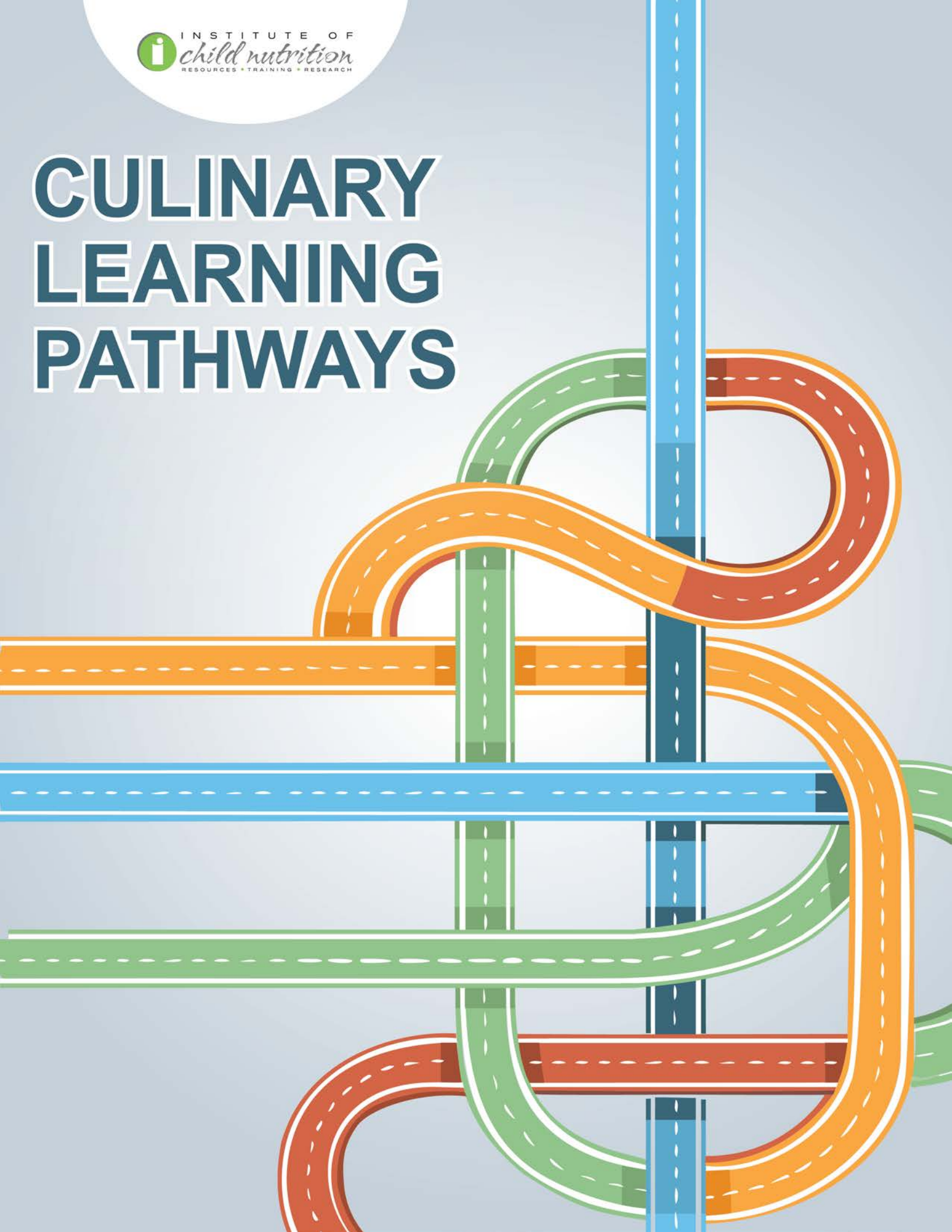


CULINARY LEARNING PATHWAYS



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Culinary Learning Pathways are practical guides designed to support the development of culinary knowledge and skills for school nutrition professionals at all levels. Each pathway outlines progressive learning steps, starting with foundational concepts and building toward more advanced skills so individuals can grow in their roles, improve meal quality, and contribute to program success.

These pathways are grounded in the Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition's (CICN) Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills (CKS) and aligned with USDA Professional Standards, helping school nutrition professionals meet training requirements while supporting workforce development and program improvement. A learning pathway is defined as a learner-centered sequence of activities or experiences intended to develop specific competencies or knowledge areas. These pathways may be either structured or flexible, often allowing learners to choose experiences that best suit their individual needs.

Importantly, these pathways are organized by job responsibilities, not job titles. Since districts across the country use different titles for similar roles, this approach ensures the content is applicable and adaptable, regardless of district size or structure.

Each pathway highlights:

- The knowledge and skills needed for specific roles or responsibilities
- Corresponding CICN CKS
- Relevant USDA Professional Standards codes and learning objectives
- Recommended ICN/CICN training resources
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Use these pathways to:

- Guide professional development planning
- Identify training opportunities based on your current role or desired growth
- Support onboarding, coaching, or promotion decisions within your team

Whether preparing meals, managing a kitchen, planning menus, or overseeing program operations, there's a pathway to support your success.

