



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

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

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Improve the operation of child nutrition programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination.

VISION

Lead the nation in providing research, education, and resources to promote excellence in child nutrition programs.

MISSION

Provide relevant research-based information and services that advance the continuous improvement of child nutrition programs.

Institute of Child Nutrition

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COMPETENCIES, KNOWLEDGE, AND SKILLS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAM DIRECTORS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School nutrition program directors play a critical role in ensuring that school meal programs operate effectively, efficiently, and in compliance with federal, state, and local regulations. These professionals are responsible for planning, administering, and evaluating complex school foodservice operations that provide safe, nutritious, and appealing meals to students across all participating schools within a school food authority (SFA). Clearly defined competencies, knowledge, and skills (CKS) are essential to support school nutrition program directors in fulfilling these responsibilities, establishing performance expectations, guiding professional development, and strengthening leadership capacity.

The Institute of Child Nutrition’s Applied Research Division (ICN ARD) has a longstanding history of developing research-based CKS resources to support child nutrition professionals across the workforce. These resources are periodically updated through research that examines evolving job responsibilities and informs the development of revised competency frameworks for specific professional roles. The most recent CKS resource developed for school nutrition program directors was published in 2010. Since that time, school meal programs have experienced substantial changes related to regulatory requirements, operational complexity, workforce challenges, and leadership demands. The time elapsed since its publication, along with these evolving programmatic demands, highlights the need to update the CKS resource for school nutrition program directors to reflect current professional practice.

The purpose of this research was to identify and validate the competencies, knowledge, and skills required for effective school nutrition program directors in today’s school meal program environment. Using a multi-phase, mixed-methods approach, ICN ARD researchers engaged subject matter experts (SMEs) to:

The objectives of this study were to:

- Evaluate the relevance, clarity, and applicability of the existing CKS statements;
- Identify and update functional areas, competencies, and knowledge and skill statements; and
- Confirm the placement of statements within their respective competencies and functional areas; and
- Validate the revised CKS framework.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, expert work group discussions, electronic review panels, and structured resource assessments conducted with SMEs.

The updated CKS framework is organized into nine functional areas that reflect the full scope of district-level school nutrition leadership: Financial Management; Food Production and Operations Management; Food Security, Sanitation, and Safety; Emergency Preparedness; Human Resource Management; Marketing and Communication; Menu and Nutrition Management; Procurement and Inventory Management; and Program Management and Accountability. Across these functional areas,

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19 competencies were confirmed and supported by 214 aligned knowledge and skill statements. Each statement was assigned an entry-level or advanced-level categorization, indicating the stage at which a school nutrition professional would typically be expected to demonstrate the identified knowledge or skill.

In addition to the competency framework, the resource incorporates practical tools designed to support workforce development, professional growth, and performance evaluation. Collectively, the *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Program Directors* resource serves as a current, evidence-based guide for school nutrition professionals, administrators, and stakeholders seeking to strengthen leadership and operational effectiveness within school meal programs.

The functional areas, competencies, knowledge, and skills identified through this project provide a comprehensive picture of the role of school nutrition program directors. Because job requirements may vary across states and school districts, the CKS framework offers a flexible structure that can be adapted to local contexts. School district administrators may use the knowledge and skill statements and accompanying job description templates when developing or revising position descriptions for school nutrition program directors. The framework may also serve as a reference for evaluating director performance and identifying professional development priorities.

School nutrition program directors may use the CKS framework to guide their own professional growth, strengthen program operations, and support continuous improvement. Additionally, the competencies, knowledge, and skills identified in this project can inform the development of other district-level child nutrition positions and assist in identifying emerging leaders within school nutrition programs. The CKS framework may also serve as a foundation for mentoring, leadership development, and succession planning efforts designed to prepare future school nutrition professionals for district-level responsibilities.

INTRODUCTION

School nutrition programs provide meals to millions of students across the United States and operate within a complex framework of federal, state, and local policies and regulations. Since the enactment of the National School Lunch Act of 1946, standards for program administration, oversight, and accountability have guided efforts to ensure students have access to safe and nutritious meals through federal child nutrition programs.

At the federal level, The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) establishes national nutrition standards for school meals, sets professional standards for school nutrition professionals, provides funding to State agencies, and oversees the administration of school meal programs. At the state level, State agencies provide guidance and training to local school districts, administer program policy and funding, and monitor compliance with federal and state requirements. At the local level, school nutrition program directors plan, administer, and evaluate district-wide school meal programs, manage day-to-day operations, and ensure alignment with applicable regulations and policies.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Institute of Child Nutrition's Applied Research Division (ICN ARD) initiated the development of research-based Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills (CKS) resources to support professionals serving in diverse roles within child nutrition programs. These resources identify the competencies, knowledge, and skills required for effective job performance and serve as a foundation for workforce development, professional training, and leadership preparation. The CKS series represents ICN ARD's signature research-based resources and has expanded over time to include role-specific frameworks for a wide range of child nutrition positions. These include CKS resources for school nutrition managers (Institute of Child Nutrition, 2018; Cater & Carr, 2017; Cater & Carr, 2007; Cater & Carr, 2004), assistants and technicians (Rushing & Rainville, 2022; Nettles et al., 2006), executive chefs (Lartey Gibson et al., 2025), State agency child nutrition professionals (Cross & Nettles, 2013), child care providers participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (Lartey-Rowser, 2015), and district-level school nutrition professionals and directors (Nettles & Aspirin, 2010; Carr, 2001; National Food Service Management Institute [NFSMI], 1996). Periodic review and revision of these resources are necessary to ensure their continued relevance as policies, program operations, and professional expectations evolve.

The most recent CKS resource for school nutrition program directors, *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills for District-level School Nutrition Professionals in the 21st Century*, was published in 2010. The resource provided a comprehensive depiction of the roles and responsibilities of school nutrition directors at the time of its publication. Since 2010, school meal programs have experienced significant regulatory and operational changes, including the implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, updates to meal pattern requirements, and increased adoption of universal free meal service models (Billings, 2025; Congressional Research Service, 2024; Vaudrin, 2018). In addition, evolving expectations related to accountability, performance management, and leadership capacity have increased the complexity of district-level school nutrition administration (Poovathingal & Kumar, 2018). Collectively, these changes have expanded the scope and demands of the school nutrition director's role and highlight the need to reassess the competencies, knowledge, and skills required for effective administration of school meal programs.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this research was to review, update, and validate the current competencies, knowledge, and skills needed by school nutrition program directors to effectively operate school meal programs. The specific objective of this project was to develop an evidence-based competency framework to update the CKS resource for school nutrition directors published in 2010. The researcher accomplished these objectives by:

- Confirming the functional areas that encompass the responsibilities of school nutrition program directors;
- Confirming the knowledge and skill statements placed within each functional area, and developing corresponding competency statements;
- Validating the CKS statements; and
- Developing a CKS resource for school nutrition program directors with the following sections:
 - Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Program Directors
 - How to Utilize the Resource
 - Application Tools

The following definitions were used to guide the development and organization of the CKS statements included in this resource:

School Nutrition Program Director(s): The district-level professional(s) responsible for overseeing and managing the daily operation of school meal programs across all school sites within a school food authority (SFA).

Functional Areas: Broad groupings of responsibilities that represent the major operational components of school nutrition program administration. Functional areas organize related knowledge and skill statements that reflect the duties performed by school nutrition directors on a daily, weekly, seasonal, or annual basis.

Competencies: Broad capabilities that integrate knowledge, skills, and professional behaviors required for effective job performance within a specific functional area.

Knowledge: The information, concepts, principles, and regulatory understanding that school nutrition professionals must comprehend to effectively perform their job responsibilities.

Skills: The practical abilities required to apply knowledge and perform specific tasks, activities, and problem-solving processes necessary for successful job performance.

Experience-Level Categorization: A classification used in this resource to indicate the stage in a school nutrition program director's career at which the associated knowledge or skill would typically be expected to be demonstrated. The experience level categorizations are not intended to represent separate job classifications, but rather developmental expectations that may guide hiring, onboarding, and professional development.

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Entry-Level: Indicates foundational knowledge and skills considered essential for effective job performance at the time of hire or early in the role. Entry-level expectations reflect a basic understanding of program operations and regulatory requirements, with continued development supported through experience, training, and professional guidance.

Advanced-Level: Indicates knowledge and skills typically developed through professional experience, ongoing professional development, and expanded leadership responsibilities. Advanced-level expectations reflect the ability to apply deeper program knowledge to decision-making, problem-solving, program oversight, and staff leadership.

METHODOLOGY

Research Overview

This research was conducted using a four-phase design to systematically review, revise, and validate the competencies, knowledge, and skills needed for school nutrition program directors to effectively operate school meal programs. Each phase built upon findings from the previous phase to ensure that the updated framework was grounded in professional practice and expert consensus.

Informed Consent

The study followed informed consent procedures established by The University of Southern Mississippi's Human Subjects Protection Review Committee. All recruitment materials and correspondence included a confidentiality statement, an informational sheet, a consent form, and contact information for the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee at The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi. For each phase of the study, participants indicated their consent electronically prior to participation. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at The University of Southern Mississippi.

Recruitment Methods and Procedures

All four phases of the project utilized a list of contacts provided by State agency directors. At the beginning of the study, State agency directors were contacted via email and asked to provide recommendations of district-level school nutrition professionals who operate exemplary school meal programs. The criteria for recommended participants included:

- **District-level school nutrition professionals**, individual(s) who oversee all aspects of the district-wide foodservice operation. Depending on the size of the school meal program and the school district, this could be one or more district-level professionals.
- **Exemplary**, based on participation rate, financial status, and USDA-documented compliance.
- **Diverse sample of school districts**, based on student enrollment size, socioeconomic status (% of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals), and locale (rural, suburban, and urban).

Phase I: Exploration of Roles and Functional Areas

Phase I was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and job expectations of school nutrition program directors. A convenience sample of eight school nutrition program directors participated in this phase through semi-structured interviews and an electronic review panel. Potential participants were recommended by State agency directors based on demonstrated program excellence, including participation levels, financial performance, and regulatory compliance.

