



Student-designed deli offers lunch alternative at high school

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With extremely low participation counts, Durango High turned to teens to come up with a concept that might keep their peers on the premises at lunchtime.

It's a dilemma familiar to most school nutrition departments that deal with open high school campuses: students leaving in droves at lunchtime to patronize local QSRs, c-stores and even gas stations rather than the school cafeteria.

That has traditionally been a big problem at Durango High School in Colorado's Durango School District 9-R, where daily lunch participation among the school's 1,100 students generally hovered at close to 10 percent despite a free/reduced percentage nearly double that.

As for breakfast, don't ask: the school abandoned morning meal service some years ago due to miniscule daily counts.

So how do you keep students around at lunch and get them to eat a meal at school in the morning?

At Durango High School, the district turned for help to the students, and they came up with a concept called the Demon Deli that sells a menu designed with student input that also still complies with federal school meal regulations.

"We thought if we included the students, then we might get a little more buy-in in the project," explains Krista Garand, the district's supervisor of student nutrition.

"We went to the DECA class and had them put together a survey for us because when we tried to administer surveys to kids [in the past] they didn't take them very seriously. So the kids put the survey out to their peers so that we could get some more valuable data and it also gave kids in this business marketing class a real-life project."
(Editor's Note: DECA is an international organization that promotes careers in marketing, management, finance and hospitality among high school and college students.)

The survey delved into questions like the kinds of food items students might be willing to buy at school, what they purchase and how much they spend when they leave campus, how much they would be willing to spend for food on campus and how often they might be willing to eat at school if they had more attractive menu options.

"The answers drove our decisions on the menu and pricing for Demon Deli," Garand says.

The lunch menu currently includes a variety of grab-and-go sandwiches and packaged salads that are similar to what is served in the cafeteria except that they generally use higher quality ingredients such as Boar's Head branded meats and cheeses and locally sourced fresh fruits and vegetables.

Pricing ranges from \$4 to \$6 and everything is a la carte and complies with federal Smart Snack regulations. Reimbursable meals are sold only in the cafeteria, Garand stresses.

"This concept is trying to reach the kids who are leaving campus and spending money outside of campus," she says.

In the morning, coffee cake, muffins, oatmeal, fruit cups, parfaits and yogurt are popular items along with branded Durango Joe's coffee drinks.

The space now occupied by Demon Deli had been an underutilized teachers lounge so it already had some infrastructure such as a counter and cabinets. The food and cold beverages are kept in an open-air cooler and dispensed by the school's kitchen manager.

The area also includes seating and bar tables so students can hang out while eating.

Garand says the dollar volume generated by Demon Deli "is where we want it to be right now," with much of it generated by a regular clientele. "But there's still quite a bit of room to grow, with 1,100 kids on campus," she notes, adding that with winter coming on, more students can be expected to stay on campus during the open periods. She is also planning to work again with the DECA students on a social media campaign to promote Demon Deli.

As for more sites like Demon Deli in the large high school building, Garand remains open to the possibility.

"I do believe that the future of our food program in our high school is not going to be a cafeteria," she says, "so we want to stay with what kids think is innovative and what they want, and they don't want a cafeteria. They want cool, funky spaces and they want things that are quick. So I can see a future of having more than one [site like Demon Deli] in the building and not so much a cafeteria."

She notes that as production capability already exists in the cafeteria kitchen, so satelliting prepared food to various service points like Demon Deli is very workable.

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