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A Publication for Child Nutrition Professionals from the
Applied Research Division • The University of Southern Mississippi



A Message from Our Director

Greetings,

The field of child nutrition is evolving. As new policies and regulations governing Child Nutrition Programs (CNPs) become effective, there is a need for School Food Authorities, Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) operators, and policymakers to understand the effect of policy change on meal operations, student health, and paths forward in serving students healthy and nutritious meals. The Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division (ICN ARD) has been working within the CNP community to ensure that we are informed of the needs of the community and connected to the end users in a way that allows us to be a valuable member of the community.

The staff members at the ICN ARD have been actively involved in local, state, and national allied organizations whose strategic goals include improving the health and well-being of our nation's children. They are also working directly with stakeholders in child nutrition to identify issues, challenges, and missed opportunities related to operational activities of CNPs. From editor of a national, peer-reviewed journal article to leadership on state and national committees and conducting high-quality research with key stakeholders in the field, I am proud to say that the staff at the ICN ARD are doing the work to ensure that the mission and vision of The Institute of Child Nutrition is fulfilled.

This year's annual report will demonstrate the work and efforts the ARD research staff placed in conducting quality CNP operations research and providing solutions to real CNP problems. Over the last 12 months, the research staff at ICN ARD has initiated and/or completed research on topics including competencies, knowledge, and skills to be and effect district level administrator in the School Meals Program, identifying challenges and drivers in implementing scratch cooking in schools and CACFPs, the use of social media to develop and train school nutrition staff, and workforce development efforts in school nutrition.

We invite you to explore the opportunities the ICN ARD has had in impacting the lives of students served in the National School Lunch, School Breakfast, and Child and Adult Care Food Programs in the 2025–2026 fiscal year through research and community engagement.

All the Best,

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





About the ARD

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

What is Applied Research?

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

What Are Operational Issues?

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

Our Projects Focus On:

- **Continuous improvement of child nutrition programs**
- **Strengthening the competence within the child nutrition profession**
- **Operational issues**

We Use the Following Methodologies:

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

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The Latest ARD Research

Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Program Directors

This study aimed to identify and validate the competencies, knowledge, and skills (CKS) required for effective school nutrition program directors in the current school meal program environment. Using a multi-phase, mixed-methods research design, researchers from The Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division engaged subject matter experts through semi-structured interviews, expert work group discussions, electronic review panels, and structured resource assessments. Findings resulted in an updated *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Program Directors* resource organized into nine functional areas encompassing 19 competencies and 214 aligned knowledge and skill statements.

Perceptions and Practices of Incorporating Student-Centered Menu Items in School Meals

This study examined school nutrition professionals' perceptions, best practices, and strategies for incorporating students' voices into school-based menu planning and modification. A literature review and qualitative expert panel responses informed the development of a national online survey. Findings identified multiple strategies and best practices used to incorporate student preferences into school nutrition programs. Results suggest that meaningful student engagement supports responsive menu development and may strengthen school nutrition program participation and acceptability. Additional research examining student selection, consumption, and acceptance of menu changes informed by student input is recommended.

Meeting the Challenges of Serving Scratch-Prepared Foods in School Nutrition Programs

This study identified challenges to offering scratch-prepared meals, assessed the national prevalence of these challenges, and identified strategies and best practices for overcoming barriers. A three-phase, mixed-methods approach was used, leading to a national survey administered to school nutrition professionals across the United States. Results indicated that most respondents prepared at least some food from scratch, though few reported primarily scratch-based operations. Major barriers included food and labor costs, procurement regulations, workforce skill gaps, recipe standardization challenges, and facility limitations. Respondents identified strategies related to workforce development, financial management, procurement practices, operational planning, infrastructure investment, policy improvements, and collaborative partnerships. Findings demonstrate broader implementation requires support through funding, training, operational resources, and policy reform.

FY 2025–2026 Publications & Presentations

Publications:

Lartey Gibson, M., Al Juboori, R., Peterson, J., Garmong, P., Fitzgerald, S., & Hall-Campbell, A. (2026). Evaluation of Popular Food Trends in K–12: Nutrition Analysis of Recipes and Daily Serving Patterns. *Nutrition Reviews 84*(Supplement_1) 89–96.