Data collected during Phase I indicated strong consistency across participants regarding core responsibilities, despite variation in district size and geographic region. Findings confirmed alignment

with functional areas identified in the *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills for District-Level School Nutrition Professionals in the 21st Century* resource published in 2010, while also highlighting emerging areas of emphasis, including systems-level leadership, cross-departmental collaboration, data-informed decision-making, and oversight of nutrition and wellness initiatives. Results from Phase I informed the development of Phase II work group documents, including draft competency, knowledge, and skill statements.

Knowledge and Skill Statements.

The researchers drafted knowledge and skill statements using the earlier research from Nettles and Carr (2010) on CKS for district-level school nutrition professionals; a review of USDA, School Nutrition Association, and ICN websites; and current job descriptions for school nutrition directors and district-level school nutrition professionals. The researcher requested that potential participants include job descriptions from their district when providing email consent to participate in the study. Additional job descriptions were also obtained from publicly available school district websites. In total, 48 job descriptions representing 33 school districts were analyzed. The responsibilities listed in the job descriptions were reviewed and organized into similar themes. Based on this analysis, 274 knowledge and skill statements were drafted.

Phase II: Expert Work Group

Face-To-Face Work Group.

Phase II engaged subject matter experts (SMEs) in a two-day face-to-face work group conducted at The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg campus, as well as an electronic review panel. This phase was intentionally designed to support extended, iterative discussion and real-time consensus building related to the wording, placement, and organization of competency, knowledge, and skill statements. The duration and in-person format of the work group reflect the complexity of the task and are consistent with prior CKS development efforts, in which sustained deliberation is required to reach agreement at the statement level.

A large event space was reserved to accommodate collaborative work, movement-based activities, and visual organization of materials. Prior to arrival, participants completed a demographic questionnaire that collected information such as years of experience, school district locale, enrollment size, and USDA region. These data were used to assign participants to small working groups in a manner that balanced professional experience and program characteristics to the extent possible within a convenience sample.

Upon arrival, participants were assigned to one of two color-designated working groups and seated at corresponding tables. Each table was provided with a color-coded supply box containing note-taking materials, paper packets, and cardstock rectangles used to document revised statements. During the work sessions, participants reviewed each draft statement and collaboratively refined wording to reflect group consensus. Once agreement was reached on the final wording of a statement, participants recorded the polished version on a cardstock rectangle.

Each finalized statement, organized by functional area, was placed on wall space, prepared in advance by the research team. This visual approach allowed participants to propose and examine the placement of statements within functional areas and to compare decisions across groups. Following group-level placement, the research team facilitated a whole-group review in which each statement was examined collectively. Statements were compared across groups to identify alignment in wording and placement, and any discrepancies were discussed until full consensus was achieved.

Finalized statements and placement decisions were documented by the research team and research assistants in a master working document to preserve an accurate record of all revisions made during the work group. This master document served as the authoritative source for subsequent electronic review and validation activities and was used to generate the draft CKS resource evaluated in later phases of the study. Feedback from the expert work group informed refinements to the framework prior to quantitative validation.

Electronic Review Panel.

The drafted functional areas and knowledge and skill statements developed during the face-to-face expert work group were compiled into a formatted document and distributed electronically to the twelve participants, inviting them to participate in the subsequent phase of the work group, the electronic review panel. The purpose of the electronic review panel was to provide participants with an opportunity to evaluate and confirm the decisions made during the face-to-face work group. In addition to confirming the wording of the knowledge and skill statements, panel members were asked to evaluate the placement of each statement within the appropriate functional area and determine the appropriate experience-level categorization.

Electronic review panel members were asked to assign each knowledge and skill statement to one of two experience-level categories: entry level or advanced level. These categories were established during the face-to-face expert work group. During that discussion, participants considered several potential experience classifications, including entry level (beginner, at hire, or basic), mid-level (intermediate), and advanced level (expert or career-level). Ultimately, the group determined that two categories, entry level and advanced level, best reflected the level of professional experience required for each knowledge and skill statement.

Experience-level categorization indicates the stage at which a school nutrition professional would typically be expected to possess the identified knowledge or skill. Entry-level statements represent foundational knowledge and skills essential for administering a school nutrition program and are expected to be possessed at the time of hire or early in the role. Advanced-level statements represent knowledge and skills typically developed through professional experience in child nutrition programs, continued professional development, and expanded leadership responsibilities.

When applying the CKS resource for workforce development or hiring, entry-level categorizations may serve as a baseline for identifying the essential knowledge and skills expected of candidates, while advanced-level statements can inform ongoing professional development and leadership growth within the profession.

Phase III: Electronic Validation Review

Phase III consisted of an electronic review panel of nine district-level school nutrition professionals. Participants independently reviewed the revised competencies, knowledge statements, and skill statements and provided feedback regarding clarity, relevance, placement, and experience-level categorization. Responses were analyzed to determine levels of agreement and to inform final refinements to the CKS framework.

Phase IV: Resource Assessment

Phase IV focused on evaluating the usability and clarity of the revised CKS resource and associated competency-based tools. Subject matter experts completed a structured resource assessment addressing understandability and actionability. Reviewers evaluated the resource's organization, language, layout, visual design, and practical applicability. Ratings and qualitative feedback were used to guide final revisions to enhance the overall effectiveness of the resource.

Data Analysis

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to support a comprehensive review, revision, and validation of the *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Program Directors*. Phase I utilized qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with school nutrition program directors and a systematic review of relevant literature and school district job descriptions, to explore current roles, responsibilities, and emerging professional demands. Findings from this qualitative phase informed the development and refinement of functional areas and draft competency, knowledge, and skill statements.

Quantitative methods were applied in subsequent phases of the study to validate and refine the revised CKS framework. Electronic review panels and structured assessments were used to evaluate the clarity, relevance, placement, and experience-level categorization of competency, knowledge, and skill statements. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to assess levels of agreement, perceived importance, and categorization consistency across expert reviewers. The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods strengthened the rigor of the study and ensured that the final CKS framework reflects both professional practice and expert consensus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings from each phase of the study used to review, update, and validate the *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Program Directors*. Results are organized by study phase and include the validation of functional areas, competency statements, and associated knowledge and skill statements, including experience-level categorizations and perceived importance ratings.

Phase I: Identification of Functional Areas and Emerging Responsibilities

Recruitment (All Phases)

District-level school nutrition professionals were identified and recommended to the ICN ARD by their respective State agency child nutrition directors based on demonstrated program excellence, including strong participation levels, financial stability, and documented compliance with USDA program requirements. Recruitment for all phases of the study relied on these State agency recommendations.

Participation in each phase of the study depended on both the recommendations provided by State agencies and the availability of the recommended individuals to participate in one or more phases of the research. Although State agencies were contacted nationwide, the response rate was lower and less geographically diverse than anticipated, which limited the overall recruitment pool.

The list below summarizes recruitment information by USDA region, including the number of states within each region that responded to the recruitment request and the number of participant recommendations provided by State agencies.

- **WRO:** 2 states responding, 10 participant recommendations
- **NERO:** 1 state responding, 5 participant recommendations
- **MWRO:** 3 states responding, 15 participant recommendations
- **SWRO:** 3 states responding, 18 participant recommendations
- **SERO:** 4 states responding, 14 participant recommendations
- **MARO:** 1 state responding, 6 participant recommendations
- **MPRO:** 2 states responding, 17 participant recommendations

Participation

Tables in this section present selected professional and program characteristics of participants across study phases to provide context for interpretation of the validation results.

A convenience sample of eight district-level school nutrition program directors participated in Phase I of this research project. Four participants took part only in the semi-structured interviews, five participated only in the electronic review panel, and three participated in both activities. All participants held current district-level school nutrition director positions and had at least six years of experience in school nutrition.

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Participants represented five of the seven USDA geographic regions, including the Mountain Plains, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, and Western regions. The professional and program characteristics of Phase I participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Professional and Program Characteristics of Phase I Participants (n=8)

Demographic Questions	Frequency	%
Which statement best describes your position?		
School Nutrition Director	5	62.5
Director of Child Nutrition Program	1	12.5
Foodservice Director	2	25.0
What is the student enrollment in your school district?		
≤ 1,999	4	50.0
2,000–29,999	2	25.0
≥30,000	2	25.0
In which USDA region do you work/serve/live?		
Mountain Plains	2	25.0
Midwest	1	12.5
Southeast	3	37.5
Southwest	1	12.5
Northeast	0	0
Mid-Atlantic	0	0
Western	1	12.5
What percentage of students in your school district are approved for free and reduced-price meals?		
0–19%	0	0
20–39%	2	25.0
40–59%	4	50.0
60–70%	2	25.0
>80%	0	0
How many years of experience do you have in school nutrition?		
0–5 years	0	0
6–10 years	1	12.5
11–15 years	4	50.0
16–20 years	1	12.5
More than 20 years	2	25.0

Results from Phase I provided foundational insights into the scope and complexity of the school nutrition program director role. Across semi-structured interviews and the electronic review panel, participants demonstrated strong consensus regarding core responsibilities, including regulatory compliance, financial oversight, production and operations management, human resource management, and stakeholder engagement. These findings confirmed the continued relevance of functional areas identified in the 2010 CKS resource.

In addition to confirming existing functional areas, Phase I results highlighted the expansion of director responsibilities over time. Participants emphasized increased expectations related to systems-level leadership, cross-departmental collaboration, data-informed decision-making, oversight of nutrition and wellness initiatives, and accountability for program outcomes. All Phase I participants had more than five years of experience in school nutrition, with many reporting over a decade of professional experience. Their extensive experience in the field provides important context for the observation that expectations for school nutrition directors have expanded over time.

Phase II: Expert Panel Work Group Refinement of Draft Framework

Participation

A convenience sample of twelve school nutrition professionals participated in Phase II of the research project through a face-to-face, two-day expert panel work group meeting. Eleven of the twelve participants (91.6%) identified their primary role as school nutrition director or assistant director, and one participant (8.3%) identified their role as school nutrition supervisor/management.

