



Insight

A Publication for Child Nutrition Professionals from the National Food Service Management Institute

Research-Based Competencies Identified as Important to Being a Successful School Nutrition Director

O School nutrition (SN) professionals are hired by school districts to oversee district-wide foodservice operations. Their responsibilities include planning, administering, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating all aspects of the SN program to ensure that school meals are nutritious, age-appropriate, appealing, and cost-effective. Depending on the size of the SN operation and the school district, district-level responsibilities may be divided into one or more district-level positions.

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V The environment in which SN programs operate is more complex and is changing at a faster pace than ever before. SN programs have evolved from small operations into multimillion dollar enterprises being run as businesses within the school setting. Since its inception, the

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National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD) has been in the forefront in identifying the competencies, knowledge, and skills needed by professionals working in the child nutrition arena. The initial work on identifying the competencies, knowledge, and skills for SN directors/supervisors was conducted in the mid-1990s and was revised in 2001.

OBJECTIVES

This research covers two separate projects. The purpose of the first project was to identify current competencies, knowledge, and skill statements needed by district-level SN professionals to effectively lead a nutrition-centered business in the school setting. The objective of the second project was to conduct a follow-up study to determine the importance of competencies to the role of SN directors as perceived by SN directors and district administrators.



Definitions Used to Guide the Process

SN directors/supervisors are the professional(s) who oversee all aspects of the district-wide SN program. This could be one or more district-level SN professionals.

Functional areas are the broad groupings or divisions of job responsibilities that are performed by directors/supervisors within the local SN operation. These categories serve as the umbrella for all job responsibilities that occur on a daily, weekly, seasonal, or yearly basis.

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, mental, and/or interpersonal tasks that are necessary for successful performance in a competency area.

STUDY I

- This first project was conducted in two phases, and SN professionals participated in both phases of the project.
- Phase I utilized an expert panel consisting of SN directors and state agency staff to bring about agreement on functional areas encompassing the job responsibilities of district-level SN professionals. Expert panel members also identified the knowledge and skill statements needed in each functional area and sorted the statements into competency categories. The findings from Phase I were used to develop a survey on the knowledge and skill statements.
- In Phase II, this survey was sent to a review panel of SN directors, district-level SN professional staff, state agency staff, and NFSMI staff. The objectives of this survey were to verify whether the knowledge and skill statements are important to the job responsibilities of an SN director/supervisor; to categorize the knowledge and skill statements into three distinct groups (essential, advanced, and just-in-time); and to confirm whether the competency statements are consistent with the supporting knowledge and skill statements.

Study I Results

- Ten functional areas were identified that encompass the job responsibilities of district-level SN professionals: Facilities and Equipment Management; Financial Management; Food Production and Operation Management; Food Security, Sanitation, and Safety; Human Resource Management; Marketing and Communication; Menu and Nutrition Management; Procurement and Inventory Management; Program Management and Accountability; and Technology and Information Systems.
- In addition to these functional areas, 23 competencies, 128 knowledge statements, and 187 skill statements were confirmed by the Phase II review panel.

STUDY II

- Building on the findings from the prior study, a second study was conducted to determine the importance of competencies for an SN director as perceived by SN directors and district administrators.
- For this study, a survey was developed that asked SN directors and district administrators to rate the importance of the 23 competencies to being a successful SN director using a 4-point scale, 4 (*extremely important*) to 1 (*not important*).
- Surveys were mailed to random samples of 700 SN directors and 700 district administrators stratified by USDA region.
- Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics and t-tests.
- Sub-scores were computed for each of the 10 functional areas using the supporting competency statements.

Study II Results

- Survey respondents included 352 SN directors (50%) and 274 district administrators (39%).
- More than one-third of SN directors reported their direct supervisor was the superintendent (35.6%), while 25.4% indicated the business administrator.
- Administrators (44.2%) described their job titles as superintendent, business administrator (25.4%), or assistant superintendent (15.3%).
- SN directors rated all competencies 3.0 or greater, and administrators rated 20 of the 23 competencies 3.0 or greater. This indicates a high level of agreement that the competencies are important to the success of SN directors.
- "Establishes policies and procedures to ensure food is prepared and served in a sanitary and safe environment" was rated the most important competency by both groups.

- Competencies with the lowest mean ratings by SN directors and district administrators were similar and included “develops a systematic approach for marketing the school nutrition program” and “establishes a communication infrastructure with stakeholders to promote the school nutrition program.”
- The functional areas with the highest mean ratings from both groups were food production and operation management and financial management.
- T-tests were used to assess differences in functional area sub-scores based on participants’ job titles. Three functional areas demonstrated significance: 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 the district administrators.

IMPORTANCE OF COMPETENCIES FOR SUCCESSFUL SN DIRECTORS Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations for Functional Area Sub-Scores		
FUNCTIONAL AREA	SN DIRECTORS^{abc} MEAN ± SD	DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS^{ad} MEAN ± SD
Food Production and Operation Management	3.79 ± 0.35	3.74 ± 0.41
Financial Management	3.79 ± 0.41	3.71 ± 0.45
Food Security, Sanitation, and Safety	3.66 ± 0.36	3.60 ± 0.40
Program Management and Accountability*	3.65 ± 0.46	3.52 ± 0.53
Menu and Nutrition Management	3.64 ± 0.46	3.58 ± 0.51
Procurement and Inventory Management	3.52 ± 0.53	3.41 ± 0.57
Facilities and Equipment Management	3.38 ± 0.55	3.35 ± 0.55
Human Resource Management	3.33 ± 0.55	3.12 ± 0.59
Technology and Information Systems*	3.23 ± 0.72	2.94 ± 0.87
Marketing and Communication*	3.18 ± 0.66	2.90 ± 0.73

