

Getting the most from your kitchen

How can schools maximise the full potential of their kitchens to deliver healthy, nutritious meals? Catering equipment trade association, ceda, gets some industry views

Ceda is the trade association representing design, supply and engineering companies in the catering equipment industry.

We asked our members, who work with schools and educational establishments throughout the UK, what developments there had been in the school catering industry. We were particularly interested in any new products or techniques that are available and how schools with limited space can still serve up healthy, nutritious meals.

"Schools are still investing in their kitchens. However, as always, budgets are tight and maximising any spend is vitally important for schools and their contract caterers," commented Michael Sinclair, design director of Catering Design Group. "Schools and caterers are looking to gain the most from their investment in equipment – flexibility is key to this. We're seeing a continued increase in combi ovens and technology that gives the ability to produce a wide variety of menu options."

Finding the space

Fundamentally the key issue that faces every new-build school is space, as they are now typically built by area to control cost; this method has an immediate impact on the catering facilities, particularly in those schools moving from much larger, traditional buildings. "This challenge must be met by the scheme designers, but also by the schools' catering teams from an operational mind set," commented Andy Brown, business development director of Garners Food Service Equipment. "It is vital to exploit every bit of space available. Equipment manufacturers have listened to feedback and in recent years have made moves to provide multi-use equipment such as combination ovens that can be stacked, in turn providing a greater product yield from a smaller footprint."

A well-designed kitchen will reduce operating costs, whilst maximising

energy efficiencies and increasing speed of service. The selection of equipment is absolutely critical to this.

Going hand-in-hand with the increase in advance bulk-cooking, the demand for high-quality hot holding areas and flexible prep stations has also increased, to ensure no loss of quality to the food through the more time and space-efficient cooking process.

However, Garners Food Service Equipment believe one of the most important elements is servery design. To ensure that the ever-growing number of diners can be maintained and supported, typically the hot, main dinner offers are kept local to the kitchen environment, with satellite grab-and-go islands positioned in and around the dining areas to relieve pressure from the main counter. This style of servery contributes to a much more diverse and flexible menu than that of the single-servery, queue-and-collect design.

The pressure faced to deliver quality catering within the education sector won't change for some years and the market is reliant on the ability of equipment manufacturers to continue their development of high-quality, flexible and space-saving items that in turn enables caterers to deliver a high-quality product.

Getting it right

Michael Sinclair believes there are crucial things to bear in mind in order to get your school kitchen ▶

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Catering Design Group
GP Millfield



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◀ equipment right: "Take a step back. It is very important for a design team to really consider exactly what the caterer and school wish to achieve from the kitchen space. Practicality is key. Look at the space, consider its flexibility and how food preparation will flow. This will dictate the correct type of equipment that will work best for the space."

Michael believes that the kitchen is the engine room of every catering operation – irrespective of menu and service style. He says: "If the kitchen is unable to deliver front-of-house requirements, the quality of food and service will suffer and in turn, so will the pupil experience."

"Schools should involve an expert in the design of a school catering area, as they will have proven knowledge and expertise to deliver an efficient and cost-effective dining operation. Expert knowledge of the right equipment is key to ensuring maximum operational flexibility. Although it may seem like an additional expense it really is fundamental to maximising the budget without compromising on quality."

Michael also believes that 'flow' is important. He explains: "Some kitchens are limited by way of space and indeed movement, so it is important that the design takes this into consideration. The key to a successful operation is ensuring both front and back-of-house can work seamlessly together and are flexible – both in terms of the space and the selection of equipment."

"Consider whether equipment needs to be multi-functional, which meal times it will serve at various points in the school year, from every-day lunches to event catering. Consideration should be given to the number of diners the equipment will be required to serve at any given time, menu options and speed of service. Multi-functional pieces of equipment, such as combination ovens, are often sourced to produce different elements of a menu at different times of the day."

Michael also advises that service style and menu will not only impact on the size and design of a kitchen, it is also an important consideration in the choice of equipment.

"Schools should be creative with equipment choices," adds Michael. "A reputable designer will be able to draw on experience to source alternative materials that aren't expensive but importantly, suit a school environment, and make recommendations on the most effective but budget-friendly sources of the right equipment."

"Buying random pieces of equipment just won't work. Use expert help to achieve a complementary set of appliances. The layout and specification of equipment should be carefully considered to ensure optimum efficiency. Schools should think carefully about the specification of kitchen equipment; short-term savings over long-term energy efficiency requires a balanced approach."

Finally, Michael advises that good ventilation is key in any kitchen and this extends further than extraction canopies. Appliances such as ovens, fridges, freezers and even microwaves generate a lot of heat and all require sufficient ventilation, both to extend the life of these appliances and to create a comfortable working environment for the kitchen brigade.

Expert advice

Adam Mason, ceda's director general commented: "Like every other sector of the industry, school kitchens provide their own individual and unique challenges. Ceda members have the knowledge, expertise and experience from design, project and equipment perspectives to help schools, caterers and contractors to overcome these challenges and deliver solutions on brief and budget without compromising performance and output." ■

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