Five of the seven USDA geographic regions were represented, including the Mountain Plains, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, and Northeast regions. Participants represented a range of district sizes and levels of experience in school nutrition. Professional and program characteristics of Phase II participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2*Phase II Participants' (n=12) Professional and Program Characteristics*

Demographic Questions	Frequency (n)	Percentage %
Which statement best describes your position?		
School nutrition director/assistant director	11	91.6
School nutrition supervisor/management	1	8.3
What is the student enrollment in your school district?		
≤ 2,500	4	33.3
2500–9,999	4	33.3
≥10,000	4	33.3
Not applicable		
In which USDA region do you work/serve/live?		
Mountain Plains	1	8.3
Midwest	2	16.7
Southeast	5	41.6
Southwest	3	25.0
Northeast	1	8.3
Mid-Atlantic	0	0.0
Western	0	0.0
What percentage of students in your school district are approved for free and reduced-priced meals?		
<25%	1	8.3
25.1–50%	4	33.3
50.1–75%	2	16.7
>75%	4	33.3
Not applicable		
How many years of experience do you have in school nutrition?		
0–5 years	0	0.0
6–10 years	3	33.3
11–15 years	7	58.3
16–20 years	1	8.3
More than 20 years	1	8.3

During Phase II, expert panel members reviewed draft functional areas and associated knowledge and skill statements for clarity, relevance, and alignment with current professional practice. Facilitated discussion revealed strong agreement regarding the overall structure of the framework and the appropriateness of the proposed functional areas.

Functional Areas

The face-to-face expert work group began with ten functional areas: 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. At the conclusion of the work group, there were nine functional areas: Financial Management, Food production and Operations Management, Food Security, Sanitation, and Safety, Emergency Preparedness, Human Resource Management, Marketing and Communication, Menu and Nutrition Management, Procurement and Inventory Management, and Program Management and Accountability.

Facilities and Equipment Management and Technology and Information Systems were consolidated into other functional areas during the expert work group discussions. Participants indicated that responsibilities related to facilities, equipment oversight, and technology systems were more appropriately integrated within Production and Operations Management, Procurement and Inventory Management, and Program Management and Accountability.

Knowledge and Skill Statements

The face-to-face expert work group began with 274 knowledge and skill statements for the participants to review and make determinations as to whether each should be retained, modified, or excluded. Over the two-day period, they came to consensus on deleting 48 statements, modifying 62, and adding 1: resulting in a final count of 214 draft knowledge and skill statements. At the conclusion of the expert work group, there were nine functional areas and 214 knowledge and skill statements.

Post-Work Group Electronic Review Panel

The work completed during the face-to-face expert work group was evaluated and confirmed through an electronic review panel consisting of 9 of the 12 original work group participants. During this electronic review, in addition to confirming the decisions made during the work group, the participants were also asked to categorize the knowledge and skill statements into the experience-level category they felt was most appropriate.

Review panel feedback resulted in minor refinement of statement wording to improve clarity and consistency, consolidation of overlapping statements, and adjustment of statement placement within functional areas. Participants also identified distinctions between foundational expectations and higher-level leadership responsibilities, which informed preliminary experience-level categorizations.

The Phase II expert panel work group's face-to-face and electronic review resulted in substantive refinement of functional areas and statement placement, as expert panel members reached consensus on final wording and organization through structured deliberation, in-person and electronically. Results from Phase II established content validity and provided a refined framework for quantitative validation.

Phase III: Quantitative Validation of Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills

Participants

A convenience sample of nine district-level school nutrition professionals participated in the electronic review panel. Participants included six school nutrition directors/administrators (n=6, 66%), one district foodservice director (n=1, 11%), one school nutrition services supervisor (n=1, 11%), and one assistant foodservice director (n=1, 11%). Five of the seven USDA geographic regions were represented in this phase: Mountain Plains, Midwest, Southeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Western.

Experience Level Categorization

Phase III expert review panel members reviewed the knowledge and skill statements for each of the nine functional areas and confirmed their agreement with the categorization of each statement as either entry level or advanced level. Final placement of each statement was determined based on the category receiving the highest percentage of responses from panel members. The percentage agreement for each categorization is presented in the functional area tables.

Competencies

The review panel also evaluated the competency statements associated with each functional area. Participants indicated their level of agreement with three statements regarding each competency: (1) the competency statement is appropriate for the functional area, (2) the competency statement accurately reflects the associated knowledge and skill statements, and (3) the competency statement is clearly worded.

Phase III electronic review panel results demonstrated high levels of agreement regarding the appropriateness and clarity of the revised competency statements across all functional areas. For each competency, respondents indicated agreement or strong agreement across the three evaluation statements. Mean agreement ratings exceeded 3.44 on a 4.0 scale for all competency statements. Competency evaluation results across all functional areas are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Competency Evaluation Results: Mean Agreement Ratings and Standard Deviations (4-Point Scale)

Functional Area	“The competency statement is appropriate for this functional area.”		“The competency statement accurately reflects the listed knowledge and skills statements.”		“The competency statement is clearly worded.”	
	N	M ± SD	N	M ± SD	N	M ± SD
Financial Management						
Competency 1.1: Develops and oversees a financial management system that supports school meal program operations and ensures alignment with program goals and regulatory requirements.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52
Competency 1.2: Establishes cost control goals to effectively manage the school meal program.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.77 ± 0.44
Production and Operations Management						
Competency 2.1: Develops a management system that upholds high standards for quality food production.	9	3.77 ± 0.44	9	3.66 ± 0.50	9	3.55 ± 0.52
Competency 2.2: Develops and implements operational systems that ensure effective management of food production and service.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.72
Food Security, Sanitation, and Safety						
Competency 3.1: Establishes policies and procedures to ensure food is prepared and served in a sanitary and safe environment.	9	3.66 ± 0.5	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.66 ± 0.50
Competency 3.2: Provides leadership in creating safe work environments for school meal program operations.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.66 ± 0.50
Emergency Preparedness						
Competency 4.1: Develops a systematic approach to address emergency and disaster situations.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.66 ± 0.50

Note. N = number of expert panelists responding to each competency evaluation item. Ratings were measured on a 4-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree).

Table 3 continues

(Table 3 continued)

Competency Evaluation Results: Mean Agreement Ratings and Standard Deviations (4-Point Scale)

Functional Area	“The competency statement is appropriate for this functional area.”		“The competency statement accurately reflects the listed knowledge and skills statements.”		“The competency statement is clearly worded.”	
	N	M ± SD	N	M ± SD	N	M ± SD
Human Resource Management						
Competency 5.1: Establishes a human resource infrastructure for the school meal program that complies with school district policies as well as federal, state, and local regulations.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52
Competency 5.2: Develops and implements a process for recruiting, hiring, retaining, and promoting qualified school nutrition staff in compliance with the school district’s written procedures and labor laws.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52
Competency 5.3: Designs a comprehensive needs-based training infrastructure that enhances learning and improves job skills.	9	3.66 ± 0.50	9	3.66 ± 0.50	9	3.44 ± 0.52
Marketing and Communications						
Competency 6.1: Works collaboratively and effectively within and outside the school meal program to achieve program- related goals.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52
Competency 6.2: Develops and implements customer-oriented approaches to achieve and maintain quality service and engagement.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52
Competency 6.3: Actively promotes the school meal program to internal and external stakeholders.	9	3.44 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52
Menu and Nutrition Management						
Competency 7.1: Develops guidelines for planning menus that comply with nutrition objectives and support operational goals of the school meal program.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52
Competency 7.2: Provides leadership to support the nutrition and wellness initiatives within the school district.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52

Note. N = number of expert panelists responding to each competency evaluation item. Ratings were measured on a 4-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree).

Table 3 continues

(Table 3 continued)

Competency Evaluation Results: Mean Agreement Ratings and Standard Deviations (4–Point Scale)

Functional Area	“The competency statement is appropriate for this functional area.”		“The competency statement accurately reflects the listed knowledge and skills statements.”		“The competency statement is clearly worded.”	
	N	M ± SD	N	M ± SD	N	M ± SD
Procurement and Inventory Management						
Competency 8.1: Develops procurement guidelines that comply with established regulations and support operational goals of the school meal program.	9	3.44 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52	9	3.44 ± 0.52
Competency 8.2: Establishes operational procedures to effectively manage receiving and inventory systems.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.66 ± 0.5
Program Management and Accountability						
Competency 9.1: Establishes a system to ensure nutritional, financial, and regulatory accountability of the school meal program.	9	3.66 ± 0.50	9	3.66 ± 0.50	9	3.77 ± 0.44
Competency 9.2: Provides leadership to position the school meal program as an integral component of the school district.	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52	9	3.55 ± 0.52

Note. N = number of expert panelists responding to each competency evaluation item. Ratings were measured on a 4–point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree).

Importance Ratings and Experience-Level Categorization of Knowledge and Skill Statements

Across functional areas, knowledge and skill statements received mean importance ratings ranging from approximately 2.33 to 3.88 on a four-point Likert scale, indicating that panelists generally rated statements as moderately important to extremely important. Statements related to regulatory compliance, food safety, financial accountability, and core operational functions consistently received the highest mean ratings, reflecting their critical role in effective program administration.

Experience-level categorization results revealed consistent patterns across functional areas. Statements related to foundational compliance, documentation, and day-to-day operational oversight were more frequently classified as entry-level expectations. In contrast, statements associated with strategic planning, systems development, leadership, workforce planning, and external engagement were more often classified as advanced-level expectations. These distinctions reflect the developmental

progression of district-level leadership roles and provide a structured framework for professional growth.

While most statements achieved clear majority agreement, several statements yielded more evenly split classifications, with agreement percentages near the midpoint threshold. These results suggest that expectations for certain competencies may vary based on district size, organizational structure, or governance context. These findings highlight the flexibility needed to apply the CKS resource across diverse operational environments. The following sections present detailed findings for each functional area, including importance ratings and experience-level categorizations of the associated knowledge and skill statements.

RESULTS

Functional Areas

Results are presented by functional area and describe perceived statement importance, entry-level and advanced-level categorization patterns, and key implications for the CKS framework. Tables for each functional area displaying the associated competencies, knowledge and skill statements, experience-level categorization with percentage of respondent agreement, and mean importance ratings are provided in the Appendix.

Functional Area 1: Financial Management

Functional Area Overview

Financial Management emerged as a core functional area with consistently high importance ratings and strong agreement regarding both competency alignment and experience-level categorization. Across Competencies 1.1 (financial management systems) and 1.2 (cost control), expert panelists emphasized the central role of financial oversight in ensuring the sustainability, accountability, and regulatory compliance of district-level school meal programs.

