



I N S T I T U T E O F
child nutrition
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Applied Research Division Research at a Glance: 2024



A Message from Our Director

Dear Colleagues and Partners,

It is with great pride that I present the annual report for our research unit, covering the period from July 2023 to June 2024. This year has been marked by remarkable achievements, innovative research, and significant contributions to the field of child nutrition.

From July 2023 to June 2024, the dedicated research staff at the Applied Research Division (ARD) of the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) have actively engaged in disseminating research and participating in research activities. For example, the ARD researchers presented at the 32nd Annual Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Conference, facilitated research sessions at the ICN National Advisory Council (NAC) and the ICN CACFP NAC, produced an article for a peer-reviewed journal that highlighted the diverse research activities undertaken by our unit, and contributed to the academic community by serving as reviewers for other peer-reviewed journals, ensuring the continued quality and integrity of child nutrition research.

The ARD plays a vital role in supporting the mission of the Institute by diligently completing Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) projects. These projects are designed to systematically assess and enhance various aspects of our programs, ensuring that we consistently deliver high-quality education and training services. Between July 2023 and June 2024, the ARD researchers employed evidence-based practices and research methodologies to identify areas for improvement, recommend strategic changes, and monitor the effectiveness of three ICN virtual instructor-led trainings and the ICN's existing training catalog. This commitment to CQI not only aligns with the Institute's mission but also fosters a culture of excellence and accountability ultimately benefiting the communities we serve.

A notable highlight this year was the creation of our inaugural research opportunity focusing on food trends in K-12 education. This initiative aims to provide actionable insights into food choices among school-aged children that can benefit School Nutrition Program operators, industry professionals, and policymakers. We are excited about this initiative, and we look forward to the outcomes of sharing it with the school nutrition world. Great things are sure to come from this research!

As we reflect on the achievements of the past year, we are filled with excitement for what lies ahead. The coming year promises new opportunities, cutting-edge research, and continued collaboration with our partners.

Warm regards,

Marjuyua Lartey Gibson, PhD, RDN
Director
Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division
University of Southern Mississippi



ARD News and Research Highlights

Milestones Met: Three Grant Years of Research Completed

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a myriad of setbacks, delays, and obstacles in all of school nutrition. Whether it was rescheduled interviews, cancelled projects, or new projects begun to more immediately address trending needs, the pandemic sent ripples through schedules and putting many behind schedule. Through hard work, dedication, and perseverance, the ARD is proud to announce that three grant years of research have been completed.

Grant Year 2019

COVID-19 Task Force

This project sought to achieve several objectives. Objective 1 was to identify and describe the major operational changes/strategies that school nutrition program (SNP) operators implemented for the re-opening of schools. Objective 2 was to explore emerging trends and future implications that will impact SNP meal service and/or future training and technical assistance requirements. Objective 3 was to assess the training, technical assistance, and resource needs of State agencies and school food authorities.

Needs Assessment of Native American/Tribal School Nutrition Programs

The purpose of this study was to conduct a needs assessment to explore unique school nutrition practices, perceived training and resource needs, and preferred methods to reach and disseminate specific technical assistance, training, and resources to support school nutrition professionals working in Native American/Tribal school nutrition programs. The results include the development of a draft needs assessment survey to assess the needs of State agencies and school nutrition professionals in Native American/Tribal schools. Additionally, the information gleaned from the qualitative data will support the ICN's efforts to increase their outreach and share information about training, resources, and technical assistance available for State agencies and school nutrition professionals working in Native American/Tribal schools.

Environmental Scan of Instructional Technology Used to Develop and Deliver Virtual Trainings

The goal of this study was to develop a database detailing the instructional technology used by relevant industry and allied organizations and universities to provide virtual training. Findings from this study illustrate that virtual training offers several benefits to the child nutrition program (CNP) professional, including accessibility, schedule flexibility, and cost savings, and the results from this study suggest that effective virtual training incorporates adult learning principles that ensure the training is relevant, concise, and based on current needs.