Audience Segments for Culinary Learning Pathways in School Nutrition Programs

To design effective culinary learning pathways in school nutrition programs, it is crucial to segment the audience by job functions and responsibilities rather than local job titles. School districts across the nation use a variety of titles for similar roles, so the segments below focus on the scope of duties and decision-making authority. This approach aligns with USDA's Professional Standards and ensures flexibility for districts of all sizes.



1. Frontline and Site-Level Culinary Staff (From Food Prep to Site Manager)

This group includes school nutrition professionals directly involved in preparing, serving, and managing meals at the school site. These roles form the backbone of day-to-day food service operations, ranging from basic food prep staff to site managers overseeing kitchen teams.

To support development across this wide range of responsibilities, the learning pathway is broken into three progressive tiers:



Typical Duties and Skills:

- Meal Preparation and Service: Follow standardized recipes, prepare meals, and serve students.
- Food Safety and Sanitation: Implement HACCP, monitor temperatures, and maintain cleanliness.
- Site-Level Inventory and Ordering: Manage ordering and forecasting at a single school site.
- Supervision and Training: Oversee staff and daily operations at the site level.

Decision-Making: Frontline staff make on-the-spot decisions during meal service. Site managers have limited supervisory authority over production quantities, minor substitutions, and kitchen logistics.

Pathway Focus: Culinary fundamentals, food safety, production planning, and basic site-level management.

2. Specialized Culinary Planning and Innovation Roles (Chefs, Menu Planners, Production Leads)

This segment targets culinary professionals who lead recipe development, menu planning, forecasting, and high-volume production, often operating in central kitchens or district-level culinary leadership positions.

Typical Duties and Skills:

- Culinary Innovation and Recipe Development: Create and adapt recipes that meet school standards.
- Menu Planning and Nutrient Analysis: Plan compliant, appealing menus and analyze nutrient content.
- Procurement and Supply Chain Management: Forecast usage and source high-quality ingredients.
- Central Production and Culinary Leadership: Manage large-scale cooking operations and train staff.

Decision-Making: Specialized authority for recipe creation, procurement specifications, and food quality oversight.

Pathway Focus: Culinary innovation, menu development, forecasting, and production leadership.

3. District and Area Program Management (Administrative & Oversight Roles)

This segment includes school nutrition directors, supervisors, and coordinators who manage operations across multiple school sites. They are responsible for high-level planning, compliance, fiscal oversight, and staff development.

Typical Duties and Skills:

- Program Planning and Oversight: Develop menus and policies; ensure compliance across schools.
- Financial and Administrative Management: Manage budgets, procurement, and program finances.
- Personnel Management and Training: Hire, train, and supervise staff across the district.
- Program Compliance and Quality Control: Maintain records, oversee audits, and monitor site adherence.

Decision-Making: High-level authority for strategic planning, procurement, training, and budgeting.

Pathway Focus: Administrative leadership, regulatory knowledge, and district-level program management.

How to Request Training

For all face-to-face trainings, submit your request [here](#).

For all online courses, use the link to access iLearn.

Introductory Pathway – Frontline and Site-Level Culinary Staff

Select this pathway if you are new to school nutrition or foodservice and are learning the basics of safe and efficient kitchen work. You may assist with simple food prep, portioning, dishwashing, or meal service. This tier focuses on foundational knowledge such as identifying kitchen equipment, understanding basic food safety practices, following simple instructions, and supporting kitchen operations under supervision. It is ideal for new hires, substitutes, or individuals transitioning into school nutrition from another field.

Knowledge & Skills Focus	Mapped CIGN CKS	USDA Professional Standards Code & Objective	Recommended ICN/CIGN Resources
Identify common kitchen equipment and demonstrate basic safety awareness (knife safety, ovens, mixers)	Food and Workplace Safety 4.2; Culinary Proficiency 5.3	2140 – Properly use and care for equipment	- Let's Cook! Culinary Training Series - Food Safety in Schools - Introduction of HACCP for SNPs
Practice food safety basics: hand hygiene, cross-contamination prevention, temperature danger zone	Food and Workplace Safety 4.1	2620 – Practice general food safety procedures	
Follow basic recipe instructions and portion correctly using scoops and portion tools	Culinary Proficiency 5.1; Menu Development 6.2	2110 – Understand and prepare food using standardized recipes	
Demonstrate basic cooking knowledge and skills.	Culinary Proficiency 5.1	2130 – Develop culinary skills necessary for school meal preparation	

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Beginner Pathway – Frontline and Site-Level Culinary Staff

Select this pathway if you have gained some experience in school foodservice and are taking on more responsibility in food preparation and kitchen operations. You may be expected to follow standardized recipes, assist with production recordkeeping, apply batch cooking techniques, and uphold HACCP-based food safety procedures. This tier supports those ready to refine their culinary skills and contribute more independently to day-to-day foodservice tasks, including prepping, cooking, and safe food handling.