Financial Management Systems

Importance Ratings Summary. Knowledge and skill statements associated with financial management systems received mean importance ratings ranging from 2.89 to 3.67, indicating that panelists viewed these statements as moderately to extremely important for effective performance.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with foundational financial operations, including understanding basic accounting principles, preparing budgets, approving payroll records, reconciling accounts, and maintaining audit-ready financial documentation. Agreement percentages for these statements frequently exceeded 70%.

These findings suggest strong consensus that baseline financial literacy and routine fiscal oversight are essential competencies for all school nutrition program directors, regardless of district size or operational complexity. High agreement for statements addressing payroll approval, invoice verification, and audit preparation reflects the level of accountability associated with the use of public funds in school meal programs.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. A smaller subset of statements was more frequently categorized as advanced level, including those related to analyzing the impact of demographic and enrollment changes on program budgets.

Interpretation / Implications. This pattern indicates that while all directors must manage budgets and ensure fiscal accountability, higher-level analytical and forecasting responsibilities are more commonly associated with experienced leaders or districts with greater operational complexity.

Cost Control and Financial Benchmarks

Importance Ratings Summary. Statements associated with cost control and financial benchmarks demonstrated greater variation in experience-level categorization, reflecting the progressive nature of financial management responsibilities. Mean importance ratings ranged from 2.67 to 3.44, with most statements perceived as highly relevant to effective program management.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with foundational cost control activities, including managing labor costs through staffing and scheduling, establishing internal benchmarks for food and labor costs, and evaluating site-level financial performance. These findings indicate that routine cost monitoring and operational efficiency are essential skills expected early in a director's tenure.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were more frequently associated with external funding acquisition, grant monitoring, technology investment analysis, and financial justification of program expansion. Agreement percentages for these statements were generally lower and closer to the categorization threshold, suggesting variability in how these responsibilities are distributed across districts.

Interpretation / Implications. This variability likely reflects differences in district governance structures, access to external funding opportunities, and the scale of school meal program operations. Overall, findings for the Financial Management functional area indicate a developmental progression from foundational fiscal accountability to advanced strategic financial leadership.

The distinction between entry-level and advanced-level expectations provides a useful framework for professional development planning, succession preparation, and targeted training initiatives. These results support the inclusion of Financial Management as a foundational functional area within the updated CKS framework and highlight its critical role in sustaining effective and compliant school meal programs.

Functional Area 2: Production and Operations Management

Functional Area Overview

Production and Operations Management was consistently identified as a core functional area essential to the effective delivery of safe, high-quality, and efficient school meal services. Validation results indicate strong agreement regarding the importance of production and service system oversight, standardization of procedures, and operational decision-making as central responsibilities of school nutrition program directors.

Food Production and Quality Assurance

Importance Ratings Summary. Knowledge and skill statements associated with food production and quality assurance received importance ratings clustered in the upper range of the scale, reflecting expert consensus that effective oversight of food production systems is fundamental to program success.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with establishing standardized recipes, maintaining production records, and implementing quality control procedures. These findings indicate that foundational production oversight and adherence to standardized practices are essential competencies expected early in a director's tenure.

High agreement for statements addressing food quality, portion control, and consistency across sites underscores the operational reality that directors are ultimately accountable for ensuring that meals meet regulatory requirements and customer expectations regardless of where meals are prepared or served. These findings reinforce the importance of systems that promote consistency, efficiency, and quality across centralized and decentralized production environments.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were generally associated with evaluating production methods, analyzing labor and equipment efficiency, and implementing system-level improvements.

Interpretation / Implications. These responsibilities require a broader operational perspective and experience, reflecting progression from routine oversight to strategic operational leadership.

Operational Systems and Service Delivery

Importance Ratings Summary. Statements associated with operational systems and service delivery demonstrated strong perceived importance and clear differentiation between entry-level and advanced-level expectations.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with foundational operational responsibilities such as scheduling production and service activities, ensuring appropriate staffing patterns, and coordinating meal service logistics. These competencies reflect the day-to-day operational demands of school meal programs and the necessity for directors to ensure smooth and timely service across multiple sites.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were more frequently associated with systems development, process optimization, and evaluation of alternative service models.

Interpretation / Implications. These findings suggest that while all directors must manage daily operations, higher-level operational decision-making and innovation are more commonly associated with experienced leaders or districts with greater operational complexity. Across both competencies, expert panelists consistently emphasized the interdependence of production and operations management with other functional areas, including financial management, human resource management, and food safety. The high level of agreement across statements supports the inclusion of Production and Operations Management as a foundational functional area and highlights its central role in ensuring program efficiency, regulatory compliance, and customer satisfaction.

Functional Area 3: Food Security, Sanitation, and Safety

Functional Area Overview

Food Security, Sanitation, and Safety emerged as a critically important functional area with some of the highest importance ratings across the entire CKS framework. Validation results indicate near-universal agreement among expert panelists that school nutrition program directors are ultimately responsible for ensuring that meals are prepared and served in environments that protect student health, meet regulatory requirements, and support continuity of operations.

Sanitary Food Preparation and Service

Importance Ratings Summary. Knowledge and skill statements associated with sanitary food preparation and service were consistently rated as highly important, reflecting expert consensus that food safety and sanitation are essential responsibilities of district-level leadership.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with understanding and enforcing federal, state, and local food safety regulations; implementing standard operating procedures; and monitoring compliance across sites. These findings suggest that baseline food safety oversight is viewed as a foundational requirement for all school nutrition program directors, regardless of experience level or district size.

High agreement for statements addressing Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles, safe food handling practices, and sanitation monitoring underscores the accountability placed on directors to prevent foodborne illness and ensure regulatory compliance. These findings reflect the operational reality that food safety failures carry immediate health risks and significant legal and reputational consequences for school districts.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were less frequently observed within this competency area, reflecting the expectation that most food safety responsibilities are foundational requirements for program leadership.

Interpretation / Implications. These findings highlight the critical importance of food safety oversight within school meal programs and reinforce the expectation that school nutrition program directors maintain strong foundational competencies in sanitation and regulatory compliance.

Safe Work Environments and Risk Management

Importance Ratings Summary. Statements associated with safe work environments and risk management also demonstrated strong perceived importance among expert panelists.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. A number of statements related to basic safety compliance and awareness were categorized as entry level, reflecting expectations that school nutrition program directors ensure adherence to workplace safety requirements and maintain safe operational environments.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were most frequently associated with developing safety training procedures, investigating and reporting workplace injury incidents, and leading continuous improvement efforts in workplace safety.

Interpretation / Implications. These findings reflect the leadership-oriented nature of creating and sustaining safe work environments across diverse school settings. Expert panelists emphasized that while all directors must ensure basic compliance with safety requirements, more advanced responsibilities involve fostering a culture of safety, integrating risk management into daily operations, and proactively addressing emerging hazards. Across both competencies, results reinforce the centrality of Food Security, Sanitation, and Safety within the CKS framework. The consistently high importance ratings and strong agreement support its inclusion as a core functional area and underscore its critical role in protecting student health, supporting staff well-being, and maintaining public trust in school meal programs.

Functional Area 4: Emergency Preparedness

Functional Area Overview

Emergency Preparedness was identified as an essential functional area reflecting the responsibility of school nutrition program directors to ensure continuity of meal service and staff safety during emergencies, disasters, and unplanned disruptions. Validation results indicate strong agreement among expert panelists that preparedness planning and coordination are critical leadership functions that extend beyond routine operations.

Emergency and Disaster Planning

Importance Ratings Summary. Knowledge and skill statements associated with emergency and disaster planning were consistently rated as highly important, reflecting expert consensus that preparedness planning is a critical component of effective program leadership.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with understanding district crisis management plans, coordinating with district leadership and emergency response teams, and ensuring compliance with federal, state, and local requirements during emergency feeding situations. These findings indicate that baseline awareness of emergency procedures and regulatory requirements is viewed as a foundational responsibility for all school nutrition program directors.

High agreement for statements addressing the development and maintenance of emergency feeding plans underscores the expectation that directors are prepared to sustain meal service during events such as natural disasters, public health emergencies, and facility disruptions. These findings reflect the operational reality that school nutrition programs often serve as critical community resources during emergencies.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were more frequently associated with training staff on emergency procedures, conducting drills or tabletop

exercises, evaluating the effectiveness of emergency response plans, and leading post-incident assessment and improvement efforts.

Interpretation / Implications. These responsibilities require strategic coordination, leadership, and experience, reflecting progression from procedural compliance to proactive preparedness and resilience planning. Overall, findings for the Emergency Preparedness functional area support its inclusion as a distinct component of the CKS framework. The combination of high importance ratings and clear developmental distinctions highlights the role of school nutrition program directors in ensuring operational continuity, safeguarding staff and students, and supporting broader district emergency response efforts.

Functional Area 5: Human Resource Management

Functional Area Overview

Human Resource Management was validated as a critical functional area reflecting the responsibility of district-level school nutrition program directors to recruit, develop, support, and retain a qualified workforce capable of delivering high-quality school meal services. Validation results indicate strong agreement that human resource leadership extends beyond administrative compliance to include workforce development, supervision, and the cultivation of a positive organizational culture.

Human Resource Infrastructure and Compliance

Importance Ratings Summary. Knowledge and skill statements associated with establishing and maintaining a human resource infrastructure were consistently rated as highly important, indicating strong expert consensus regarding the central role of human resource oversight in effective program administration.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with compliance with district policies, labor laws, and federal and state employment regulations. These findings indicate that foundational human resource compliance is viewed as a core responsibility that all school nutrition program directors must possess to ensure lawful and equitable program operations.

High agreement for statements addressing payroll processes, personnel documentation, and adherence to district procedures underscores the accountability associated with managing a large, often decentralized workforce. These findings reflect the operational necessity for directors to ensure consistency and compliance across multiple sites.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were less frequently associated with infrastructure compliance tasks and instead appeared more commonly within leadership-oriented workforce development responsibilities.

Interpretation / Implications. These results suggest that while foundational compliance responsibilities are expected early in a director's tenure, broader workforce leadership responsibilities often develop with increased experience and organizational oversight.

Workforce Development and Leadership

Importance Ratings Summary. Statements associated with workforce development, recruitment, and retention were consistently rated as highly important, highlighting the critical role of leadership in maintaining an effective and sustainable workforce.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Some statements related to basic supervision and workforce coordination were categorized as entry level, reflecting expectations that directors possess foundational management capabilities early in their roles.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were more frequently associated with designing training systems, supporting professional growth, evaluating employee performance, and fostering a positive workplace culture. These findings indicate that workforce development responsibilities often require leadership experience, strategic planning, and an understanding of workforce dynamics.