ARD News and Research Highlights

Grant Year 2020

Developing a Framework for Compiling ICN's Training and Technical Assistance Needs Data

The purpose of this project was to identify, adapt, or develop a framework suitable for compiling participant-driven training and technical assistance needs from various ICN meetings, focus groups, advisory councils, and committees, to serve as the basis for the development of evidence-based training and technical assistance resources for all child nutrition programs. Specific objectives were to conduct a thorough review of the literature about methodological frameworks and the research process; develop a methodological framework for ICN data collection and analysis; develop an informative, user-friendly guide to ICN information-gathering efforts; and create a template for data storage and management of ICN projects and resources. As a result of the research, a *Guide to Information Gathering at the ICN* was created to support ICN staff.

Assess the Institute of Child Nutrition's Existing Training Catalog by Modality in Comparison to Child Nutrition Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills (CKS) and Professional Standards

This project established a system to assist the ICN in determining gaps in training by topic, audience, and format, and to also assist professionals in identifying ICN trainings that will meet their individual professional development needs. The project resulted in a research-based ICN training matrix. The results yield four uses for the research-based matrix. The matrix can be formatted as an online tool to assess training. It may identify gaps in training. It can identify and group similar courses by topic area, functional areas, competencies, and professional standards. Finally, professionals may use it to identify training courses needed for career advancement, to establish and update strategic planning objectives, or to establish annual goals.

Evaluation of the Institute of Child Nutrition Virtual Instructor-Led Training (VILT): Basic Culinary Math for School Nutrition Professionals

The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of the VILT course *Basic Culinary Math for School Nutrition Professionals* on participants' satisfaction, learning, and transfer of knowledge from the learner's perspective. In general, the participants expressed satisfaction with every aspect of the training, including the content and the VILT format. They found the training engaging, and the information presented was deemed relevant to their work, contributing to their ability to fulfill job responsibilities. All participants indicated they would recommend *Basic Culinary Math for School Nutrition Professionals* to their colleagues.

ARD News and Research Highlights

Grant Year 2021

Environmental Scan of State Agencies' Child Nutrition Program Trainings and Resources

One of the many ways State agencies support child nutrition program (CNP) professionals is by providing CNP-related resources on their websites. The web-based platform provides an efficient means to disseminate and obtain important information, but it is key to note that not all State agency websites publish the same CNP resources. The purpose of this project was to develop a database of State agency training and resources available online. Results from the Environmental Scan of State Agencies' Child Nutrition Programs Resources produced information that can support the development of new and improved trainings and resources for child nutrition professionals. In addition, the resources collected in the environmental scan database helped expand the Child Nutrition Sharing Site (CNSS) which is hosted on the ICN website, and contains resources easily accessible to CNP professionals.

Environmental Scan of Allied Organizations' Child Nutrition Program Trainings and Resources

Allied organizations (AO) offer web-based resources that support child nutrition program (CNP) professionals. This project's objective was to identify additional resources offered by AOs that support CNP programs or their performance and to develop a draft database of resources to be evaluated for potential inclusion into the ICN CNSS. As with the environmental scan for Stage agencies, the findings of this research were also compiled into ICN's CNSS online database.

Evaluation of the Institute of Child Nutrition Virtual Instructor-Led Trainings

The purpose of this project was to investigate the impact of the VILT courses (*Training Culturally Diverse Groups*, and *Food Safety in Child Care*) on participants' satisfaction, learning, and transfer of knowledge from the learner's perspective. Some of the key findings in this study included the participants in the *Training Culturally Diverse Groups* VILT found it engaging, were well satisfied, and would recommend the training to others. Regarding training in the *Food Safety in Child Care* VILT, researchers found most participants viewed the training as relevant, engaging, and a satisfying experience. The majority of participants felt the training was worth the time spent, and they would recommend the training to others. Participants from both trainings reported using the training to apply for SNA or other certification.

Research Spotlight: Food Trends in K-12 Digizine



New Interactive Digital Publication: A Valuable Resource for School Nutrition Professionals

The *Food Trends in K-12* Digizine is the latest innovation by the Institute of Child Nutrition. It is a beneficial resource for school nutrition programs, as it offers a wealth of information on current trends in food preferences for students. With information presented in six categories ranked by popularity, this resource is easy to navigate and available online for free.

Background

The ARD division of the Institute of Child Nutrition conducted a Food Trends in K-12 online survey in April 2024. The survey drew responses from 1,691 school nutrition professionals, including directors, managers, staff, chefs, and State agency professionals. Professionals from across all US states and territories participated in the survey.

