This is not to say that clean, bright whites or soothing grays don’t have positive places in the palette. But maybe not in a cafeteria filled with fluorescent lighting and cinderblock walls. Do your student customers see an inviting destination on par with the commercial restaurants they frequent outside of school? Or do they see a stereotypical “institution”? It’s time to take a look at the colors used in your serving and dining areas. Be honest: Are they drab or fab?

Even if you have a personal affinity for color—using it with confidence to liven up a room in your home or to add an extra something special to your outfit—you may not realize the full extent of how color can be applied in the cafeteria. It can build
Looking to create a brighter, more vibrant mealtime space? Learn how some touches of color can revitalize the eating environment.
Harmonious Hues
A space that makes effective use of color—and applies it in marketing, as well—simply makes the meal experience more enjoyable. Color can improve the level of comfort and how kids feel about the space, says Jeanna DeSutter, president of Descon, Inc. (Brownsburg, Ind.), a consultancy specializing in the design and manufacture of signage and specialty décor exclusively for learning environments. DeSutter shared her insights with attendees at the 2009 SNA Annual National Conference in Las Vegas. (To view the entire presentation, “The Power of Color,” visit the Presentations and Papers Library at SchoolNutrition.org: http://docs.schoolnutrition.org/meetingsandevents/anc2009/presentations.asp.)

More than posters, bulletin boards and other signage, paint can make the most dramatic difference in the look of a cafeteria. But a space painted in orange and pink is going to create a much different feel than one that makes use of blue and green. Before you start collecting paint chips, you may want to refresh your understanding of the traditional color wheel (at left).

All colors—every single shade—come...
from combinations of the three primary colors: Red, Yellow and Blue. As in nature, cooler shades tend to feature blue, while warmer shades tend to involve red and yellow. Colors that are close to each other on the wheel, such as shades of blue and green, tend to be seen as harmonious because they share the same undertones. But you want to take care when using such analogous combinations, DeSutter points out, as total harmony sometimes can be too subtle, depending on the message that you want to convey! Colors located across from each other on the color wheel, such as red and green or yellow and purple, are considered complementary combinations, complete opposites that often enhance one another when used as a pair.

**Color Confusion?**
As you expand your options for paint colors beyond the basic color wheel, keep in mind that colors can look very different in print than they do on your computer. Don’t presume that the blue you see on a paint chip will be identical to the blue you view on a computer program that allows you to design a “virtual” room. It could be shockingly dissimilar!

This is because the type of system used to reproduce color for printing (CMYK) is different than the system used to reproduce color for computer and television monitors (RGB). As explained on Wikipedia, the CMYK model works by partially or entirely masking colors on a lighter (usually white) background; the ink reduces the light that would otherwise be reflected, so it is called a “subtractive” model because inks subtract the brightness from white. The acronym stands for cyan (blue), magenta (red), yellow and key (black).

The RGB model is considered an “additive” combination; a computer monitor mixes shades of red, green and blue to create color pictures. Comparisons between RGB displays and CMYK prints can be different, because the color reproduction technologies have very few similarities.

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**The Right Dye Job**
There’s another step to consider before breaking out the brushes and rollers. What messages will your color choices convey? Let’s say you are contemplating red as a primary color for your cafeteria walls. It’s bright, it’s warm—but be warned that some people reject red when they are feeling irritated or exhausted. On the other hand, color experts suggest that the color red is linked...
to a psychological reaction that can result in increased appetite! And, of course, it is connected to many healthy fruits and vegetables—plus popular kid favorites, like pizza, salsa and ketchup.

But there is no single “ideal” color that will affect all customers the same positive way. And while you don’t want to get caught up in over-thinking your options, doing some research into the psychology and application of color can help you make decisions that are a bit more informed than picking a hue primarily because it’s your grandson’s favorite.

Color can build participation, encourage consumption of various menu components and promote positive perceptions by kids, teachers, parents and others.
Following are some examples of other interesting facts about common colors:

- Sure, pink is associated with romance, sweetness and tenderness, but did you know that pink also has an influence on all growing things? Plants grown in a hothouse with pink-tinted glass grow twice as fast as those in a facility with blue glass!
- Strongly associated with sunshine, yellow tends to convey optimism and friendly feelings.
- Not surprisingly, orange is considered the hottest of all colors, and it tends to add zest and vitality where used. Like red, orange is known to stimulate the appetite. It’s considered a perfect choice for fastfood—and if you look at some of the color schemes of familiar chain restaurants, you will see that orange is integral in the design.
- The wholesomeness of brown, the color of the Earth, has been used to great advantage by the natural food movement.
- The human eye sees more green than it does any other color.
- Blue is associated with tranquility and peace.

Some color experts recommend painting ceilings blue to address feelings of claustrophobia.
- Black is the absence of all color, but it can have as deep an impact as the most vibrant hues.

Of course, many school cafeterias find inspiration—and acceptance—in using colors taken from school logos, team colors and mascots. This approach certainly reduces the agony of the decision!