Interpretation / Implications. The distinction between compliance-oriented tasks and leadership-driven workforce development reflects a developmental progression within the Human Resource Management functional area. These findings support its inclusion as a core component of the CKS framework and emphasize the importance of effective workforce leadership in sustaining program quality, operational stability, and employee effectiveness.

Functional Area 6: Marketing and Communications

Functional Area Overview

Marketing and Communications was identified as an increasingly important functional area reflecting the evolving role of school nutrition program directors as advocates for school meal programs. Validation results indicate strong agreement that effective communication and marketing strategies are essential for promoting program participation, stakeholder engagement, and public understanding.

Program Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Importance Ratings Summary. Knowledge and skill statements associated with internal and external communication were rated as moderately to highly important, indicating strong recognition of the role that effective communication plays in supporting successful school meal program operations and stakeholder relationships.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with foundational communication responsibilities such as disseminating accurate information, coordinating with school administrators, and responding to stakeholder inquiries. These findings suggest that baseline communication skills are essential competencies expected early in a director's tenure to ensure transparency and effective coordination within school districts.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were more frequently associated with strategic marketing activities, including community outreach, the use of multiple communication platforms, and evaluation of promotional and engagement efforts.

Interpretation / Implications. These findings reflect the expanding expectations for school nutrition program directors to actively shape public perceptions of school meal programs and engage diverse audiences effectively. Overall, results support the inclusion of Marketing and Communications as a distinct functional area and highlight its role in promoting program participation, strengthening stakeholder relationships, and aligning program messaging with district priorities.

Functional Area 7: Menu and Nutrition Management

Functional Area Overview

Menu and Nutrition Management emerged as a foundational functional area central to meeting the nutritional needs of students and ensuring compliance with federal meal pattern requirements. Validation results indicate strong agreement that school nutrition program directors play a key role in overseeing menu planning, maintaining nutritional quality, and ensuring alignment with federal dietary guidelines.

Menu Planning and Nutritional Compliance

Importance Ratings Summary. Knowledge and skill statements associated with menu development, nutrient standards, and dietary guidelines were consistently rated as highly important, indicating strong expert consensus regarding the central role of nutrition oversight in school meal program administration.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with ensuring compliance with USDA meal pattern requirements, accommodating special dietary needs, and overseeing nutritional analysis. These findings suggest that baseline knowledge of federal nutrition standards and menu compliance responsibilities are essential competencies expected early in a director's tenure.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were more frequently associated with evaluating nutrition initiatives, incorporating nutrition education concepts into program planning, and implementing strategic menu innovation.

Interpretation / Implications. These responsibilities reflect progression from regulatory compliance toward leadership in promoting healthful eating environments and advancing nutrition initiatives within school meal programs. Overall, the findings underscore the critical role of Menu and Nutrition Management in supporting student health outcomes and reinforce its inclusion as a core functional area within the CKS framework.

Functional Area 8: Procurement and Inventory Management

Functional Area Overview

Procurement and Inventory Management was validated as a key functional area supporting financial stewardship, regulatory compliance, and operational efficiency. Validation results indicate strong agreement that school nutrition program directors are responsible for overseeing ethical procurement practices and maintaining effective inventory control systems.

Procurement Processes and Inventory Control

Importance Ratings Summary. Knowledge and skill statements associated with procurement regulations, ethical purchasing, and inventory management were consistently rated as highly important, indicating strong expert consensus regarding the role of procurement oversight in supporting effective program administration.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with compliance with federal and state procurement requirements, bid processes, and the maintenance of inventory documentation. These findings suggest that foundational knowledge of procurement regulations and inventory procedures is an essential competency expected early in a director's tenure to ensure regulatory compliance and operational continuity.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were more frequently associated with contract negotiation, supplier evaluation, demand forecasting, and system-level inventory optimization.

Interpretation / Implications. These responsibilities reflect a developmental progression from procedural compliance toward strategic resource management and operational planning. Overall, the findings support the inclusion of Procurement and Inventory Management as a distinct functional area within the CKS framework and highlight its role in ensuring fiscal responsibility, transparency, and uninterrupted school meal program operations.

Functional Area 9: Program Management and Accountability

Functional Area Overview

Program Management and Accountability emerged as an overarching functional area encompassing leadership responsibilities related to planning, evaluation, and continuous improvement of school meal programs. To achieve group consensus on statement placement between the Program Management and Accountability and Financial Management functional areas, participants determined that statements referencing federal, state, and local regulatory requirements would be assigned to Program Management and Accountability, while statements focused primarily on financial processes or monetary considerations would be assigned to Financial Management. Validation results indicate strong agreement that school nutrition program directors are responsible for aligning program operations with regulatory requirements, district priorities, and performance outcomes.

Program Oversight and Continuous Improvement

Importance Ratings Summary. Knowledge and skill statements associated with monitoring program performance, conducting evaluations, and responding to audits were consistently rated as highly important, indicating strong expert consensus regarding the importance of oversight and accountability in school meal program administration.

Entry-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as entry level were most frequently associated with documentation, reporting, and corrective action responsibilities. These findings suggest that foundational program oversight tasks, including maintaining required records and responding to compliance findings, are essential competencies expected early in a director's tenure.

Advanced-Level Categorization Findings. Statements categorized as advanced level were more frequently associated with strategic planning, data-driven decision-making, and long-term program improvement.

Interpretation / Implications. These responsibilities require systems thinking and leadership capacity, reflecting the culmination of competencies across functional areas. Overall, findings support the inclusion of Program Management and Accountability as a core functional area within the CKS framework and emphasize its integrative role in sustaining effective, compliant, and high-performing school meal programs.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to review, update, and validate the *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Program Directors* resource to ensure continued alignment with current professional practice and evolving programmatic demands. Using a multi-phase, mixed-methods research design, the study engaged practicing school nutrition professionals and SMEs to examine the relevance, clarity, and applicability of existing CKS statements and to identify areas requiring refinement or expansion.

Findings from this study indicate strong consensus across all phases regarding the core responsibilities and leadership expectations of school nutrition program directors. Validation results confirm that the nine functional areas included in the updated framework accurately reflect the breadth and complexity of district-level school nutrition administration. Together, these functional areas encompass both foundational operational responsibilities and advanced leadership functions, reinforcing the multifaceted nature of the director's role.

The distinction between entry level and advanced-level categorizations across knowledge and skill statements provides an important developmental perspective that aligns with ICN's longstanding approach to workforce development. Foundational competencies related to regulatory compliance, food safety, financial oversight, documentation, and routine operations were most frequently categorized as entry level, whereas statements related to strategic planning, systems development, workforce leadership, program evaluation, and external engagement were more frequently categorized as advanced level. This progression reflects the increasing complexity of leadership responsibilities as district-level school nutrition professionals gain experience and as program demands expand.

These experience-level categorizations have practical relevance for multiple workforce applications. For hiring, entry-level categorizations may serve as a useful baseline for identifying the essential knowledge and skills expected of candidates at the time of hire. For onboarding and retention, the categorizations provide a structured framework for clarifying role expectations, identifying early support needs, and guiding supervisors in helping new directors build confidence and competence in foundational areas. For professional development, advanced-level statements can inform individualized learning plans, training priorities, and leadership development opportunities as directors assume broader strategic and administrative responsibilities. In this way, the updated framework can support not only selection of qualified candidates, but also continued growth, support, and retention of school nutrition leaders over time.

Results also highlight the growing emphasis on systems-level leadership within district-level school nutrition administration. Functional areas such as Program Management and Accountability, Human Resource Management, and Marketing and Communications illustrate expectations that extend beyond day-to-day operations to include stakeholder engagement, data-informed decision-making, workforce leadership, and integration of school meal programs within broader district goals. These findings are consistent with broader trends in public-sector management and reinforce the need for competency frameworks that support both operational excellence and strategic leadership.

Collectively, the findings support the updated CKS framework as a valid, relevant, and comprehensive representation of the competencies, knowledge, and skills required for effective district-

level school nutrition leadership. The updated framework builds upon prior ICN CKS resources while incorporating current expectations related to accountability, workforce development, financial sustainability, and systems-level leadership. As such, the framework provides a practical resource for guiding workforce preparation, hiring, professional growth, and leadership development in contemporary school nutrition programs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The updated *Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills of Effective School Nutrition Program Directors* resource provides a comprehensive, research-based framework that reflects current professional practice and evolving leadership expectations within school meal programs. Through a systematic, multi-phase validation process, the study confirmed the relevance, clarity, and applicability of nine functional areas and their associated competencies, knowledge, and skill statements.

The resulting framework offers a structured representation of the operational and leadership responsibilities required for effective district-level school nutrition administration. The inclusion of experience-level categorizations further enhances the framework by distinguishing foundational competencies expected at entry into the role from advanced competencies associated with expanded leadership responsibilities. These categorizations provide a practical developmental guide that can support hiring decisions, clarify role expectations, and inform professional development pathways for school nutrition professionals.

The updated CKS resource is intended to serve multiple workforce development functions. School districts may use the framework to support recruitment, onboarding, performance evaluation, and leadership development of school nutrition program directors. State agencies and professional training providers may use the framework to guide professional standards training, leadership preparation programs, and continuing education initiatives aligned with the evolving demands of school nutrition administration.

By clearly identifying the competencies, knowledge, and skills required for effective leadership, the framework supports efforts to strengthen leadership capacity, promote workforce stability, and enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of school meal programs. The framework also provides a common language for discussing professional expectations and development across school districts, State agencies, and training organizations.

Continued periodic review of the CKS framework is recommended to ensure alignment with regulatory changes, emerging best practices, and the evolving role of school nutrition program directors. Future research may build upon this framework to examine relationships between competency development, leadership practices, workforce preparation, and program outcomes in school nutrition programs.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, participant recruitment relied in part on recommendations from State agency directors and resulted in a convenience sample. Although participants represented a range of geographic regions, district sizes, and program characteristics, the sample was not intended to be statistically representative of all school nutrition program directors nationwide.

Second, participation varied across study phases, and not all individuals participated in every phase of the research. Although this approach is consistent with prior ICN CKS development studies and

allowed for targeted expertise at each stage, differences in participant composition may have influenced the perspectives reflected in specific phases.