Participants were asked to identify foods, flavors, seasonings, sauces and condiments, and dining options currently popular and growing in popularity among students. Participants in this survey were permitted to select multiple items in each category, and the results were ranked according to the frequency of selections. These results are presented in *Food Trends in K-12*, publication presents a list of breakfast and lunch menu items, flavors, seasonings, sauces, and dining cuisines, ordered according to their rankings. The food trends are organized in descending order.

Access the free resource, here!





About the ARD

The Applied Research Division (ARD) conducts *applied research* projects that address *operational issues* impacting Child Nutrition (CN) programs.

What is Applied Research?

- i** Addresses real-world issues
- i** Finds solutions to everyday problems
- i** Has immediate and practical applications of the findings

What Are Operational Issues?

- i** The processes, functions, and regulations surrounding a CN program that culminate in the delivery of food and nutrition services.

Our Projects Focus On:

- i** Continuous improvement of CN programs
- i** Strengthening the competence within the CN profession
- i** Operational issues

We Use the Following Methodologies:

- i** National surveys
- i** Case studies
- i** Expert work groups/national review panels
- i** Request for Application/
Request for Proposal

Our Strategic Priorities

The ARD supports the ICN mission to provide relevant research-based information and services that advance the continuous improvements of child nutrition programs by systematically conducting research and developing projects that influence child nutrition operational practices.

ARD Research Areas



Operational Accountability



Wellness



Equipment/Facility Design



Human Resources



Customer Service



Green/Environmental Conservation



Best Practices



Program Evaluation



Meet Our ARD Team



Dr. Marjuyua Lartey Gibson is the Director of the Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division at The University of Southern Mississippi. She completed a PhD in Nutrition and Food Systems at The University of Southern Mississippi, and her career encompasses nearly 27 years of teaching, research, and practice in the field of nutrition and dietetics. Dr. Lartey has spent the last 13 years of her career conducting research related to youth and Child Nutrition Programs.



Dr. Keith Rushing is a Research Scientist with the Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division. Keith holds a Doctorate Degree in Family and Consumer Sciences Education from Texas Tech University and is a registered dietitian. His work experience includes 12 years in healthcare and school foodservice management and 16 years at The University of Southern Mississippi, 10 of those at the Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division as a research scientist and two as director.



Dr. Kristi L. Lewis is a Research Scientist with the Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division, an educator, and registered dietitian in private practice for her business, K. Lewis Consulting, LLC. For over 21 years, her nationally recognized research has focused on childhood obesity, community health programs, and the development of best practices for serving young children; and exploring wellness in child care operational issues facing foodservice staff.



Dr. Jane Peterson is a Research Scientist with the Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division. Jane holds Doctorate in Biological Sciences with an emphasis in Nutrition from South Dakota State University. Dr. Peterson has over 30 years of experience in nutrition practice, education, and research. Dr. Peterson is a member of the School Nutrition Association and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND) professional organizations. Within AND, she is a member of the dietetic practice group (DPG) for research and the school nutrition services (SNS) DPG.



Dr. Kymberle Gordon is a Research Scientist with the Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division. She received her Doctor of Philosophy in Nutrition at the University of Mississippi. During her time at the University of Mississippi, she was a research consultant for the Institute of Child Nutrition, and the Applied Sciences Research and Analytics Lab, an adjunct professor in community nutrition, and both a Teaching and Research Assistant for the Department of Nutrition and Hospitality Management.



Shellie Hubbard is a Research Assistant for the Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division. In 2001, she received a Master of Arts in Creative Writing from The University of Southern Mississippi. She began her work with the institute over fifteen years ago as an editor and writer, then expanded her role to include graphic design.

And last, but not least... ***You!***

Our research would not be possible without the invaluable contributions from professionals of all walks of career and life in the field of child nutrition. State agencies, directors, managers, chefs, cooks, nutritionists, statisticians, educators, child care providers, parents, students... the list is long and it keeps growing. Thank you for all that you do to volunteer and contribute your voice to the work that we do.



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Visit the Institute of Child Nutrition [Applied Research Division](http://www.theicn.org/research)
(<http://www.theicn.org/research>) to learn more about the
projects and research conducted.

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