Lartey Gibson, M., Al Juboori, R., & Schaefer, S. (2025). Food trends of K–12 schools participating in the School Breakfast Program. *Journal of Child Nutrition Management, 49(2).* https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/JCNM-Fall-2025-Full-Issue.pdf

Presentations:

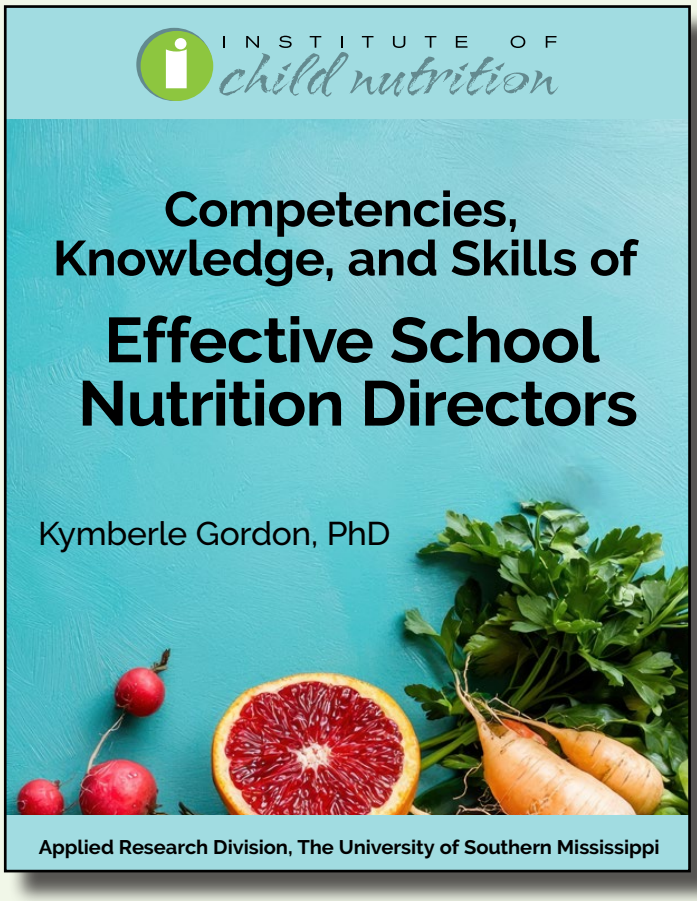
Al Juboori, R., Shahan, M., & Rushing, K. (2025, November). *Rapid Response Survey #3: Determining the Training Needs of Child Nutrition Professionals.* American Public Health Association 2025 Annual Meeting and Expo, Washington, D.C.

Landry, A. & Gibson Lartey, M. (2025, July). *School Food for Thought: The Truth Behind School Meals* (Season 4, Episode 9). [Video podcast episode]. In School Food for Thought: A Podcast by School Nutrition. https://schoolnutrition.org/resource/podcast-s4-ep9-fresh-perspectives-a-deep-dive-into-school-nutrition-research/

Lartey Gibson, M., Garmong, P., & Al Juboori, R. (2026, January). Back for Seconds: 2025–2026 Food Trends in K–12. [Conference presentation]. School Nutrition Industry Conference 2026 by the School Nutrition Association.

Lewis, K. (2026, June). The Courage to Pivot: Strategic Career Reinvention in School Nutrition. [Conference presentation]. Mississippi School Nutrition Association Nutrition Industry Conference.

Research Spotlight:
Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Directors

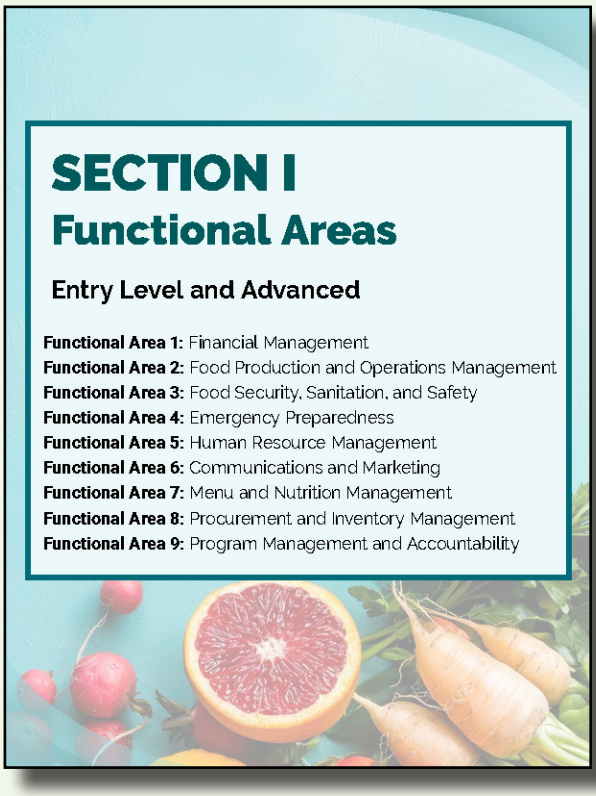


New Free Resource with Downloadable Templates!