Third, experience-level categorization of knowledge and skill statements reflects consensus among expert reviewers but may vary according to district governance structure, staffing models, available administrative support, and local policy context. Some responsibilities may be assigned differently across districts, particularly in smaller, rural, or highly centralized systems. As a result, users of the CKS resource should apply the entry-level and advanced-level categorizations with consideration of local context, organizational structure, and workforce needs.

Finally, although the framework offers practical guidance for hiring, onboarding, retention, and professional development, it should not be interpreted as a rigid progression applicable in the same way across all districts. Rather, the categorizations are intended to serve as a flexible developmental guide that can support local decision-making, workforce planning, and leadership development while allowing for variation in district roles and responsibilities.

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APPENDIX

Knowledge and Skill Statements Ranked by Mean, Experience Level, and Agreement

This appendix contains 19 tables presenting the Functional Areas, Competency Statements, Knowledge and Skill (K/S) statements, experience-level categorization and agreement percentages, and mean importance ratings of K/S statements for each functional area.

Table 1

Financial Management

Financial Management, Competency 1.1: Develops and oversees a financial management system that supports school meal program operations and ensures alignment with program goals and regulatory requirements			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows the financial goals and objectives of the school district.	3.00 (0.50)	Entry	55.5
Understands basic principles of accounting.	3.33 (0.50)	Entry	94.4
Knows fundamentals of reporting the school meal program budget as part of the district budget.	3.11 (0.33)	Entry	72.2
Understands the process for budget development, justification, and implementation.	3.33 (0.50)	Entry	61.1
Understands the impact of changing demographics and enrollment trends on the school meal program budget.	3.00 (0.71)	Advanced	77.7
Provides budget status to appropriate district administrators, following local guidelines.	3.33 (0.50)	Entry	77.7
Prepares and administers budgets that appropriately reflect financial goals.	3.44 (0.53)	Entry	52.6
Analyzes financial statements regularly to make informed financial decisions.	3.33 (0.50)	Entry	61.1
Collaborates with appropriate district administrators to identify desired financial outcomes.	3.11 (0.60)	Entry	77.7
Ensures all financial reports necessary for the annual audit are prepared.	3.67 (0.50)	Entry	72.2
Implements written procedures for collecting, reconciling, depositing, and disbursing funds.	3.11 (0.60)	Entry	72.2
Uses financial management systems (software and/or manual processes) to enhance financial reporting and accountability.	2.89 (0.78)	Entry	61.1
Shares relevant financial information with school nutrition managers and develops strategies for addressing issues.	3.11 (0.78)	Entry	72.2
Regularly reconciles projected annual budget to actual revenue and expenditures and documents variances.	3.33 (0.71)	Entry	55.5
Approves school nutrition staff payroll records before payment.	3.22 (0.83)	Entry	94.4
Checks all bills and purchase orders for accuracy before approving payment.	3.11 (0.78)	Entry	100.0

Note. Mean importance ratings are based on Phase III electronic review panel responses (n = 9) using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = not important; 4 = extremely important). SD = sample standard deviation.

*Note. Agreement based on 19 total votes due to tie resolution using the 2010 CKS resource, resulting in 52.6% agreement.

Table 1.2

Financial Management, Competency 1.2: Establishes cost control goals to effectively manage the school meal program.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows methods for establishing internal and external financial benchmarks.	3.00 (0.71)	Advanced	55.5
Understands the importance of providing cost-effective special functions (e.g., catering), as appropriate.	3.33 (0.50)	Advanced	61.1
Understands the importance of appropriate staffing and scheduling to control labor costs.	3.44 (0.53)	Entry	83.3
Seeks external funding to support school meal program initiatives, as appropriate.	2.78 (0.83)	Advanced	77.7
Establishes internal benchmarks for food and labor cost percentages.	3.11 (0.33)	Entry	52.6*
Identifies benefits and costs associated with maintaining a comprehensive technology system.	2.67 (0.75)	Advanced	66.6
Performs cost analysis to justify additional expenses to promote program growth.	3.00 (0.82)	Advanced	83.3
Monitors the appropriate use of external funding (e.g., grants, donations), when applicable.	2.89 (0.78)	Advanced	61.1
Evaluates the financial performance of individual school nutrition sites and adjusts, as necessary.	3.22 (0.62)	Entry	61.1
Controls labor costs by assessing meals served, labor hours, and school nutrition staff benefits.	3.44 (0.53)	Entry	66.6

**Note.* Agreement based on 19 total votes due to tie resolution using the 2010 CKS resource, resulting in 52.6% agreement.

Table 2

Competency 2.1: Develops a management system that upholds high standards for quality food production.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows procedures for documenting and evaluating amounts of food planned, prepared, and served.	3.28 (0.83)	Entry	88.8
Understands the importance and methods for identifying and producing cost-effective, high-quality food and beverages.	3.28 (0.83)	Entry	72.2
Knows principles of developing and using standardized recipes.	3.11 (1.02)	Entry	88.8
Understands the importance of production scheduling for optimal holding of food items.	3.17 (0.99)	Entry	83.3
Knows the principles of food science and culinary arts related to production, holding, serving, and food presentation.	3.00 (1.19)	Entry	66.6
Knows guidelines for recipe modification to meet nutrition objectives and increase customer acceptability.	3.11 (0.96)	Entry	72.2
Knows food production and distribution systems that allow for efficient use of products, labor, and equipment.	3.2 (0.41)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at selecting and monitoring the most effective food production system for school nutrition sites.	2.89 (0.60)	Advanced	66.6
Skilled at establishing procedures to complete and maintain required daily food production records at each school nutrition site.	3.56 (0.73)	Entry	83.3
Skilled at developing and monitoring food production planning procedures, including, but not limited to, forecasting, production schedules, standardized recipes, and portion control.	3.67 (0.50)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at training staff in food production and forecasting procedures.	3.44 (0.53)	Entry	72.2
Skilled in developing food quality standards to assist school nutrition staff in evaluating menu items prior to service.	3.22 (0.67)	Entry	66.6
Skilled in maintaining current training materials for use by school nutrition managers to train staff on food production techniques.	3.11 (0.78)	Entry	94.4
Skilled at implementing standard procedures (e.g., appropriate product ingredients, standardized recipes, accurate portion sizes) to control food costs.	3.17 (0.92)	Entry	77.7

Table 2.2

Competency 2.2: Develops and Implements operational systems that ensure effective management of food production and service.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Understands the relationship between student meal periods and efficient food production and timely service of meals.	3.06 (1.11)	Entry	70.5
Skilled at establishing an effective food distribution system for all school nutrition sites.	3.22 (0.88)	Entry	58.8
Skilled at using established benchmarks for efficient production of meals (e.g., meals per labor hour).	3.39 (0.70)	Entry	52.9
Skilled at developing safe and efficient work methods to maximize staff productivity.	3.22 (0.88)	Entry	52.9

Table 3

Functional Area 3: Food Security, Sanitation and Safety			
Competency 3.1: Establishes policies and procedures to ensure food is prepared and served in a sanitary and safe environment.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows federal, state, and local sanitation and food safety requirements.	3.77 (0.44)	Entry	94.4
Knows fundamentals of Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) based standard operating procedures.	3.88 (0.33)	Entry	100.0
Knows basic principles and techniques of foodservice sanitation and food safety.	3.66 (0.50)	Entry	100.0
Understands the importance of all aspects of food security (e.g., foodborne illness and biosecurity).	3.66 (0.50)	Entry	83.3
Skilled at developing a HACCP-based food safety and sanitation program that meets federal, state, and local regulations.	3.55 (0.52)	Entry	61.1
Skilled at ensuring that all food safety inspection deficiencies are addressed competently and in a timely manner.	3.66 (0.50)	Entry	88.8

Table 3.2

Functional Area 3: Food Security, Sanitation and Safety			
Competency 3.2: Provides leadership in creating safe work environments for school nutrition operations.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows principles for selecting, storing, using, and maintaining chemical supplies and other hazardous materials.	3.44 (0.52)	Entry	100.0
Understands principles of creating and maintaining a safe work environment.	3.55 (0.52)	Entry	83.3
Knows safety standards for school nutrition establishments that comply with the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) and other regulations.	3.22 (0.66)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at encouraging school nutrition staff participation in creating a safe work environment.	3.33 (0.75)	Entry	83.3
Skilled at developing procedures and training school nutrition staff on the proper use, cleaning, and sanitizing of foodservice equipment.	3.66 (0.70)	Entry	77.7
Skilled in ensuring that Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for chemical products are up-to-date and accessible to school nutrition staff.	3.33 (0.75)	Entry	94.4
Skilled at implementing established safety requirements and standards for the selection and use of chemicals, hazardous materials, and equipment.	3.44 (0.52)	Entry	88.8
Skilled in guiding school nutrition staff in meeting all health code regulations.	3.66 (0.50)	Entry	88.8
Skilled at developing and implementing training procedures and safety guidelines for workplace injury prevention and injury response reporting.	3.44 (0.52)	Advanced	61.1

Table 4.1

Functional Area 4: Emergency Preparedness			
Competency 4.1: Develops a Systematic approach to address emergency and disaster situations.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows the district's crisis management plan and/or emergency response plan.	3.22 (0.66)	Entry	72.2
Knows federal, state, and local regulations for providing services during an emergency or crisis.	2.33 (0.70)	Entry	61.1
Knows how to develop an emergency feeding plan and train school nutrition staff on appropriate implementation.	2.88 (0.60)	Advanced	72.2
Skilled at ensuring food is prepared, stored, and served at proper temperatures during an emergency.	3.55 (0.52)	Entry	83.3
Skilled at establishing and communicating an emergency/disaster plan to school nutrition staff and appropriate school/district staff.	3.55 (0.52)	Entry	*50.0
Skilled at networking with community disaster agencies and maintaining current contact information.	2.66 (0.75)	Advanced	72.2
Skilled at developing a plan for communicating with appropriate federal, state, and/or local officials regarding the use of USDA Foods for disaster relief.	3.11 (1.05)	Advanced	61.1
Skilled at determining the food and supply items needed at each school nutrition site for emergency situations.	3.0 (1.0)	Advanced	66.6

**Note.* Researchers established categorization through discussion rather than refereeing to the CKS because this functional area was not included in the 2010 CKS resource

