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A bulldog in a baseball outfit decorates the cafeteria at Bunnell's Flagler Palm Coast High School, which spiced up its cafeteria with a theme.

Some school cafeterias try creative décor

Themed interiors are designed to appeal to students and entice them to eat school lunches.

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BUNNELL — When Matanzas High School opens in Flagler County in August, students may notice their cafeteria is a bit different from those at other schools.

The adobe fireplace could raise a few eyebrows, along with the Caribbean-themed murals. And it probably will be hard not to notice the three life-size pirate mannequins standing on a platform next to the lunch line or the wig-clad skeleton that will ride a cannon set on top of a powder keg.

“This is what we have to do now because this is what kids are used to,” said artist Tom Galvin, who along with artist Barry Snyder turns plain vanilla cafeterias into something students are proud to call their own. “We really pride ourselves on the fact that we’re not normal.”

Osceola County is looking at employing the same artists to create an innovative space inside the cafeteria of its new alternative ninth-grade

Cafeterias try themes to attract kids

CAFETERIA FROM BJ

center, the Osceola Educational Complex.

Freshmen who do poorly on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test will be sent to the school, built inside an old Kmart, for a year of intense course work.

But without sports teams, clubs or other extracurricular activities, some say there isn't much about the school that will make the students excited to be there.

"If anyone needs this type of work, it's this school," said Snyder, a former Disney Imagineer who has spent 30 years designing the interiors of restaurants, airport terminals, theme parks and schools.

"These kids have been removed from the mainstream and isolated," Snyder said. "They don't have a mascot. They're kind of stuck there."

Along with business associate Galvin, Snyder envisions turning the cafeteria's plain white walls into a collage of fantasy, music, history and space travel. Quotes from historical figures such as Helen Keller and Martin Luther King Jr. would inspire achievement while the novelty of a school food court would create a space that students take pride in.

"We're playing on the psychology of these kids," Snyder said.

With students accustomed to eating in malls and fast-food restaurants, getting them to the school cafeteria is no longer a given, food-service officials say. Even forbidding students to go elsewhere for lunch doesn't mean they'll choose to dine in the cafeteria.

"We used think that we had a captive audience," Osceola's food-service director, Jean Palmore, said. "But we don't. We must entice students to dine with us."

Flagler County started giving a theme to its cafeterias two years ago when it renovated the cafeteria at Flagler Palm Coast High School.

"We might be a small school district, but we're not going to be small-minded," said Roy Pistone, the food-service director in Flagler County, which has about 8,600 students. "If you

build something nice for students, they will respect it."

The main part of the cafeteria opened in 2003 with the "Dawg House Café," where the school's main hot lunches are served. There, chicken-shaped fixtures cast a golden glow over the "Fowl Play" station, where students can get a chicken sandwich or a burger. At the Tex-Mex station, a bulldog clad in a school baseball uniform stands behind the counter sticking his tongue out at patrons.

"We wanted to do something like the environment that most kids like to be in, and that's a mall," said Flagler Superintendent Bill Delbrugge, who was principal at Flagler Palm Coast when the new cafeteria opened. "It's been a very, very positive thing for our school."

Food-service officials say they've seen a dramatic increase in school-lunch sales without changing the menu. During the 2003-04 school year, student-lunch sales at the school increased 47.5 percent from the previous year. The following year, student-lunch sales jumped another 21.7 percent, Pistone said.

"It just makes a world of difference," Delbrugge said.

Flagler officials were so impressed that they asked Snyder and Galvin to design cafeterias in two schools set to open in August. The men also designed a cafeteria in Hillsborough County.

But with the Osceola Educational Complex set to open when school starts in August, time may be running out for Snyder and Galvin's vision.

Palmore commissioned the two to design the cafeteria there for \$4,850. But when Eric Houston, the district's assistant superintendent for construction services saw the design, which would cost more than \$43,000 to install, he decided it needed School Board approval.

"It was a bit of a departure from what we've done in the past," Houston said.

School Board members' initial reaction to the project was not positive. At a meeting June 7, board members expressed concern that the kitchen's design had changed from a cheaper warming kitchen to a -capacity kitchen with ovens and

stoves.

"The board's vision was completely pre-empted and I don't appreciate that," School Board Member David Stone said that night.

"I don't think it's going to work," School Board Chairman John McKay said. "I have no problem with the concept. I have a problem with the timing and the construction of the cafeteria."

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