

# — ISSUETRAK —

A CEFPI Brief on Educational Facility Issues

Topic: A Holistic Approach to Healthy School Meals  
*How Hopkins High School looked beyond its cafeteria when it changed meal service from fast food to nutritional food*

Issue Tracker: Timothy Dufault, AIA, LEED® A.P. and Meg Parsons, REFP

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## INTRODUCTION

To the casual observer, Hopkins High School in Minnetonka, Minnesota may appear as ordinary as other schools in the area. However, upon closer examination, the High School's new state-of-the-art eating facility is part restaurant, part study hall, part lounge area and part health-food store. From the beginning, the superintendent and food service leaders planned the *Royal Court* commons and its *Health Nut Deli* with the goal of ensuring that balanced diets – with quickly prepared, but healthy foods – are offered to students to help them establish an overall balanced lifestyle.

But the design also did something more: It effected a complete transformation of Hopkins School's food-service program, incorporating nutritional values into school curriculum and reaching out to local organic farmers and other purveyors of healthy foods.



Hopkins High School is, in fact, not ordinary in any way. It is Minnesota's first National School of Excellence – a premier accreditation distinction. The school was also one of 62 high schools in 1996 honored nationwide for overall excellence in *Redbook* magazine's "America's Best High Schools" project. (It serves all or parts of seven leading communities in the western suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota – Hopkins, Minnetonka, Edina, Eden Prairie, Golden Valley, St. Louis Park, and Plymouth – with over 2,100 students ranging from grades 10-12.)

## THE DESIGN APPROACH

Because the school already adhered to the highest academic standards, the design approach of Cuningham Group Architecture, P.A. was to enlist excellent culinary standards as well. The architecture firm worked closely with the Hopkins Public School District and with Bertrand Weber, the school district food service leader, noted for his expertise as executive chef for some of the region's finest resort establishments. During Bertrand's stint as food service leader, the three entities partnered to strategize ways to maximize the usefulness of the school's existing space and to discuss the logistics of food preparation and consumption.

## GETTING STARTED

Guided by the premise, "We become what we eat," this *Hopkins High School Healthy Eating Team* became the planning consortium that created Hopkins' new cafeteria.

The process started with conversations – with staff, parents, students and the community. The team brought these groups together in a visioning process that challenged the traditional assumptions of school food service. The outcome was a goal to develop a new cafeteria that would not only provide their nutritional needs, but would also serve as a community gathering place, a place for students to study, parents to wait and the community to share. The team termed the new menu *Eat-to-Achieve*, and its research uncovered seven major amenities that students, parents and community desired in the new eating area:

1. The shape should deviate from the existing structure, with an easier walking pattern including colorful daylight and interesting lighting.
2. The facility should be a separate room with doors both to the school and to outside.
3. The location should double as a study area with Internet access.

4. There should be healthier food choices.
5. There should be more food options with menus that reflect diverse cultures; with an attractive, restaurant-like atmosphere.
6. There should be a coffee shop with popular and healthy quick-food choices such as bagels.
7. There should be the opportunity for students to work, learn and participate in the hospitality businesses.

## NUTRITIONAL VALUES

Among the nutritional values that the Hopkins team espoused were:

- Providing healthy and diverse food choices within USDA guidelines.
- Offering foods that are fresh, high-quality and minimally processed.
- Increasing natural fibers and other natural ingredients while reducing calorific intake.
- Teaching lifelong eating habits that reinforce a belief in moderate consumption of all food groups.

The *Hopkins High School Healthy Eating Team* believed in the integration of design with curriculum on many levels. For example, Hopkins High School paired the teaching of its health classes with the changes made in the cafeteria. Efforts were also made to establish and implement district-wide nutrition guidelines at all school levels.

## FROM FARM CO-OPS TO VENDING MACHINES

This holistic approach operated on many other levels and even extended to local farmers. For example, Weber initiated a successful partnership with farming organizations and co-op food stores, establishing farm-to-market type arrangements with Hopkins High. The students were able to receive fruits and vegetables directly from the vine to their lunch line within the span of one day.

Several other innovations were a part of this comprehensive strategy. Originally, the school's former lunch space offered just two meal options on any given day (the traditional A and B lunch lines). The new proposal included a wider array of dining options – many with considerable prep-time considerations.

The former lunch model had required enormous amounts of freezer space and warming ovens, while the new model required much more refrigeration and storage for bulk items. It was focused on preserving fresh items and actual day-of preparations, allowing the school to deliver healthy, balanced meals to students throughout the school day.

## HEALTH CONSCIOUS VENDING MACHINES

The school's ever-popular vending machines were part of the solution as well. Soft drinks, cookies, pies and other sugar-fueled snacks became indulgences of the past. Fresh Minnesota apples, a variety of fruits, nuts and bottled water replaced the “junk-munch” machines.

