

Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Assistants/Technicians



National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi
1-800-321-3054

2006

This publication has been produced by the National Food Service Management Institute–Applied Research Division, located at The University of Southern Mississippi with headquarters at The University of Mississippi. Funding for the Institute has been provided with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, to The University of Mississippi. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of The University of Mississippi or the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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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 (NFSMI) was authorized by Congress in 1989 and established in 1990 at The University of Mississippi in Oxford. The Institute operates under a grant agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

PURPOSE

The purpose of NFSMI is to improve the operation of Child Nutrition Programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination. The Administrative Offices and Divisions of Technology Transfer and Education and Training are located in Oxford. The Division of Applied Research is located at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

MISSION

The mission of the NFSMI is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs.

VISION

The vision of the NFSMI is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in Child Nutrition Programs.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Headquarters

The University of Mississippi
Phone: 800-321-3054
Fax: 800-321-3061
www.nfsmi.org

**Education and Training Division
Technology Transfer Division**
The University of Mississippi
6 Jeanette Phillips Drive
P.O. Drawer 188
University, MS 38677-0188

Applied Research Division
The University of Southern Mississippi
118 College Drive #10077
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601-266-5773
Fax: 888-262-9631

Acknowledgments

WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY

**Mary Frances Nettles, PhD, RD
Research Scientist**

**Deborah H. Carr, PhD, RD
Director, Applied Research Division**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Charlotte B. Oakley, PhD, RD, FADA

**COMPETENCIES, KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF
EFFECTIVE SCHOOL NUTRITION ASSISTANTS AND TECHNICIANS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State agencies and local school districts have been faced with the task of training site-level school nutrition personnel since before the passage of the National School Lunch Act (Martin, 1999). Early leaders in school nutrition (SN) recognized the benefits of establishing standards for personnel as well as developing training programs for the various levels of school nutrition personnel. Since its inception, the National Food Service Management Institute has been in the forefront in the identification of the competencies, knowledge, and skills needed by professionals working in the child nutrition arena. Research studies have been conducted for school nutrition directors and supervisors (Carr, Cater, & Conklin, 1996; Gregoire & Sneed, 1994; Rainville & Carr, 2001), school nutrition managers (Cater & Carr, 2004; Conklin, 1995; Sneed & White, 1993), and sponsor monitors of family day care homes (Carr & Oakley, 2002). This project focused on the SN assistant/technician who works at the local school cafeteria under the direction of a SN manager. The objectives of this study were to identify the functional areas, competencies, knowledge, and skills needed by effective SN assistants in the current SN environment, and determine at what point the SN assistant should be able to know/perform the knowledge/skill statement, at time of hire or after training. To accomplish these objectives, the researchers used the following definitions:

- **School nutrition assistants/technicians** are the foodservice employees who work at the local school cafeteria under the direction of a school nutrition manager.
- **Functional areas** are the broad groupings or categories of similar tasks that reflect job duties performed by assistants/technicians within the local SN operation. These categories serve as an umbrella for all tasks that are listed on a work schedule or are done on a daily, weekly, or seasonal basis within the school year.
- **Competencies** are underlying characteristics within each functional area that lead to successful performance. They may include knowledge and skills as well as various levels of motivation.
- **Knowledge** is the information a person has in specific content areas that is necessary for successful performance in a competency area.
- **Skills** are the abilities to perform certain physical and/or mental tasks that are necessary for successful performance in a competency area.

This research project was conducted in two phases and SN professionals participated in both phases of the project. Phase I utilized an expert panel consisting of state agency personnel, SN directors, and SN managers to bring about agreement on functional areas for job duties performed by SN assistants/technicians. Expert panel participants arrived at consensus on the knowledge and skill statements needed in each functional area. NFSMI researchers grouped the knowledge and skill statements for each functional area into smaller categories and drafted competency statements. The Phase II review panel, consisting of state agency personnel, SN directors, and SN managers, were mailed a survey that asked them to verify whether the knowledge and skill statements are important to the job responsibilities of a SN assistant, determine at what point the SN assistant should be able to know or perform the knowledge or

skill statement, at time of hire or after training, and confirm whether the competency statements are consistent with the supporting knowledge and skill statements.

Six functional areas were identified that encompass the job duties of the SN assistant/technician: food production; sanitation, safety, and security; customer service; program regulations and accountability; equipment use and care; and professional excellence. In addition to these functional areas, 12 competencies, 45 knowledge statements, and 105 skill statements were confirmed by the Phase II review panel. From these knowledge and skill statements, the Phase II review panel only identified 37 statements as being necessary when SN assistants are hired. These findings suggest that training of SN assistants occurs after hire as few individuals are fully competent in all aspects of the job when hired.

SN administrators can use the knowledge and skill statements and the Sample Job Description Template in preparing job descriptions for school nutrition assistants. Although job requirements for a school nutrition assistant may differ from state to state and sometimes from school district to school district, the findings from this research project provide needed information for defining the role an effective school nutrition assistant plays. Having an understanding of the functional areas and the supporting competencies, knowledge, and skills provides a clear image of the role of the SN assistant.