

Education Specifications

Learning is Healthy

Learning lifelong habits for healthy living

Schools play an important role in promoting lifelong habits for students such as diet, cooking, fitness, and self-care. Providing healthy environments is not enough; we must think about the culture and habits of mind that our environments engender.

Done well, dining plays an important role in providing sensory-rich experiences: food has different textures, smells, sounds, and temperatures. When designing we must ask ourselves hard questions:

1. Do we provide opportunities for learning about the full cycle of food?
2. Do we provide opportunities for learning how to cook food that is tasty and nutritious?
3. How do we build rituals that celebrate the communal aspects of eating?

While current practices may exclude such offerings, future design opportunities for schools allow for consideration.

How do we build environments that foster healthy living?



Reinventing the School Lunch

An Interview with Stephen Murakami

Why is the lunch experience important?

A recent study shows that for first time in history, kids today have a shorter life expectancy than their parents because of lack of nutritional smarts. We play a huge role because we feed kids two to three times per day. We provide breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack; in some schools, we send food home for the weekend. In twelve of our schools, nearly all students eat for free.

What are the challenges?

Students typically have about twenty-three minutes to get into the queue, get food, sit down, eat, clean up, and get back in line for drop-off before racing out to recess. That's no time at all. I'd like to see recess and dining flipped. Give the kids the exercise they need, allow them to burn off energy, and at the same time, get them involved in an outdoor experience that actually shows where food comes from. Instead of a race to the playground, I imagine that we create opportunities to see the full cycle of food.

What would teaching the full food cycle look like?

We must get our students talking about how food is cultivated, harvested, planted, produced, and managed as waste. They must see it and experience it. Given the legal ramifications and requirements imposed by the risk management pools, these experiences will likely need to be demonstrative and not for production; legislators aren't supporting that yet. If we are visioning for the future, then I imagine a farm-to-school-based system with a full circle learning opportunity to get kids aware of the decisions they make and to promote healthy living. We must help our students build lifelong skills that will carry them throughout their life.

Are there examples?

Bainbridge Island School District has a lunch program called "Bite of Bainbridge," where third graders plant and fourth graders harvest potatoes for student meals. I would love to see our district start a conversation with Metro Parks and City of Tacoma about creating a community kitchen, where we work together, mitigate the legal concerns and ultimately build something that becomes a focal point for truly engaged, multi-generational learning around nutrition. The ability to do that, not only for the kids, but for their parents and the local community too, is what we mean when we say community asset.

Is there a way to make the dining experience more meaningful?

There are a lot of benefits to slowing down and moving to smaller scales. Grouping students in smaller, more meaningful ways may help alleviate bullying and bridge socioeconomic divisions. We talk about creating shared learning areas throughout the school. Can these be used for dining? They may become places to slow down, break down the scale, and have more of a family setting.

Talk more about slowing down the dining experience.

In order to slow down the lunch experience, we must find ways to make the period educational. Right now, students typically have twenty-three minutes to quickly eat their meal. Every minute in the day of a student is critical. So how do we maximize lunch as a learning experience? We give students a say in what's on the menu, and a role in producing, distributing, and composting their food. If we make lunch educational, we can give it more time.

Is there a way to make dining less formal and more ubiquitous?

Operations have been built around the adult for many years now. As we move to a more student-centered model, we must think about students' physiological needs, such as when and how often children need to eat. How do we support children with different learning as well as physiological needs? Many workplaces now offer their employees the freedom to eat when they want based on their schedule and needs. If they are doing it, then we can too. The Starbucks model offers grab-and-go selections and a surprising amount of variety with little more than a microwave. An early learning center in Renton provides mobile hot carts to teachers so that students eat meals within the learning suite. Other districts are starting to offer these types of experiences.