The Institute of Child Nutrition's 2026 resource, *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Directors*, provides a research-based framework for identifying and developing the capabilities needed to manage district-wide school meal programs successfully. It is part of the Institute's Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills series, which has supported child nutrition professionals since 1995. Designed for school nutrition directors, supervisors, administrators, superintendents, and aspiring leaders, the resource establishes common expectations while recognizing that specific duties and requirements vary by state, district, and facility.

Section I: Functional Areas Entry Level and Advanced

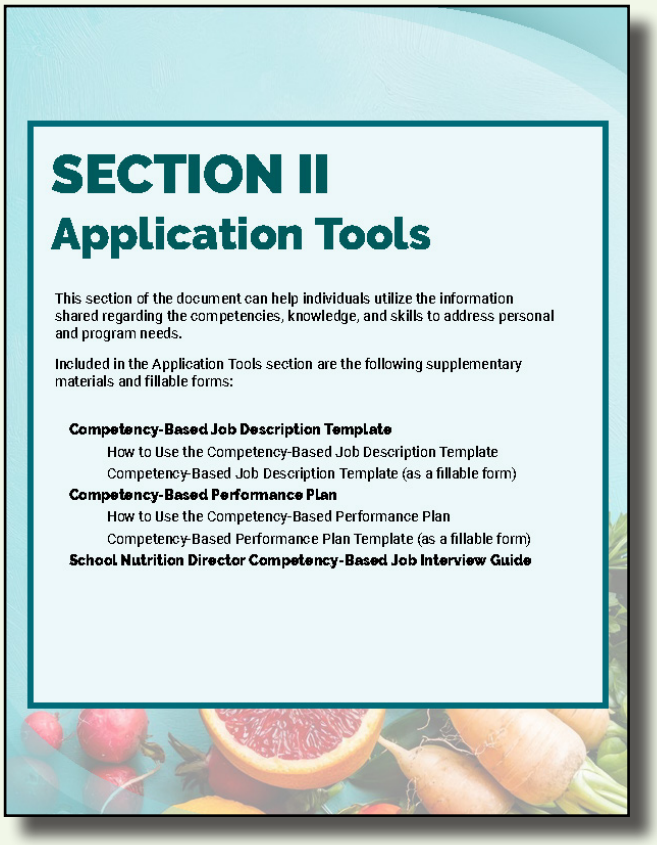
This section organizes directors' responsibilities into nine functional areas and identifies 19 competencies, 67 knowledge statements, and 147 skill statements. The knowledge and skills are classified as entry level or advanced, distinguishing the foundational capabilities directors should possess when hired from the more complex abilities developed through professional experience. This provides a comprehensive framework school districts can use to establish job expectations, assess performance, identify professional-development needs, and guide career advancement.



Research Spotlight:
Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Directors

Section II: Application Tools

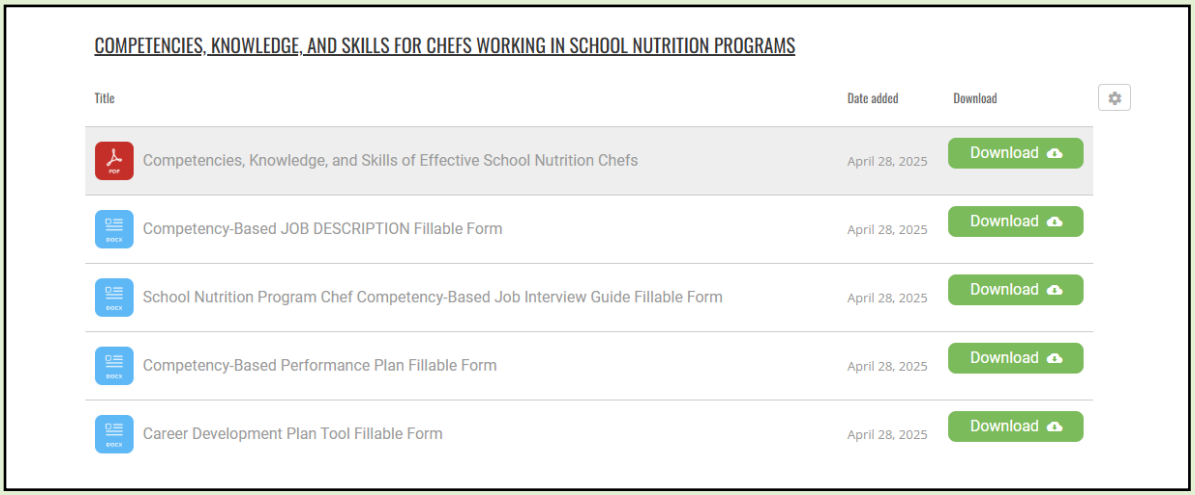
This section provides practical resources for applying the information presented in Section I to school nutrition leadership positions. It includes a *Competency-Based Job Description Template* that districts can use to establish position qualifications, credentials, and required competencies; a *Competency-Based Performance Plan Template* for evaluating directors using four proficiency levels—novice, developing, competent, and proficient—and setting performance and professional-growth goals; and a *School Nutrition Director Competency-Based Job Interview Guide* containing behavioral questions, suggested work samples, evaluation criteria, and scoring areas for each of the nine functional areas. Detailed instructions explain how to customize and use each tool according to district needs.



