

# A CAFETERIA DESIGNED FOR ME

HOW IDEO HELPED THE SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT REDESIGN ITS FOOD SYSTEM



Imagine, for a moment, that you're back in 8th grade. Having preordered your lunch online the night before, you grab a brown bag from the rolling cart—no lines. Your lunch is fresh, as it's been sourced from local suppliers and cooked in a communal kitchen. You and your friends devour it on beanbags. On your way out, you pick up a dinner kit for your family.

This is what school lunch could be. But it's not.

The design challenge was about much more than the food – it was about the experience of eating at school. The district had already hired Revolution Foods, a caterer that serves some of the highest nutritional meals in the nation. But when the lunch bell rang, 72 percent of those who could afford lunch weren't showing up. In a world in which students are used to expressing their opinions on social media, they had no voice in shaping their lunch experience.

Working alongside more than 1,300 students, parents, union leaders, nutrition staff, board commissioners, principals, teachers, and community groups, IDEO and SFUSD redesigned school lunch.

**“This is too good to be true.”**

—Joyce Gu, *a senior at Thurgood Marshall High School*

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What the team discovered was that the district had managed to serve, but had limited capacity for customer service. Students were waiting in long lines, rushing to finish, and eating in makeshift “cafeteriums”. Many kids simply opted out and headed off campus with friends, or chose to not eat at all. Student Nutrition Services was running a \$2+ million deficit. The Sara and Evan Williams Foundation saw that the system needed help, so they brokered a collaboration between IDEO and SFUSD.

**“You helped us understand that the student-centered design of the experience was as important as the food they were eating.”**

—Zetta Reicker, *Director, Student Nutrition Services, SFUSD*

IDEO developed recommendations for three age-appropriate dining experiences, from communal eating to student-designed spaces to new technology platforms. To be sure these ideas would address the operational deficit, IDEO worked closely with SFUSD to develop a robust business model—considering thousands of data points, like the cost-per-meal of a delivery truck route and where the ketchup was placed in cafeteria. They took federal, state, and local regulations into account, as well as operational and labor constraints. The data-driven model, which the District has now adopted, informed the design at every stage.

In September, 2013, the San Francisco Unified School Board expressed unanimous enthusiasm for IDEO’s work, clearing the path for this new vision of student-centered lunch to take root.

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