

**Evaluating the NFSMI, ARD Competencies:
Perceptions of District Administrators and
School Nutrition Directors**



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**National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi**

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

The National Food Service Management Institute was authorized by Congress in 1989 and established in 1990 at The University of Mississippi in Oxford and is operated in collaboration with The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. The Institute operates under a grant agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the National Food Service Management Institute is to improve the operation of child nutrition programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination.

MISSION

The mission of the National Food Service Management Institute is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of child nutrition programs.

VISION

The vision of the National Food Service Management Institute is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in child nutrition programs.

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EVALUATING THE NFSMI, ARD COMPETENCIES: PERCEPTIONS OF DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS AND SCHOOL NUTRITION DIRECTORS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its inception, the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) has been in the forefront in identifying the competencies, knowledge, and skills (CKS) needed by professionals working in the child nutrition arena. The initial work on identifying the competencies, knowledge, and skills for school nutrition (SN) directors/supervisors was conducted in the mid 1990s and was revised in 2001 (Carr, Cater, & Conklin, 1996; Gregoire & Sneed, 1994; Rainville & Carr, 2001)

As the environment in which SN programs operate is more complex and is changing at a faster pace than ever before, Nettles, Asperin, and Carr (2010) initiated a research project to identify the functional areas, competencies, knowledge, and skills needed by district-level SN professionals to be successful in the 21st century. The functional areas that encompass the job responsibilities of district-level SN professional staff include the following areas: facility and equipment management; financial management; food production and operation management; food security, sanitation, and safety; human resource management; marketing and communications; menu and nutrition management; procurement and inventory management; program management and accountability; and technology and information systems. School boards and administrators can use the CKS as a framework to identify the goals and objectives for hiring and/or evaluating an effective SN director. The CKS also define the expectations of the role of effective district-level SN professionals and can be used by district administrators to prepare these professionals to perform at the expected level of responsibility.

Limited research is available that explores district administrators' perceptions of the SN program or of the director leading the SN program. March and Gould (2002) examined superintendents' perceptions of SN operations in Kansas. They found that the majority of superintendents expressed support for the SN programs, and they recommended that SN directors work with superintendents to provide the best SN program for children, achieve the mission of the school district, and remain a part of the total educational environment.

The purpose of this research was to determine the importance of the competencies developed by NFSMI, ARD to the role of SN directors as perceived by current SN directors and school district administrators. The specific objectives were to:

- Determine SN directors' perceived importance of the competencies to the role of an SN director;
- Determine district administrators' perceived importance of the competencies to the role of an SN director; and
- Determine the degree to which district administrators and SN directors believe that SN directors are adequately prepared in the competency areas.

The survey entitled *Evaluation of Competencies for School Nutrition Directors* was developed using previous NFSMI, ARD research that identified ten functional areas and 23 competencies that SN directors need to effectively lead their programs in the current environment. In Section I, participants were provided the following question: "When I think about the job responsibilities of a SN director, how important is this competency to being a successful SN director?" They were then asked to rate the importance of the 23 competencies using a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not important*) to 4 (*extremely important*). In Section II, participants were provided the question: "Based on my professional experience, district

administrators perceive that SN directors are competent in..." They then were asked to rate their agreement with the 23 competencies using a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). In Section III, participants were asked to provide information about themselves or their school district.

Surveys were mailed to a random sample of 700 SN directors and a random sample of 700 school district superintendents stratified by the seven United States Department of Agriculture regions. Descriptive statistics included means, standard deviations, and frequencies of total responses. Sub-scores were computed for each of the ten functional areas using the supporting competency statements. T-tests were used to assess differences in functional area sub-scores based on participants' job title (SN director and district superintendent). Bonferroni corrections were used to reduce the possibility of a Type-One error.

The SN directors and district administrators were provided the 23 competencies identified in the Nettles, Carr, and Asperin (2010) research. They were asked to rate the importance of the 23 competencies to being a successful SN director by using a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not important*) to 4 (*extremely important*). The SN directors rated all of the competencies 3.0 or greater, and the district administrators rated 20 of the 23 competencies 3.0 or greater, indicating that both groups viewed the competencies as important to the success of SN directors. The functional areas with the highest mean ratings from both groups were food production and operation management and financial management. When t-tests with Bonferroni correction were applied to assess differences in functional area sub-scores based on the participants' job titles, three functional areas demonstrated significance ($P < .005$). The three functional areas were program management and accountability, technology and information

systems, and marketing and communication. In all cases, the means of the SN directors were significantly higher than those of district administrators.

The SN directors and district administrators were provided the question: “Based on my professional experience, district administrators perceive that SN directors are competent in...” The respondents used a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) to indicate their agreement with the 23 competencies. School nutrition directors’ and district administrators’ mean ratings for the competency statements were greater than 2.0, suggesting that SN directors are perceived as having at least some competence in all areas. Competencies with the lowest mean ratings by SN directors and administrators were similar and included “developing a systematic approach for marketing the SN program,” “establishing a communication infrastructure with stakeholders to promote the SN program,” and “establishing a comprehensive technology infrastructure to achieve the operational goals of the SN program.”

Study results suggest that research-based competencies are important to the foundational success of SN directors, and that district administrators perceive SN directors as capable in most of the competency areas. Resources and training programs are needed to assist SN directors in addressing those functional areas and competencies that received the lowest agreement ratings for competency.