



Problem: An antiquated store room with old, warped wooden shelves

Solution: A mobile track shelving system makes storage easy and efficient.



Some schools have the luxury of serving food to just one group of students — elementary, middle or high schoolers. In smaller communities, however, schools often have to serve students of all ages. That requires an efficient, organized kitchen to handle differing age groups and tastes on a daily basis.

Flanagan-Cornell Unit 74 in Flanagan, Ill., is just such a school. It's located in a rural community in central Illinois and serves breakfast and lunch daily to 175 elementary and middle school students and 70 high school students. In addition, the school provides meals for the Livingston County Special Services Unit (LCSSU), the county department that accommodates students who have social or behavioral issues.

Susan Ulrich, kitchen manager at Flanagan-Cornell, and her team handle the same issues that other schools face nowadays, such as supply chain challenges, frequently changing governmental regulations and tight budgets. Besides those challenges, however, they have had to deal with a kitchen and dry storage area in desperate need of updating.

FE&S Kitchen Storage Makeover Winner Flanagan-Cornell Unit 74

Small-Space Makeover Yields Big Efficiency Results

| By Tom O'Brien |
Photos by Chris McGuire



Problem: Too many wasted steps in the kitchen

Solution: A pass-through holding cabinet — just one of many new efficiencies — now enables staff to save steps between the cookline and serving line.



Little things — like staff getting slivers from old wooden shelves and having to take extra steps in the kitchen — soon became big annoyances, ultimately prompting Ulrich to enter the FE&S Kitchen Storage Makeover contest. Her entry won Flanagan-Cornell a kitchen assessment and redesign of the space. Upon the notification that her school had won, Ulrich “did a happy dance” and informed her staff. When they asked what it meant for them, she laughed and said, “It means you’re never going to get another splinter!”

In the 200-square-foot dry storage area, there were wooden shelves to hold institutional-size cans, dry ingredients, bins of breakfast cereal and other food items. The shelves

were stained from years of use and were bowing; team members would often get splinters when they reached in for products. “Of course, you’re in a hurry, and the wooden shelves are splintering,” Ulrich says. “Here we go again. Get the tweezers and get your splinter out.” Unused appliances and other items were stacked high on top of the shelves. “The shelves went pretty high. I used as much space as I could and stacked stuff on top, the stuff we didn’t use very often. The fire marshal said, ‘You can’t stack stuff up there.’ They were concerned with the sprinkling system, and of course if it fell over, it would hit someone.”

The kitchen measures a tight 650 square feet, with a reach-in cooler located in an adjacent room. A mobile walk-in freezer sits outside the building, a few steps away from the kitchen.

The Pain Points

There were three major areas of concern the Flanagan-Cornell project

needed to address. The first order of business was redesigning the kitchen area to be more ergonomic. Making the kitchen and storage areas safer for the kitchen staff was equally important. And finally, the makeover sought to eliminate any areas of concern for local health and fire departments.

Changing the way food was delivered from the cookline to the serving line helped address both the ergonomic and safety issues. The school had a unique cookline-to-serving line system. As food came off the school’s cookline, it was portioned into roasters or crockpots that were carried around the cookline to the serving line. The roasters were then placed on a raised wooden platform on the serving counter. The serving line crew stood on a long wooden box rising about 8 inches off the floor. As they dished out food from the roasters, the crew would place the items on a tray and hand it to students. This method of service presented several problems, Ulrich says. “It was not the safest. I’d get on one end [of the box], and the other end would go up.” In addition, team

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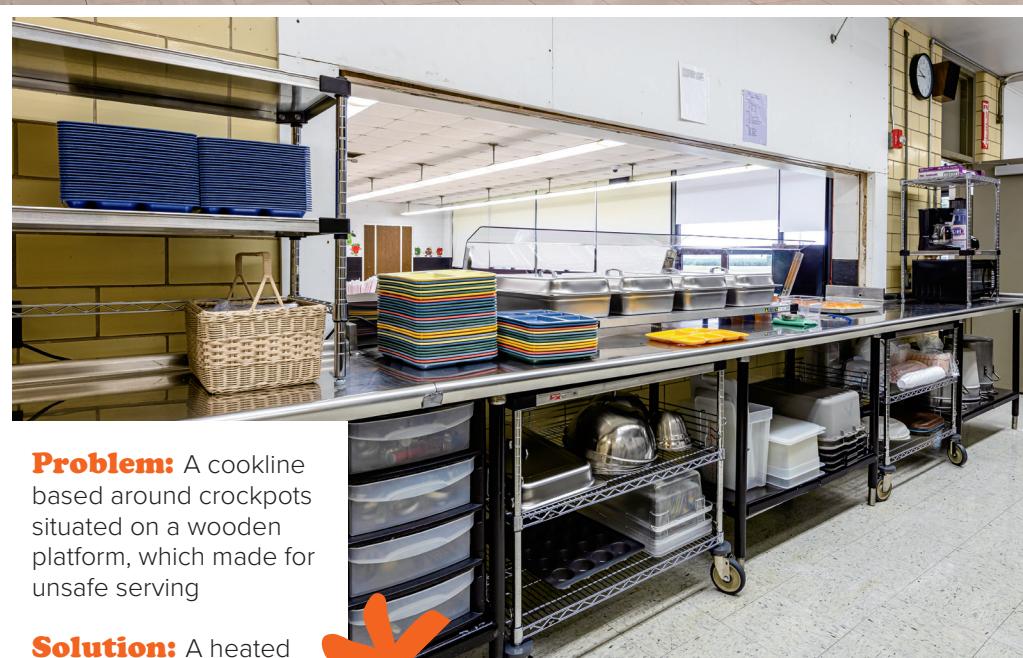
We put space to work.



members were getting burns on their arms from reaching over the hot roasters to hand trays to the students.