While the school was designing and building its new cafeteria, Weber, with the full support of District officials, installed an impromptu deli line – the Health Nut Deli – that provided a third option distinct from the traditional A and B lunch lines. Shortly after its debut the cafeteria began to attract more students and reduced the overall number of off-campus lunches by an astounding 15 percent. With the new health-conscious vending machines and the Health Nut Deli, Hopkins High School's lunchroom was now ready for its major transformation.

## HEALTH BY DESIGN



In addition to accommodating the changes necessary to deliver a revamped food service program, Cuningham Group's plans for the facility encompassed additional considerations, including issues of safety, lighting and attractive design.

With regards to safety, systems had to be in place to provide security for the many students who were expected to flow throughout the renovated space. Cuningham Group created The Depot Too Coffee Shop at the entrance of the school. While helping to foster an atmosphere of anticipation and rejuvenation with its daily-baked whole-grain muffins, fruits and vegetables, natural juices and freshly brewed coffee, The Depot serves a security purpose as well. The coffee shop provides near constant witnesses at any point during the day; this “passive” security allows the school to forgo more drastic security measures such as metal detectors and an army of school security guards.



Lighting was an issue that ran a close second to the initial nutritional concerns. It is established that artificial lighting, with its imperceptible fluttering-flash, negatively impacts the moods and attitudes of students. Careful consideration was given to lighting options in order to help combat fatigue and allow students to focus throughout the day, and especially during times of standardized testing. Cuningham Group applied its expertise in creating warm and inviting settings, and added full-spectrum light to give the area a calmer feeling. Considerable efforts were made to open the dining room to natural light, as the architects felt it was absolutely imperative that students be connected with the sun during their school days, especially in this northern climate.

As part of the process, Cuningham Group employed a business-savvy sense of making the dining space appealing to customers. For example, because Hopkins is an open campus, students are free to sample the food-service competition of restaurants within a certain mile radius. The team wanted to create compelling reasons for students to congregate in the school. Not only does this area provide freshly prepared meal options made from scratch with natural ingredients, but the design enables students to congregate freely in an exciting, upbeat atmosphere. Today, students are re-energized by Hopkins High School's new dining common with its new lighting and casual setting.

Healthy, fresh alternatives in a restaurant-style environment have made school lunches fun and cool, while serving many other purposes. The staff, students and community served by the high school have resoundingly embraced the planning and design of this community place.

## RESULTS

The Health Nut Deli at Hopkins High School continues to grow in popularity and now accounts for approximately 48 percent of the school's food revenue. The school has increased its average lunch servings by 400 meals per day. And revenue increased \$5,000 weekly.

The health-class curriculum of ingredient analysis and nutrition-learning is carried through to lunch and after school. New meal options have begun to challenge students' eating habits, and encourage mental and physical fitness. The new farm-to-school project has even exposed the students to real-world experiences about the business world. And in a very holistic way, the new dining facilities support a message of nutritional practices and beliefs throughout the school.



*Cuningham Group's innovative design for Hopkins High School's "Royal Court" complex.*

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**Tim Dufault, AIA**

Tim is a principal with Cuningham Group and is responsible for overseeing the design, management, and construction of over \$700 million of new and remodeled educational facilities. As the managing principal of Cuningham Group's Education Studio, a group that dedicates itself to creating effective learning environments, Tim is responsible for bringing the resources necessary to each project for success.

Tim is a 1986 graduate of North Dakota State University with a Bachelor of Architecture. He is a member of CEFPI and on the leadership group of the American Institute of Architects Committee on Architecture for Education.

**Meg Parsons, REFP**

Meg Parsons has been involved in the planning and design of educational projects since she joined Cuningham Group Architecture, P.A. in January of 1989. She is active in a wide range of projects from high schools to elementary schools, from pre-referendum planning through construction documents. Her expertise and experience is in assisting schools and districts in their facility planning.

Meg is a Recognized Educational Facility Professional (REFP) and was the Project Manager and facilitator for the Crosswinds Arts and Science Middle School, the 2002 MacConnell Award winner.

**The Cuningham Group**

Cuningham Group transcends tradition with architecture, interior design, urban design and planning services for a diverse mix of client and project types. Founded in 1968, the firm is consistently recognized as a leader in the architecture industry and has grown to over 180 employees in offices in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Las Vegas, Madrid and Seoul.

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**THE COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL FACILITY PLANNERS INTERNATIONAL**

9180 East Desert Cove Drive, Suite 104

Scottsdale, Arizona 85260

Phone: 480-391-0840 Fax: 480-391-0940

E-mail: [contact@cefpi.org](mailto:contact@cefpi.org) Web: [www.cefpi.org](http://www.cefpi.org)

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