



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

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

PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR

Kymerle Gordon, PhD

RESEARCHERS

Jane Peterson, PhD, RDN

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Travis Brewington
Shellie Hubbard, MA

APPLIED RESEARCH DIRECTOR

Marjuyua Lartey-Gibson, PhD, RDN

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Aleshia Hall-Campbell, PhD, MPH



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PURPOSE

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.

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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,

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.



The University of Mississippi
School of Applied Sciences

800-321-3054
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