

Exploring the Uniqueness of School Nutrition Programs in Small School Districts



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**National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi**

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

The National Food Service Management Institute was authorized by Congress in 1989 and established in 1990 at The University of Mississippi in Oxford and is operated in collaboration with The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. The Institute operates under a grant agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the National Food Service Management Institute is to improve the operation of child nutrition programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination.

MISSION

The mission of the National Food Service Management Institute is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of child nutrition programs.

VISION

The vision of the National Food Service Management Institute is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in child nutrition programs.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Headquarters

Administrative Division

The University of Mississippi

Phone: 800-321-3054

Fax: 800-321-3061

www.nfsmi.org

Education and Training Division

Information Services Division

The University of Mississippi

6 Jeanette Phillips Drive

P.O. Drawer 188

University, MS 38677-0188

Applied Research Division

The University of Southern Mississippi

118 College Drive #5060

Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001

Phone: 601-266-5773

Fax: 888-262-9631

Acknowledgments

WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY

**Keith Rushing, PhD, RD
Research Scientist**

**Applied Research Division
The University of Southern Mississippi**

**NFSMI EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Katie Wilson, PhD, SNS**

EXPLORING THE UNIQUENESS OF SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS IN SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2010, approximately 75% of United States public school districts had less than 3,000 students enrolled (Keaton, 2011). Studies suggests that many of these small rural schools have become crucial for holding their local communities together (Jimerson, 2006; Lyson, 2005). Further, it appears small rural school districts have several advantages over larger districts, including higher student participation rates and a more autonomous nature, where decisions are made closer to the classroom and community (Raywid, 1999). Yet, depressed economies and rapid demographic changes have created challenges for small rural schools (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Murray & Schafer, 2006; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Further, evidence suggests that school nutrition (SN) directors in small rural school districts face unique operational issues that require unique skills when compared to SN directors in larger school districts (Lewis, Herndon, & Belmont, 2009; Rushing, Nettles, & Johnson, 2009a; Rushing, Nettles, & Johnson, 2009b). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the uniqueness of SN programs in small school districts. For this study, a small school district is defined as a school district with student enrollment of 2,800 or less. The specific objectives of this project were the following:

- Determine operational issues and practices that SN directors in small school districts encounter;
- Identify challenges and barriers SN directors in small districts face;

- Identify characteristics and qualities needed by SN directors to successfully operate SN programs in small school districts; and
- Identify training needs and preferred methods of delivery/training of SN directors in small school districts.

To achieve these objectives, a two-phase research design was utilized. In the first phase, SN professionals participated in an expert panel discussion to identify issues and characteristics of SN programs and the directors who operate SN programs in small school districts. Qualitative data gathered from the expert panel session were summarized and used to create a quantitative survey instrument in phase two of the study. The quantitative survey was evaluated by a review panel consisting of SN professionals, and the final survey was mailed to a random national sample of 700 SN directors in small school districts.

The survey response rate was 56% with 388 SN directors returning survey. As part of the survey, respondents were provided with 69 statements regarding operational issues related to SN operations in small school districts and were asked to indicate their agreement with each statement using a scale ranging from 4 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*).

Respondent mean agreement ratings for the operational issues and practices statements provide some insight into the operation of small district SN programs. The statement, “I have multiple responsibilities as a SN director,” had the highest mean rating, confirming the multifaceted role of SN directors regardless of district size. It seems most SN directors in small school districts perceive they have a positive and communicative relationship with school administration and staff, as shown by the following statements receiving positive mean ratings: “I have a positive working relationship with school administrators in my district,” “I have a positive working relationship with other departments [i.e. maintenance, transportation] in my

school district,” “I am confident communicating with district administrators,” and “I have a positive working relationship with teachers in my school district” (3.50 ± 0.59 , 3.44 ± 0.55 , 3.28 ± 0.60 , and 3.21 ± 0.58 , respectively). Yet, many of these SN directors sense that school administration in small school districts do not fully understand, appreciate, and/or support the roles and responsibilities associated with the position of SN director as demonstrated by the following statements receiving mean agreement ratings below 3.0: “The school district recognizes the importance of the SN program in the education setting” (2.90 ± 0.70), “I am considered a member of the school district’s administrative team” (2.78 ± 0.90), “School district officials understand SN program regulations” (2.51 ± 0.74), and “My salary is comparable with other district administrators” (2.21 ± 0.86). Apparently, many SN directors in small school districts do not place a high priority on marketing as evidenced by the following results: “Marketing ideas are implemented to promote the SN program” (2.75 ± 0.68) and “There is a marketing plan for the SN program” (2.50 ± 0.71). As school district size increased, SN directors were more likely to report the following: they are responsible for financial management and budget planning for the SN program; their SN program operates like a business within the school setting; their SN program provides catering; and their SN program is self-supporting. All of these suggest that as school district size increases SN directors are more likely to run their operation like a commercial business.

Findings from this research suggest education and training programs are needed to assist in the preparation of SN professionals to operate SN programs. These programs should be made available to SN professionals who work on the management team in all school districts and state agency child nutrition staff that provide training and support to SN directors. The topics of this education and training should include important operational issues and practices, such as

information to support SN directors in marketing their SN program to parents, and methods to best communicate to school administration the importance and complexity of the position of SN director.