Replacing the kitchen's single-door heated holding cabinet with a pass-through model eliminated the need for carrying hot roasters or crockpots between the two lines. Stephanie O'Donoghue, principal of Naperville, Ill.-based Rep Concepts, brought a team to assist with the setup and describes the before and after: "They were walking completely around the area and then serving. That pass-through cabinet's going to give them the ability to take something off the stove and pop it into a food pan. Then they can pull it from the other side without having to walk all the way around the whole operation." The cookline was provided with mobile carts to move items like large pots that might be too big or heavy for staff to carry.

The kitchen also suffered from a severe lack of shelf and storage



Problem: A cookline based around crockpots situated on a wooden platform, which made for unsafe serving

Solution: A heated shelf now holds standard-size pans; rolling shelves under the counter increase storage space.

space, so staff would frequently have to run out of the kitchen and across the hall to the dry storage room for ingredients or utensils. The makeover team solved that by removing an underutilized, antiquated wooden cooling rack and replacing it with workstations that enable staff to store dry ingredients such as spices and flour above or below the worktable. Some of the pots and pans, which were previously stored in the storage room, now sit on

a new hanging rack installed near the sink. A tall drying rack on wheels was also placed in that area to serve double duty, for storage or drying.

Having the makeover team's fresh set of eyes look at the kitchen led to ideas on how to repurpose different areas in the kitchen space. For example, an empty wall at the end of the dishwasher became the perfect location for a wall-mounted drying rack. Cafeteria trays can now come right out of the dishwasher, and instead of being stacked on the dishwasher table as they were previously, staff place them in the rack for quicker, more effective drying.

Smart Serving & Smoother Storage

The service line was the next area to get an overhaul. The makeover team and Flanagan-Cornell team agreed it was imperative to get rid of both the hot roasters and the wooden box on which the crew stood to serve as they presented safety issues and also made for a less-than-optimal service line.

Since the makeover team could not redesign the stainless-steel serving counter to allow heated wells, they decided to go up rather than down. They installed a 24-inch-by-60-inch heated shelf on the counter, which was the perfect size for four new standard-size pans to fit in the heated cabinet. With a maximum temperature of 200 degrees F, the shelf can hold pans coming out of the cabinet at proper temperature throughout the meal service. The shelf, which rises just 3 inches off the counter, still allows the staff to interact with students even when it is loaded with pans. A sneeze guard was installed on the front of the serving line so students can see the food as they move down the line to the final tray pickup point at the end of the counter.

New mobile carts replaced wooden shelving under the serving line. "So now they can, if they need to, roll things in and out of there easily," says O'Donoghue. "And they can clean much easier."

The dry storage area provided some of the most dramatic changes in the makeover project. The storage room had originally been the closet for the school band's instruments. Years ago, it had been outfitted with stationary wooden shelves, which the fire department cited as a fire hazard. Once these shelves were removed, the makeover team installed a mobile overhead track shelving system with antimicrobial plastic shelving. Staff can now easily move each bank of shelves to access the product stored within, and they can wheel a cart in the active aisle to

load product out. To ensure proper rotation the makeover team installed institutional-size can racks for "first in, first out" product usage.

Stationary shelving units were installed along the sides of the storage area with bins and dividers as needed to hold smaller products. With larger, more secure shelving installed, fewer of those lesser-used items (such as the now-retired roasters) need to be stored on top of the shelves, and there is no danger of the items falling off.

The makeover team also designed a niche under one of the shelving units in the storage area to store lightweight containers for transporting food off-site to LCSSU. The school now has two sets of containers with dollies so that one set can be loaded while the other set remains in use off-site.

O'Donoghue says the makeover achieved its goals of increasing efficiency and safety at Flanagan-Cornell. "In the storeroom and prep areas, everything has a designated space, and it's created more organization," she says. "Everything's easy to find. At the end of the day, they're not walking back and forth, which is going to make them more efficient." The changes in the serving line benefit both the line crew and the students, she adds. "It's more organized around the serving line. The students are able to see the food and what's being offered. It's going to be more efficient for them too."

Ulrich agrees that the Flanagan-Cornell kitchen operates more smoothly in the aftermath of the makeover. "We know where everything's at because it's right in front of us now," she says. "We don't have to go to the cabinet and look for it and dig for it." Students are enjoying the new serving line and are naturally curious, she says. "They see the sneeze guard and the heated surface, and they say, 'What happened to this? What happened to that?' Well, we got a whole new kitchen!" **FE&S**



A cantilevered workstation provides storage and also offers staff room to work.



The Flanagan-Cornell kitchen crew: Susan Ulrich, Jessica Hall, Kim Albertson and Amanda Weichmann.

Problem: Lack of a safe and simple way to transport food to off-site locations

Solution: Staff now use two sets of insulated storage containers, which rotate out from the main kitchen to off-site venues.

