

## ICN RESEARCH SUMMARY

**Keith Rushing, PhD, RD**  
**Director of Applied Research Division**  
**Institute of Child Nutrition**  
**Keith.Rushing@usm.edu**

The Institute of Child Nutrition, Applied Research Division (ICN, ARD) is located at The University of Southern Mississippi with headquarters at The University of Mississippi. Funding for the Institute was provided with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (USDA, FNS), to The University of Mississippi in cooperation with The University of Southern Mississippi. The mission of the ICN is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition (CN) Programs, such as School Meals Programs, Summer Food Service Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Program.

ARD supports ICN's mission by conducting applied research that engages active child nutrition industry professionals. This process is utilized to identify current issues facing CN professionals, find practical solutions to these issues, determine best practices for managing CN programs, develop research-based resources to support CN professionals, and support the development of training and education to meet the professional development needs of CN professionals.

## CURRENT RESEARCH STUDIES

The following research studies are currently underway at ICN, ARD.

### **Environmental Scan and Formative Research of Student Engagement Practices in Support of Child Nutrition Programs**

The purpose of this study is to explore how schools, districts and School Nutrition (SN) stakeholders have effectively engaged students to promote participation in SN programs and healthy eating. This is a two-phase project. Phase I involves a literature review to identify SN stakeholders, organizations and professionals that utilize effective strategies and activities to engage students to participate in school meal programs. Semi-structured interviews with at least 24 representatives from allied organizations working with SN services will be conducted to understand effective strategies to engage students in school meal programs. Phase II will consist of environmental scans conducted at nine school districts from across the nation that are deemed successful at effectively engaging students in school meal programs. The site visits will consist of focus group interviews with SN program professionals, parents, administrators and students. Results of the study will be used to provide recommendations, best practice strategies and success story content for the development of training, supplemental materials, and needed resources to increase student engagement in SN programs. This project will be completed in the Spring of 2020.

### **Exploratory Investigation of the Roles, Responsibilities, and Impact of Chefs Working in School Nutrition Programs**

The purpose of this project is to explore the role and impact of chefs working in school nutrition (SN) programs. This project will be conducted of the following three phases. Phase I will involve SN programs site visits to conduct job shadowing with school chefs and interviews with school chefs, SN managers, SN directors, and/or SN administrators to identify job duties/responsibilities of school chefs, perceptions and preferences related to working with school chefs and working as a school chef, and the perceived impact of chefs on SN program operations. Phase II will include an expert panel meeting consisting of focus group discussions and review of sample survey questions for a national survey instrument. Phase III will be a national survey related to confirm job duties/responsibilities of chefs working in SN programs, perceptions and preferences related to working with chefs and working as a school chef, and the perceived impact of chefs on SN program operations. The results of this research will result in identifying job functions for chefs working in schools and be the foundation for a competencies, knowledge, and skills for chefs working in schools resource. This project will be completed in early 2020.

### **Education, Training, and Research Needs Assessment for State Agency Child Nutrition Program Professionals.**

The purpose of this study is to develop, validate, and implement a national needs assessment survey to identify the training and professional development needs of state agency school nutrition (SN) professionals. This is a three-phase project. Phase I, which concluded in October of 2018 consisted of a literature review and an expert panel of eight state agency SN professionals tasked with developing of a draft needs assessment survey. During Phase II, the survey will be validated with an electronic review panel of 15 to 20 state agency SN professionals. In Phase III, the needs assessment will be implemented on a national scale, using a mail survey. Once data is collected, researchers will analyze the data utilizing descriptive and inferential statistics. Results of this study will be used to make recommendations for future ICN training, resource, and research projects to support the training and professional development needs of state agency SN professionals. This project is of significance because there is currently a lack of trainings and resources specifically targeting state agency SN professionals. The planned completion date for the project is the spring of 2020.

### **Update of Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills (CKS) of Effective School Nutrition (SN) Assistants/Technicians**

The purpose of this study is to identify current competencies, knowledge, and skills (CKS) needed by effective school nutrition (SN) assistants/technicians for updating the 2006 Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) resource. This project will consist of four case study site visits to school districts around the United States, multiple face-to-face and electronic work groups involving 20-30 SN professionals, and a national needs assessment survey distributed to a random sample of 1500 SN programs stratified by USDA region and over 9,000 SN professionals. The resource, which is scheduled to be complete by the summer of 2021, will be a foundational tool for managing SN assistants and technicians. In addition to identifying the latest competencies, knowledge and skills needed by SN assistants and technicians, the resource will provide links to electronic templates which can be utilized for creating job descriptions, performance plans, and annual training schedules.

## **Exploring the implementation of Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Policies and Regulations**

The purpose of this study is to explore CACFP providers' implementation of CACFP policies and regulations; evaluate the impact of children's perceived food acceptability; and identify successful best practices and resources for the CACFP. The completion of this research study will result in the development of an easily-accessible resource that will include identified best practices from the study that support sponsors' implementation of CACFP policies and regulations. This study will be conducted in five steps and will contain qualitative and quantitative data collection protocols that include: input from CACFP experts; 14 case study site visits in all seven USDA FNS regions; the development of a CACFP database; the development of a national survey; and the creation of an online resource. The pilot and data collection for this study will begin in early 2019 and will conclude with a resource for CACFP sponsors by the summer of 2021.