

# Why a Food Court Concept

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In our thirty-seven years of working with the School Foodservice Community, there has never been a more striking development than the introduction of the “Food Court Concept” to school foodservice. For many years Foodservice Directors recognized that high school students lost interest in school foodservice programs resulting in underutilized and unprofitable operations. That trend has grown worse as the high school student has become more mobile, with many driving to school. For Administrators, the increased potential liability associated with students leaving campus during school hours to seek commercial foodservice has become an ever-increasing problem.

Innovative School Foodservice Directors working with Administrators have begun to analyze the problem and develop solutions.

School Foodservice has several distinct advantages:

- Proximity – Located within the campus
- Nutrition – Participating in USDA Programs insuring nutritional offerings
- Financial – Supported by USDA Programs of Reimbursements and Free or Reduced Meals

Along with the advantages the disadvantages are being assessed. They include:

- Institutional Style Service
- Limited Menu Choices
- Competition from large multi-unit chains with huge advertising budgets
- Brand recognition developed over years of heavy advertising by chains
- Stigma associated with qualifying for the USDA Free and Reduced Meal Programs

The Food Court Concept has proven a viable way to overcome these shortcomings. In effect, school foodservice programs are adopting the marketing principles of their commercial competitors and are winning back their clients. The Food Court presents an attractive, menu-expanding climate for the student. The environment that students associate with food, friends and fun is moved into the school. A small additional cost associated with the décor is necessary to take full advantage of the concept. Choices are increased while the nutritional value of the meal is maintained. A wide variety of foods are available from commercial suppliers that conform to the nutritional requirements of the National School Lunch Program. USDA has altered their programs in several ways to adapt to student’s eating habits. “Offer vs. Served” and “New Menus” offer flexibility to Directors who are adapting to new trends. Those Directors are marketing to the students through the use of “branding”. While not offering a Big Mac<sup>®</sup>, some programs, particularly in older schools, are establishing proprietary concept brands around the school’s history and traditions or the ethnic origins of the food served. The stigma mentioned earlier is easily handled by incorporating an accounting system that has everyone using some form of debit account. All students appear the same at the cashier. One additional advantage to a Food Court is flexibility. Commercial competitors spend huge sums developing the next “Hot

Concept". Once the concept has proven successful, food processors quickly offer products for the new category. Because Food Courts use countertop display equipment for the most part, changes can be readily accomplished with décor and little or no equipment changes. Numerous Directors have stated they have converted their high school operations from money losing sinkholes to profit centers with the introduction of Food Courts.

Probably the best known Food Court operation in Virginia is at Granby High School in Norfolk. I am sure Robert Morris would be happy to have interested visitors see this outstanding operation. If you have problems similar to those outlined, e-mail Robert at [rmorris@nps.k12.va.us](mailto:rmorris@nps.k12.va.us). You will see an interesting concept that may be a solution for some of your more difficult schools.

*About the author:*

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