through each phase, I'm always happy to connect.

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About The Author:

Having 30 years of experience in the construction industry, Jason brings a unique perspective in dealing with Lakeside and Multiteria clients. Jason has worked closely with many companies ranging from dealers, general contractors, architects and building owners in that time. His career has been built on creating paths to connect good people and adding the value of great products.