

Adding Visual Appeal to K-12 Lunch: Cobb County Public Schools' Innovative Approach

An old adage that's well-known among chefs is the idea that "you eat with your eyes first." Visual appeal is a critical part of the dining experience: we use all of our senses to make decisions about the food we eat. If it looks unappealing, you're not going to eat it. If the surroundings aren't equally visually inspiring, there's a disconnect and you feel a suspicion that something isn't quite right about the food, either. Visual appeal has been a battle that school nutrition programs have been facing for decades: food service areas are dull and institutional and yet program managers are under pressure to increase meal participation rates.

Improving the visual appeal of the food service area to increase school meal participation is a plan that Cobb County Public Schools is putting into action through a massive undertaking that impacts nearly 70 schools, protects thousands of students from COVID-19 and other viruses, and educates the students on wellness – while adhering to strict budgeting standards.

Emily Hanlin, Executive Director of the Food and Nutrition Services for Cobb County, searched for a solution that would help her increase meal participation and meet the requirements of her program. "The solution can't be purely decorative. The money we receive is Federal and there are rules for how we use it to fund a project. This protects the students by ensuring that we're buying good quality food and keeping up with the facilities' needs – but it makes it challenging to pursue transformational change." Hanlin found a path forward that would meet the restrictions for spending and accomplish her goals: nutritional and wellness messaging through decorative and functional wall coverings. Investing in solutions that encourage healthy eating and wellness activities was something that would be allowed – and SafeWalls was the innovative product that met all of her needs.

A Revolutionary New Product

SafeWalls is a commercial wall covering –, but one that prevents the spread of viruses, is custom-designed to fit your visual goals and the size and shape of your space, *and* withstands Sharpie® "art" and other forms of touch and tampering with a simple wipe down from your favorite cleanser. At first glance, SafeWalls looks and feels a lot like normal digital wallcoverings, but it contains a polymer that makes a permanent barrier between your walls and stains – and it inhibits the growth of transmittable infections.

SafeWalls is a commercial grade wallcovering that can be customized with graphics, logos, photographs, and murals. In addition to the stain-free polymer surface, SafeWalls work 24/7 in the background to protect against the spread of bacteria and viruses. The material is naturally antibacterial, and it is manufactured with safe antimicrobials to inhibit the growth of microbes. SafeWalls' polymer wallcoverings and surface protection film has been independently tested by ISO 21702 certified lab as effective against SAR-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19), reducing the surface virus by up to 96.2% in one hour. It's also effective against staph infections, MRSA, and e-coli. Contaminants cannot thrive on surfaces covered by SafeWalls. Plus, SafeWalls are easy to clean, which means fewer harsh chemicals need to be used – perfect for sticky fingers touching the decals as they pass through the lunch line at school. SafeWalls look and feel like traditional wallcoverings, but they work hard to protect surfaces and people.

According to the BrandArmor website, schools need to know that SafeWalls products:

- Inhibit the growth of 99% of microbes
- Received laboratory certifications demonstrating protection against Staph, MERSA, ecoli and SARS Cov-2 (Covid 19)
- Wipe clean with a nonabrasive cleanser
- Resist graffiti – even Sharpie® doodles
- Stay bright, clean, and crisp – indoors and out

Prior to learning about SafeWalls and how they could be used in Cobb County Schools, Hanlin says her School Nutrition Managers would decorate the food service area on a tiny budget with seasonal décor from the Dollar Store. She'd push her managers, asking, "How do we make it fun for the kids?" while asking herself, "How do I make it easier for the managers?" Not everyone has an eye for interior decorating and it's a challenge to keep the serving area fresh and visually appealing on top of other (often more important) duties. She started allocating funds over a number of years and looking for a solution that would meet her requirements. She wanted something that incorporated nutritional and wellness messaging, improved the look and feel of the space, reduced that institutional look, and was easy to maintain.

With a solution in mind, Hanlin was eager to explore the design options available for her project. BrandArmor - the company behind SafeWalls - works closely with each client to measure, custom-design, and manage the installation of SafeWalls. For Cobb County, this means careful measurement of each of the 67 school's food service areas, custom designs for each school (every food service line gets its own custom café name and sign), and the installation of the decals. "The designs were a collaboration between Cobb County Food and Nutrition Services and our design team," says Jonathan Baltic, President of BrandArmor. "Emily gave us her list of needs and our creative team lead by Bill George developed designs that met her goals. We have images of kids participating in fun physical activities, like yoga and dance, enticing visuals of bright, beautiful fruits and vegetables, and messages encouraging balanced, healthy eating. What's even better is knowing that along with reducing that institutional feel, we're providing the schools with something that's incredibly durable and will last for decades."