Table 5.1

Competency 5.1: Establishes a human resource infrastructure for the school meal program that complies with school district policies as well as federal, state, and local regulations.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows district policies and procedures for performing human resource functions (e.g., accident reporting, payroll, benefits, immigration, policy acknowledgment, performance appraisal).	3.33 (0.71)	Entry	61.1
Understands the importance of a school nutrition staff handbook.	3.22 (0.84)	Entry	83.3
Knows selection, supervision, promotion, termination, and disciplinary procedures that comply with federal, state, and local regulations and contractual policies, when applicable.	3.33 (0.71)	Entry	66.6
Knows legislation and resources pertaining to collective bargaining and labor union contracts, when applicable.	3.44 (0.52)	Advanced	72.2
Knows staffing and scheduling techniques to achieve operational goals.	3.00 (0.87)	Advanced	*52.6
Skilled at maintaining accurate school nutrition staff records and other essential human resource documentation.	3.11 (0.60)	Entry	72.2
Skilled at interpreting and disseminating the school district’s human resource policies and procedures and providing guidance as needed.	3.22 (0.67)	Entry	*52.6
Skilled in verifying that human resource decisions follow due process established by the school district.	3.33 (0.50)	Advanced	55.5
Skilled at developing guidelines for work schedules that effectively and efficiently meet operational goals.	3.33 (0.50)	Entry Level	52.6
Skilled at ensuring that employees work within contracted weekly hours by supervising time records.	3.33 (0.71)	Entry	83.3
Skilled at administering personnel policies and evaluating school nutrition staff.	3.22 (0.67)	Entry	*64.7
Skilled in adhering to the Professional Code of Ethics as established by the Education Professional Standards Board.	3.11 (1.05)	Entry	*88.2
Skilled at reviewing and recommending wages, salaries, and fringe benefits that are equitable and competitive.	3.00 (0.87)	Advanced	*76.4
Skilled at monitoring and tracking the cost and incidence of on-the-job injuries and related liabilities.	2.33 (0.87)	Advanced	*70.5
Skilled at developing and maintaining a school nutrition staff handbook that includes a current organizational chart and program/district policies and procedures.	3.11 (0.78)	Advanced	77.7
Skilled in collaborating with other staff and leadership to advance the goals of the strategic leadership plan, particularly those related to human resources.	3.22 (0.67)	Advanced	55.5

Note. Experience-level categorization reflects the percentage of expert panel respondents indicating agreement with entry level or advanced designation.

Table 5.2

Competency 5.2: Develops and implements a process for recruiting, hiring, retaining, and promoting school nutrition staff while maintaining compliance with district procedures and labor laws.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows basic principles of job analysis, job design, job specifications, job descriptions, and performance appraisals.	3.11 (0.60)	Entry	77.7
Knows effective job interview techniques that incorporate legally permissible inquiries.	3.56 (0.73)	Entry	72.2
Understands the importance of staff orientation to ensure that new school nutrition staff have the appropriate information to perform their jobs.	3.33 (0.71)	Entry	77.7
Understands the importance of providing professional development opportunities for school nutrition staff.	3.33 (0.71)	Entry	77.7
Knows strategies for effective recruitment, hiring, and retention of school nutrition staff.	3.11 (0.78)	Advanced	66.6
Understands factors important to employee satisfaction and strategies to address dissatisfaction.	3.22 (0.83)	Advanced	66.6
Skilled in determining the minimum skills and characteristics required for effective school nutrition staff members.	3.11 (0.78)	Entry	72.2
Skilled at developing a team approach to kitchen operations, emphasizing collaboration and mutual support to complete required tasks.	3.33 (0.87)	Entry	61.1
Skilled at interviewing, screening, and employing school nutrition employees.	2.89 (1.05)	Entry	72.2
Skilled at assigning responsibilities, supervising, and training school nutrition staff.	3.00 (1.00)	Entry	72.0
Skilled at maintaining a positive attitude, fostering positivity among employees, and communicating clearly to ensure instructions are accurately implemented.	3.78 (0.44)	Entry	72.2
Skilled at developing a staffing plan based on delivery systems, student participation, facilities, and services provided.	3.33 (0.50)	Advanced	61.1
Skilled at designing an effective orientation program that introduces new staff to the mission, requirements, and goals of the school meal program.	3.22 (0.67)	Advanced	61.1
Skilled in utilizing competency-based performance appraisals to identify staff weaknesses and areas for improvement.	3.22 (0.83)	Advanced	66.6
Skilled at applying conflict resolution, negotiation, and problem-solving techniques when addressing staff issues in a fair and equitable manner.	3.78 (0.44)	Advanced	66.6
Skilled in developing and implementing a staff recognition program, as appropriate.	2.78 (0.97)	Advanced	55.5

Competency 5.2: Develops and implements a process for recruiting, hiring, retaining, and promoting school nutrition staff while maintaining compliance with district procedures and labor laws.

Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Skilled in developing and implementing contingency staffing plans to maintain operations during vacancies.	3.11 (0.33)	Entry	*52.6
Skilled at establishing a process for conducting performance appraisals that aligns with district timetables and guidelines.	3.00 (0.50)	Entry	55.5
Skilled in providing school nutrition staff with information on professional organizations and opportunities for personal and professional development, including certification.	3.00 (0.71)	Entry	55.5

Note. Experience-level categorization reflects the percentage of expert panel respondents indicating agreement with entry level or advanced designation.

Table 5.3

Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows effective job training methods for various learning styles.	2.89 (0.78)	Entry	61.1
Knows procedures for documenting staff development and training in accordance with district policies.	3.33 (0.50)	Entry	72.2
Knows methods to assess the professional development needs of school nutrition staff.	2.67 (1.00)	Advanced	55.5
Skilled at ensuring that first aid training programs are provided to school nutrition staff.	2.33 (1.00)	Entry	88.8
Skilled at selecting resources for technical information and educational materials appropriate for staff training.	2.56 (0.88)	Entry	77.7
Skilled in documenting safety training in accordance with district guidelines.	3.33 (0/71)	Entry	94.4
Skilled at supervising and directing staff and providing a variety of foods and preparation methods and to ensure meals are attractively served.	3.22 (0.67)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at planning and conducting annual school nutrition personnel training courses for cafeteria staff.	2.89 (0.33)	Advanced	55.5
Skilled at developing a system to evaluate the effectiveness of training programs and making necessary modifications.	3.56 (0.53)	Entry	61.1

Table 6.1

Competency 6.1: Works collaboratively and effectively within and outside the school meal program to achieve program-related goals.			
Statement	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	(Agreement) (%)
Understands the importance of school nutrition staff in marketing the school meal program.	2.77 (0.78)	Entry	(77.7%)
Knows effective strategies for positively influencing customers' eating behaviors.	2.66 (0.81)	Entry	(61.1%)
Understands principles of public relations and marketing techniques appropriate for the school community.	3.00 (0.66)	Entry	(61.1%)
Knows resources for the development and evaluation of nutrition education materials and activities.	2.66 (0.66)	Entry	(52.6%)
Skilled at networking with school nutrition professionals to share best practices in marketing.	3.33 (0.81)	Entry	(88.8%)
Skilled at evaluating catering as a viable marketing tool.	2.00 (0.94)	Entry	(66.6%)
Skilled at leading the development of a marketing plan that integrates objectives, strategies, implementation, and evaluation.	2.77 (0.91)	Advanced	(72.2%)
Skilled at aligning the school nutrition marketing plan with district-wide marketing initiatives.	2.55 (1.06)	Advanced	(61.1%)
Skilled at designing and implementing an effective public relations program to maintain a positive image for the school meal program.	3.00 (0.66)	Advanced	(66.6%)
Skilled at responding appropriately to media publicity related to the school meal program.	3.00 (0.81)	Entry	(55.5%)
Skilled at evaluating marketing plans and promotional campaigns and modifying initiatives that are ineffective.	2.66 (0.81)	Advanced	(77.7%)
Skilled at forming partnerships with parents, students, and the education community to support an integrated approach to nutrition education.	3.11 (0.73)	Entry	(55.5%)
Skilled at using customer feedback to improve production and service.	3.33 (0.66)	Entry	(52.6%)
Skilled in working with the superintendent, central office staff, and teaching personnel to ensure the cafeteria supports learning experiences.	3.33 (0.47)	Entry	(55.5%)
Skilled at promoting and supporting activities that increase wellness and nutrition awareness among students, administrators, teachers, and district staff.	3.33 (0.47)	Advanced	(61.1%)
Skilled in using appropriate nutrition education and promotional materials to encourage healthy eating behaviors.	3.11 (0.56)	Entry	(66.6%)

Table 6.2

Competency 6.2: Develops and implements customer-oriented approaches to achieve and maintain quality service and engagement.			
Statement	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	(Agreement) %
Knows the fundamentals of creating a pleasant, appealing, and safe dining experience.	3.11 (0.56)	Entry	(83.3%)
Knows food merchandising techniques to enhance the presentation of food.	3.00 (0.66)	Entry	(66.6%)
Knows methods to collect and use data on customer acceptability of school meals.	3.22 (0.62)	Entry	(61.1%)
Knows the fundamentals of creating a pleasant, appealing, and safe environment for serving nutritious meals.	3.22 (0.41)	Entry	(77.7%)
Knows age-appropriate methods for promoting nutrition education.	2.88 (0.73)	Entry	(66.6%)
Skilled at empowering school nutrition managers to address and resolve customer service issues.	3.22 (0.62)	Advanced	55.5
Skilled at ensuring student involvement in recipe and product testing to determine customer acceptability.	3.11 (0.73)	Advanced	55.5
Skilled at ensuring the daily menu schedule is accessible to the public.	3.55 (0.49)	Entry	100
Skilled at encouraging school nutrition staff to support and participate in district nutrition and wellness initiatives.	3.00 (0.94)	Entry	61.1
Skilled at promoting and supporting activities that increase wellness and nutrition awareness among students, administrators, teachers, and district staff.	3.22 (0.78)	Advanced	61.1
Skilled at developing procedures to maintain the aesthetic qualities of menu items throughout the meal period.	3.22 (0.62)	Entry	52.6
Skilled at establishing quality customer service standards and training school nutrition staff on those standards.	3.33 (0.66)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at treating students as priority customers and instilling this concept in employees.	3.71 (0.41)	Entry	83.3
Skilled at encouraging school nutrition managers and staff to produce and serve meals in a customer-friendly environment.	3.55 (0.49)	Entry	88.8
Skilled at cultivating a dining environment that promotes good nutrition and healthy eating behaviors.	3.66 (0.47)	Entry	66.6