A Spectrum of Options

Painting your facility is the most dramatic and obvious way to introduce color into your cafeteria. It’s also one of the least expensive things that can be done to improve a space, says DeSutter. But what to paint? It’s amazing what a difference simply painting trim—moldings, doors, frames—can make. Painting the walls a bright color certainly will have an impact—even a single accent wall. On the other end of the spectrum, some cafeterias turn heads with complex themes and murals evoking everything from the ocean to the jungle to outer space to popular culture. But DeSutter cautions against going crazy with
The cafeteria is a place where your students should feel welcome. It is important that the décor accomplishes more than just a look. It should enhance communication about menuing, nutrition and value and help to increase participation.

color: “It’s hard to make a cafeteria look good when there is too much of one color—especially if it is a really bright, aggressive color like red.” She advises that the majority of the wall space be light or neutral, with accent colors or artwork to act as a focal point.

Sometimes, painting the dining area simply isn’t an option, whether because of budget or because renovation plans aren’t suitable with the room’s multiple functions or because an administrator simply refuses. Keep in mind other ways that you can update your décor through color:

- Consider displays, such as posters, photographs and other artwork. Images of food, in particular, can stimulate the appetite while providing added color and making the space more inviting.
- Be sure to think about color when you are ready to buy new tables and chairs (see “A Seat at the Table,” page 56, for more advice on buying such equipment).
- Even the uniforms worn by the school nutrition team can be a way to add color and give a more professional look to the operation.
- How do you display and merchandise menu items? A serving line that also includes a few potted plants, flowers or even a basket of fruit can offer colorful eye appeal. (And be sure that the menu itself includes a colorful variety of fruits and vegetables!)
- Spruce up your signage. This can be as simple as using colored chalk to highlight key messages on a blackboard. Countertop signs and ceiling danglers also can add color.

Color can work in these other areas of the cafeteria, but it needs to be considered and applied with care, warns DeSutter. She recommends using black, gray or other neutral colors for tables and seating (especially since specing color can drive up the price). And these neutral colors can work to varying advantages; for example, she notes that food looks great when served on black trays.

As you consider all the options, keep the messages you want to convey foremost in mind. Do you want to merely step up the perception of your operation? Do you want to emphasize certain character values—teamwork, community, kindness, spirit—in the personality of the cafeteria? Do you want to evoke a commercial foodservice feel or something wholly unique and magical? You may want to convene an advisory group of students to offer ideas and feedback, giving them ownership of the cafeteria as a place they truly can call their own.

**Shades of Success**

When it comes to cafeteria renovations, the bottom line is the bottom line! When design is paramount, participation seems to follow. An increase in participation was just what resulted from Descon’s work with William Henry Harrison High School in West Lafayette, Ind. Though the school did not repaint or replace any equipment, DeSutter says, the previously off-white space was updated with food art murals, photography and new menu boards. Messages like “Eat Smart. Be Smart.” also were incorporated into the redesign.

“The participation rates of those students purchasing meals increased 28% in the first two weeks [after the redesign] and has steadily increased since,” DeSutter notes, adding, “This concept helped the school to dramatically increase its bottom line, and students are eating much healthier meals.”

Michigan City (Ind.) High School experienced similar results. Changes included taking advantage of the cafeteria’s high ceilings with the use of aluminum sheets to create backdrops. Graphics were placed on the fronts of existing
equipment to tie food themes together. “Participation jumped to 71%—an increase of 500 meals per day—and the staff takes pride in their new display areas,” reports Kathy Kane, SNS, foodservice director for Michigan City (Ind.) Area Schools.

Another redesign success story is the cafeteria at Pendleton Heights High School in Pendleton, Ind. The cafeteria needed a fresh concept, DeSutter explains, so a food court was created with the use of paint, signs and graphics, along with changes to the menu. One serving line wall was divided into new colors. Another was decorated with an awning. After the new look, the school’s lunch participation increased dramatically—by an estimated 250 to 300 more meals per day. Also after the new design, customer satisfaction increased from 64% to 83%, resulting in a revenue increase of nearly $76,000 in one year, says DeSutter.

The cafeteria is a place where your students should feel welcome. Thus, it is important that the décor accomplishes more than just a look. It should enhance communication about menuing, nutrition, value and so on and help to increase participation, details DeSutter. “It should also encourage healthier lifestyles through fitness and nutrition education” in approaches that are suited to stimulate the target age group served in that facility.  

Cecily Walters and Patricia Fitzgerald are, respectively, assistant editor and editor of School Nutrition. Photographs on page 36 by Comstock, page 36, 37, 39, 40 and 43 by Getty Images. Illustration on page 38 by Nancy Nehring/istockphoto.com. Cafeteria photos courtesy of Descon, Inc.

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Color Resources
Want to learn more about how color can affect mood, personality, marketing messages and more? Check out the following websites and books.

Colorstrology
www.colorstrology.com

Descon, Inc.
www.desconinc.com

Pantone® 2010
www.pantonepaint.com

The Voice of Color
www.voiceofcolor.com/en