Knowledge & Skills Focus	Mapped CIGN CKS	USDA Professional Standards Code & Objective	Recommended ICN/CIGN Resources
Prepare food using standardized recipes and maintain production records	Culinary Proficiency 5.2; Operation Management 7.1	2120 – Complete a food production record	• Culinary keystones • Flavor Development • Knife Skills • Menus of Flavor
Improve knife skills and apply batch cooking methods	Culinary Proficiency 5.3; Culinary Proficiency 5.1	2130 – Develop culinary skills necessary for school meal preparation	
Apply HACCP and sanitation SOPs during production	Food and Workplace Safety 4.3	2610 – Practice a HACCP-based food safety program	
Serve meals using Offer Versus Serve correctly	Menu Development 6.2	2220 – Use Offer Versus Serve correctly	

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Intermediate Pathway – Frontline and Site-Level Culinary Staff

Select this pathway if you lead or help manage meal service at a school site. You may supervise staff, coordinate daily production, place orders, manage inventory, reduce food waste, or ensure meals meet special dietary needs. This tier supports staff in roles such as site managers or kitchen leads who oversee operations, make real-time foodservice logistics decisions, and ensure food safety and compliance with quality standards.

Knowledge & Skills Focus		Mapped CICN CKS	USDA Professional Standards Code & Objective	Recommended ICN/CICN Resources
Forecast production and minimize food waste through effective planning		Operation Management 7.1; Menu Development 6.2	2120 – Complete production record and manage waste	• Marketing to the Line • The Grains Lab • The Produce Lab • The MMA Lab • Training and Facilitating (Train-the-Trainer) • Culinary Quick Bites Series
Lead kitchen operations and ensure consistent SOPs		Personnel Management 8.3	3430 – Develop employee training plans	
Accommodate special diets (allergies, gluten-free)		Menu Development 6.1	1160 – Plan meals for special diets	
Prepare meals from scratch using advanced culinary methods		Culinary Proficiency 5.1; Recipe Development 1.1	2130 – Develop culinary skills	

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Culinary Innovation and Planning Pathway – Chefs, Menu Planners, Production Leads

Select this pathway if your role includes menu planning, recipe development, production forecasting, or oversight of central kitchen operations. You may work as a chef, culinary coordinator, production lead, or menu planner—often at the district or multi-site level. This pathway emphasizes culinary innovation, speed-scratch and scratch cooking techniques, student-centered menu design, flavor enhancement, nutrient analysis, and culinary leadership. It supports individuals responsible for elevating food quality and creativity while maintaining compliance and cost-efficiency.

Knowledge & Skills Focus	Mapped CICN CKS	USDA Professional Standards Code & Objective	Recommended ICN/CICN Resources
Develop and test speed-scratch and from-scratch recipes	Recipe Development 1.2	2130 – Develop culinary skills	- School Meal Recipe Workshop: From Concept to Standardization - USDA Recipe Standardization Guide for School Nutrition Programs - Shaking it Up! - Training and Facilitating (Train-the-Trainer) - Culinary Quick Bites Series - FBG Series - Culturally Inclusive Meal Toolkit - Planning Reimbursable School Meals for Menu Planners
Plan menus that reduce sodium and added sugar	Menu Development 6.1	1320 – Understand general nutrition concepts	
Enhance flavor using herbs, spices, and seasonings	Culinary Proficiency 5.1	2130 – Develop culinary skills	
Coordinate student taste-testing and feedback loops	Stakeholder Engagement 2.4	4160 – Engage students to choose healthy foods	

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Program Management Pathway – District and Area Program Management

Select this pathway if you oversee school nutrition programs across multiple schools and are responsible for high-level decision-making and program oversight. You may be a director, supervisor, or coordinator tasked with menu planning, budgeting, procurement, compliance monitoring, personnel management, and training. This pathway supports administrative leaders who shape the direction of school meal programs, ensure alignment with USDA requirements, and lead teams to achieve operational excellence across sites.

Knowledge & Skills Focus		Mapped CICN CKS		USDA Professional Standards Code & Objective	Recommended ICN/CICN Resources
Plan cycle menus that meet USDA meal pattern requirements		Menu Development 6.1		1110 – Plan menus that meet USDA nutrition requirements	• Training and Facilitating (Train-the-Trainer) • Facility Design and Equipment Purchasing for School Nutrition Programs • Meal Patterns • Production Records) • FBG Series • Buy American
Manage procurement: write specs, conduct bids, use USDA Foods		Procurement 9.1		2410 – Develop product specifications	
Oversee financial management: budgeting and reporting		Financial Accountability 3.1		3330 – Prepare a budget	
Supervise program compliance: AR readiness, audits		Operation Management 7.5		3200 – Manage staff and resources for ARs	

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