^aScale = 4 (extremely important) to 1 (not important)

^bFunctional area mean scores presented in descending order based on SN directors’ responses

^cN varies from 335 to 346

^dN varies from 267 to 272

*P<.005

Functional Areas and Competencies

Functional Area

Competency

Facilities and Equipment Management

- Provides leadership in designing and planning facilities that support the operational goals of the SN program
- Develops guidelines for selecting and maintaining equipment to accomplish the operational goals of the SN program
- Establishes an environmentally responsible SN program

Financial Management

- Develops financial management guidelines that support SN program operational goals and comply with regulations
- Establishes cost-control goals to effectively manage the SN program

Food Production and Operation Management

- Develops a management system to ensure high standards for quality food production
- Establishes operational systems for managing food production and service

Food Security, Sanitation, and Safety

- Establishes policies and procedures to ensure food is prepared and served in a sanitary and safe environment
- Provides leadership in creating a safe work environment for SN operations
- Develops a systematic approach to address emergency and disaster situations

Human Resource Management

- Establishes a human resource infrastructure for the SN program that complies with school district policies as well as federal, state, and local regulations
- Develops and implements a process for recruiting, hiring, retaining, and promoting qualified SN staff in compliance with school district's written procedures and labor laws
- Designs a comprehensive, needs-based training infrastructure that enhances learning and improves job skills

Marketing and Communication

- Develops a systematic approach for marketing the SN program
- Develops a customer service infrastructure to promote the SN program
- Establishes a communication infrastructure with stakeholders to promote the SN program

Menu and Nutrition Management

- Develops guidelines for planning menus that comply with nutrition objectives and support operational goals of the SN program
- Provides leadership to support the nutrition and wellness initiatives within the school district

Procurement and Inventory Management

- Develops procurement guidelines that comply with established regulations and support operational goals of the SN program
- Establishes operational procedures to effectively manage receiving and inventory systems

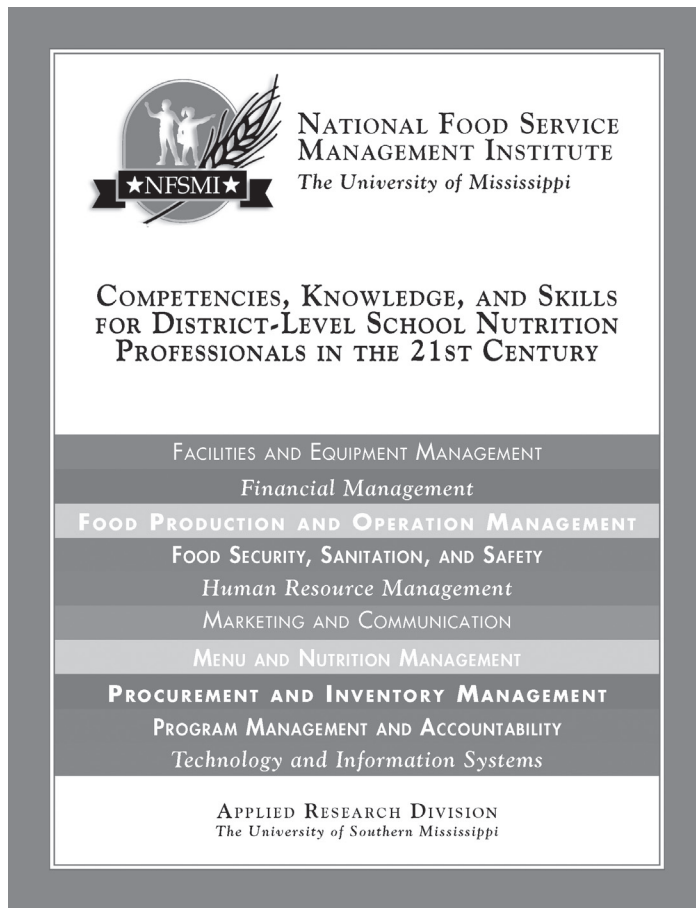
Program Management and Accountability

- Provides leadership to position the SN program as an integral component of the school district
- Establishes a system to ensure nutritional, financial, and regulatory accountability of the SN program

Technology and Information Systems

- Establishes a comprehensive technology infrastructure to achieve the operational goals of the SN program

PRACTICAL USE OF THIS INFORMATION



- The resource, *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills for District-Level School Nutrition Professionals in the 21st Century*, is available as a free download in PDF format from the NFSMI Web site: <http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=284>. Included in this resource is a summary of the research, all of the knowledge and skill statements, and a sample job description template.
- Research-based competencies are important to the foundational success of SN directors. Those seeking careers as SN directors should possess knowledge and skills related to the competencies.
- These competencies can serve as the framework for professional development, mentoring, and other succession planning activities to prepare SN professionals for district-level responsibilities.
- The functional areas, competencies, knowledge, and skills identified in this project provide a clear picture of the role of SN professionals at the district level.
- Job requirements for SN directors differ from state to state and often from school district to school district. School district administrators can use the knowledge and skill statements and the sample job description template in preparing job descriptions for SN directors. The information can also serve as a framework for district administrators to identify the criteria for evaluating an effective SN director.
- SN directors can use this information to advance their knowledge and skills while improving their SN programs.
- The competencies, knowledge, and skills identified in this project can provide the foundation, when needed, to design other district-level SN positions and prepare job descriptions. In addition, SN directors can use this information when identifying staff members who demonstrate the potential to advance within the SN program.
- The competencies, knowledge, and skills framework can provide the basis for mentoring and other succession planning activities to prepare SN professionals for district-level responsibilities.

For More Information

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GY 2007 Project 3
GY 2008 Project 6

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