Download Your Free Copy Today!

Full versions of the job description and performance plan are also available as downloadable, customizable Microsoft Word templates, allowing districts to adapt them to their organizational structures, policies, and priorities.

https://theicn.org/research/





Featured Researcher: Dr. Jane Peterson

The following is an excerpt from an interview with Dr. Jane Peterson conducted by ARD's editor and research assistant, Shellie Hubbard.

Shellie Hubbard (ARD Editor): "Please tell us a little about your journey to working with ICN."

Dr. Jane Peterson: "While I was working as an assistant professor in the Nutrition department at USM, I became aware of The Institute of Child Nutrition, an institute that focused on supporting child nutrition programs. Successful child nutrition programs are needed to help support the health, well-being and success of children throughout the school day. As a dietitian and a researcher, I was drawn to the opportunities that I could help support child nutrition programs."

"**What are some of the current research projects or initiatives that you find particularly exciting or promising?**"

"There is growing interest in including locally sourced foods into school meals because it can support local communities while also exposing students to fresh, nutritious food options that align with healthy eating recommendations. My current work is exploring the challenges of serving local foods in rural school districts. This research aligns closely with the emphasis on scratch-prepared meals, as serving local foods often requires additional food preparation and culinary skills.

In rural districts, incorporating local foods often requires staff to work with fresh or minimally processed ingredients, adapt menus, and use scratch cooking techniques.

"This work builds on a previous project in which I identified culinary training and resource needs among school nutrition professionals. Together, these areas highlight the strong connection between local food procurement and culinary skills. In rural districts, incorporating local foods often requires staff to work with fresh or minimally processed ingredients, adapt menus, and use scratch cooking techniques.

"What excites me most is the opportunity to better understand these challenges and translate the findings into practical training and technical assistance resources. Ultimately, this research can help schools successfully incorporate local foods and scratch cooking while strengthening their nutrition programs overall."

Featured Researcher: Dr. Jane Peterson

"What are some of the areas or topics in nutrition research and education that you believe to be crucial or particularly relevant today?"

"The updated Dietary Guidelines for Americans highlight several areas that I believe will remain important in child nutrition research and education, particularly scratch-prepared meals and the increased use of whole, minimally processed foods in school nutrition programs. As programs move away from relying heavily on pre-prepared items, staff are increasingly expected to have skills in scratch cooking, menu adaptation, and working with fresh or minimally processed ingredients. Research will be needed to identify culinary training and resource needs that help school nutrition professionals successfully implement these changes."

"What do you find most rewarding about your work in the field of child nutrition?"

"What I find most rewarding is knowing that our research helps identify what resources, training and support can enable school nutrition program professionals implement strong child nutrition programs and better serve students. The way research is conducted, learning from school nutrition professionals from across the country is very important. Listening to them talk about their experiences, challenges, and successes provides a valuable perspective. Those interactions keep me motivated."

Listening to them talk about their experiences, challenges, and successes provides a valuable perspective. Those interactions keep me motivated.

"What advice would you give to aspiring researchers or educators in the field of nutrition?"

"I would suggest staying connected to the organizations that help shape school nutrition policy and program requirements. Understanding the broader policy environment including updates to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and changes to school nutrition program requirements can help ensure that research and educational efforts are relevant, and responsive to the needs of the field. Also, stay connected to school nutrition professionals and the day-to-day realities of school nutrition programs. Being aware of the priorities and challenges facing them can help ensure that research findings are relevant and useful to school nutrition professionals."

Being aware of the priorities and challenges facing them can help ensure that research findings are relevant and useful to school nutrition professionals.



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 15 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 20 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.



Karen Mullins attended Jones County Junior College in Ellisville, MS, and serves as the Research Administrator for the Applied Research Division. She oversees the daily office operations and is the primary financial manager for the division. Her previous experience includes working as a legal assistant and executive assistant before coming to The University of Southern Mississippi (USM). Karen has worked at USM for 20 years, 11 of those years include working for the Institute. During her career at USM, her roles have included financial and administrative management, contract and compliance administration, academic support, special project and grant support, liaison, graphic design and review, and stakeholder outreach.



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 twenty years ago as an editor and writer, then expanded her role to include graphic design. Recently she has incorporated AI tools for enhanced proofreading, copy editing, and asset production.

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

This project was funded using U.S. Department of Agriculture grant funds. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

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