Table 6.3

Competency 6.3: Actively promotes the school meal program to internal and external stakeholders.			
Statement	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement %
Knows appropriate channels for effectively communicating with school meal program stakeholders.	3.22 (0.47)	Entry	52.6
Understands the importance of involving stakeholders in implementing marketing plans, measuring outcomes, and interpreting results.	3.11 (0.56)	Entry	61.1
Skilled at informing stakeholders of policy updates and current school meal program information.	3.22 (0.62)	Entry	72.2
Skilled in communicating school nutrition research findings to stakeholders, when applicable.	2.66 (0.66)	Advanced	55.5
Skilled at coordinating the use of multiple approaches for informing stakeholders about menus, nutrition information, and available services (e.g., website, newsletters, printed menus).	3.00 (0.66)	Entry	55.5
Skilled in communicating the relationship between nutritional adequacy and children’s educational performance.	3.22 (0.62)	Advanced	55.5
Skilled at representing the school meal program at conferences and giving presentations on district initiatives, best practices, challenges, and innovations.	3.22 (0.41)	Advanced	77.7
Skilled at attending Board of Education meetings and preparing reports, as needed.	3.33 (0.66)	Entry	66.6

Table 7.1

Competency 7.1: Develops guidelines for planning menus that comply with nutrition objectives and support operational goals of the school meal program.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements Statement	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Understands the relationship between menu planning and facility design.	3.00 (0.81)	Entry	61.1
Knows menu planning principles.	3.44 (0.49)	Entry	94.4
Knows current USDA menu planning options and requirements.	3.77 (0.41)	Entry	94.4
Knows how to standardize recipes.	3.55 (0.49)	Entry	77.7
Knows the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, USDA Menu Planner for Healthy School Meals, and the Food Buying Guide as menu planning tools.	3.44 (0.68)	Entry	94.4
Knows menu planning and service techniques for children with special food and/or nutrition needs, as appropriate.	3.44 (0.49)	Entry	83.3
Knows how to nutritionally analyze menus according to USDA meal pattern requirements.	3.44 (0.52)	Entry	66.6
Understands the relationship of menu planning to the availability of USDA Foods, purchasing, food production, and productivity.	3.66 (0.50)	Entry	61.1
Understands the importance of customer feedback on menu planning.	3.22 (0.66)	Entry	94.4
Skilled at developing and implementing a menu system that maximizes the use of USDA Foods.	3.33 (0.50)	Entry	52.6
Skilled at assessing customer preferences, industry trends, and research to plan menus that encourage participation in the school meal program.	3.22 (0.44)	Advanced	61.1
Skilled in developing internal guidelines for planning menus that comply with nutrition objectives and support operational goals of the school meal program.	3.22 (0.44)	Advanced	55.5
Skilled at developing procedures for collecting customer feedback, including surveys, taste panels, and menu committees.	3.00 (0.86)	Advanced	55.5
Skilled in developing an effective system for menu planning that includes costing, forecasting, nutrient analysis, variety, and customer preferences.	3.22 (0.44)	Advanced	55.5
Skilled in ensuring all menu items served are consistent with nutrition objectives and contribute to the development of healthy eating habits.	3.33 (0.70)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at planning menus that incorporate cultural preferences and introduce students to a variety of foods.	3.22 (0.66)	Entry	61.1
Skilled in evaluating new and existing food products for nutritional value, quality, and acceptance.	3.55 (0.52)	Entry	66.6
Skilled in providing nutritional analysis for menus and to school nurses.	3.33 (0.70)	Entry	83.3

Table 7.2

Competency 7.2: Provides leadership to support the nutrition and wellness initiatives within the school district.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Understands the importance of providing nutrition education training for school nutrition staff.	3.33 (0.66)	Entry	100.0
Skilled at collaborating with faculty and school nutrition staff to implement nutrition education projects.	3.11 (0.73)	Entry	55.5
Skilled at collaborating with school staff, teachers, parents, physicians, and other health professionals to meet the special food and/or nutrition needs of children, as appropriate.	3.22 (0.62)	Entry	66.6
Skilled at planning school nutrition promotional events (e.g., National School Lunch Week, National School Breakfast Week).	3.55 (0.49)	Entry	66.6
Skilled at promoting healthy eating habits and providing guidelines for selecting healthful meals and snacks through nutrition education and appropriate marketing in the school cafeteria.	3.00 (0.66)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at encouraging school nutrition staff to support and participate in school district nutrition and wellness initiatives.	3.22 (0.41)	Entry	88.8
Skilled at working with appropriate school nutrition staff to develop and implement quality recipes and effective techniques to improve food quality in school meals.	3.22 (0.41)	Advanced	66.6

Table 8.1

Competency 8.1: Develops procurement guidelines that comply with established regulations and support operational goals of the school meal program.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows ethical practices for procurement.	3.44 (0.52)	Entry	88.8
Knows federal, state, and local procurement regulations, policies, and procedures governing all school meal program purchases.	3.66 (0.50)	Entry	66.6
Knows factors that guide the procurement of equipment.	3.22 (0.66)	Entry	55.5
Knows the structure of procurement channels from the manufacturer to the school meal program for food, supplies, and equipment.	3.22 (0.44)	Entry	55.5
Knows principles for purchasing chemical supplies and other hazardous materials.	3.0 (0.50)	Entry	83.3
Knows fundamentals of developing specifications for food, supplies, and equipment that incorporate quality and/or performance indicators.	3.1 (0.70)	Entry	61.1
Knows basic principles of requests for proposals (RFP), formal bidding, and informal bidding (quotes).	3.33 (0.70)	Entry	72.2
Knows guidelines for procurement and processing of USDA Foods following federal and state regulations.	3.44 (0.52)	Entry	66.6
Skilled at developing product specifications that ensure broad customer acceptability and nutrition integrity, utilizing pre-bid conferences, product testing/screening, and product comparison.	3.11 (0.60)	Advanced	66.6
Skilled at analyzing technical support, training availability, maintenance service availability, and cost of upgrades when considering new purchases.	2.88 (0.60)	Advanced	66.6
Skilled at evaluating purchasing methods (e.g., bid buying, prime vendors, group purchasing) and selecting the most appropriate method for the school meal program.	3.11 (0.60)	Advanced	61.1
Skilled at developing appropriate bid documents that include product specifications, usages, and special instructions/conditions following federal, state, and local regulations.	3.11 (0.78)	Advanced	72.2
Skilled in evaluating current purchasing practices to determine effectiveness.	3.00 (0.5)	Advanced	72.2
Skilled at evaluating bids/quotes and making purchase recommendations following federal, state, and local regulations.	3.44 (0.52)	Advanced	61.1

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

Competency 8.1: Develops procurement guidelines that comply with established regulations and support operational goals of the school meal program.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Skilled at monitoring current market conditions that influence procurement decisions (e.g., price, supply, demand).	3.0 (0.5)	Entry	52.6
Skilled in providing a profile describing the school meal program to assist industry representatives in meeting procurement needs.	2.55 (0.88)	Advanced	72.2
Skilled at developing and/or implementing established procurement guidelines for environmentally responsible purchasing practices, if applicable.	2.77 (0.66)	Advanced	72.2

Table 8.2

Competency 8.2: Establishes operational procedures to effectively manage receiving and inventory systems.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Knows fundamentals of effective receiving procedures.	3.00 (0.70)	Entry	94.4
Understands the relationship of standardized recipes to accurate ordering and inventory management.	3.22 (0.44)	Entry	88.8
Knows methods to project food and supply needs.	3.33 (0.50)	Entry	94.4
Skilled at developing and monitoring procurement procedures for school nutrition sites to order, receive, and store products.	3.22 (0.66)	Advanced	61.1
Skilled at updating product specifications by communicating with industry and other school nutrition professionals.	2.88 (0.78)	Entry	61.1

Table 9.1

Competency 9.1: Establishes a system to ensure nutritional, financial, and regulatory accountability of the school meal program.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Understands the role of controlling costs through menu development.	3.55 (0.52)	Entry	83.3
Knows federal, state, and local regulations governing food and beverage sales.	3.66 (0.70)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at establishing and/or maintaining a system for retaining financial records following federal, state, and local regulations.	3.66 (0.70)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at ensuring that foodservice accounting procedures are in alignment with district guidelines.	3.55 (0.52)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at ensuring public access to information on child nutrition programs as mandated by federal guidelines	3.33 (0.70)	Entry	83.3
Skilled at establishing a pricing structure for meals and food items that follows federal, state, and local guidelines.	3.33 (0.50)	Entry	72.2
Skilled at planning nutritionally sound menus that comply with federal, state, and local regulations.	3.55 (0.52)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at maximizing the use of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Foods to assist in controlling food cost.	3.22 (0.66)	Entry	66.6

Table 9.2

Competency 9.2: Provides leadership to position the school meal program as an integral component of the school district.			
Knowledge and Skill Statements	Mean (SD)	Experience Level	Agreement (%)
Understands the importance of school nutrition services and nutrition education as a component of the coordinated school health education program.	2.77 (0.66)	Entry	72.2
Understands the concepts of institutional and structural racism and bias and their impact on underserved and underrepresented communities.	3.00 (0.70)	Entry	77.7
Skilled at coordinating training for school nutrition staff to enhance their culinary and/or catering skills.	2.88 (0.60)	Entry	55.5
Skilled at advising appropriate central office administrators, school principals, relevant school nutrition staff, and local board with respect to program needs.	3.33 (0.70)	Entry	55.5
Skilled at attending professional meetings and staying involved with such organizations to remain knowledgeable of all aspects of the School Meal Programs.	2.88 (0.60)	Entry	72.2
Skilled at coordinating and preparing special school meal requests made by faculty and staff, as appropriate.	1.88 (1.05)	Entry	88.8
Skilled at reporting regularly to the superintendent on any developments or situations within the district requiring the superintendent's awareness.	3.33 (0.86)	Entry	88.8
Skilled at encouraging school nutrition staff to participate in general staff meetings at school sites.	2.44 (0.88)	Entry	88.8



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