"It's bright a beautiful!"

Prior to going on summer break, one Cobb County elementary school food service area was completely retrofitted with the SafeWalls decals. The staff and student responses have all been positive.

- "Love it!!! It is so bright and puts a smile on the students' faces when they see it!" *Holly M., Kindergarten Student*
- "My first impression was, 'wow! Thanks for brightening up our school!'" *Megan H., 4th Grade Student*
- "It's bright and beautiful – like the women who prepare and serve the lunches at Bullard. Great job!!" *Diana Rockefeller, 3rd Grade Student*

- “I could not believe how much energy the new colors and creatively placed décor brought to our lunchroom! Our students’ faces lit up as they saw them. It was awesome to eat in a place as beautiful as our Café!” *Ms. V. – 5th Grade Teacher*

Part of Emily Hanlin’s process is to examine this year’s metrics compared to the upcoming school year to see how much of a difference has been made on meal participation. The SafeWalls decals in the pilot school appear to have made an immediate impact: even packed lunch kids wanted to come through the lunch line to see the new décor – as well as be exposed to the nutritional and wellness messaging. Hanlin feels like that’s half the battle, saying, “We want to bring students into the serving area. If they don’t come into the serving line, you don’t have the chance to win them over.” The premise is that students who wouldn’t normally try a school-prepared lunch may try it now that they have seen it being made and served. The schools in Cobb County already keep records on participation rates, number of lunches made versus served, and new foods tried, such as the “Try Day” vegetables they bring in from local farmer’s markets.

Spotting SafeWalls Out and About

According to BrandArmor, you may have already encountered SafeWalls and didn’t even realize what you were seeing. These antimicrobial polymer wall coverings that are both stain-free and work 24/7 in the background to eliminate microbes and viruses that are commonly found in locations that are high-touch, require visual appeal, and need a low-maintenance solution. SafeWalls are frequently used in:

- Hospitals
- Medical and Dental Offices
- University locker rooms
- Hotels
- Gyms
- Offices
- Retail locations

SafeWalls uses a special film designed to apply directly over any (relatively) flat surface – including the concrete block most often found in schools. The installation team applies SafeWalls and uses heat to set the entire surface with the results looking hand-painted. Schools like Cobb County use them to educate and protect. Other organizations use them to reduce maintenance and build their branding.

For Emily Hanlin, time will tell – as well as the number of trays her team fills with delicious, nutritious school meals: “We’re building our brand as the largest quick-serve “restaurant” in Cobb County as we roll out SafeWalls to our elementary schools and then expanding to update the food service lines for our middle and high schools.”

About Emily Hanlin

Emily Hanlin is a registered and licensed dietitian. She received her Bachelor of Family and Consumer Sciences in Dietetics from the University of Georgia and her Master of Business Administration from Kennesaw State University. Prior to her career in school nutrition she worked as a dietitian in foodservice, hospital, and corporate wellness settings. She is a member of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and an active member of the School Nutrition Association. She volunteers her time on both local and state level Boards for the School Nutrition Association. She regularly speaks at state conferences about the importance of providing healthy schools meals. Ms. Hanlin is dedicated to the professional growth of the Food and Nutrition Services team members in order to allow them to provide the highest quality food and service for the students of Cobb County. She is proud to lead a fantastic team of school nutrition professionals.

About SafeWalls & BrandArmor

BrandArmor Technologies, LLC is an industry leader in the large format digital printing industry. Its specialty products feature a proprietary polymer, which protects the environment-facing surface with a zero PVC polymer. BrandArmor is chemically inert and will repel without degradation most environmental pollutants and chemicals, which normally attack and degrade regular vinyl graphics. After more than a year of development and field installations, BrandArmor® is offering antimicrobial SafeWalls® customized wallcoverings. This groundbreaking product combines bacteria and virus resistance with the durability of a polymer finish, all with beautiful custom designs.