

## **INSTITUTE OF CHILD NUTRITION APPLIED RESEARCH DIVISION SPRING 2020 RESEARCH UPDATE**

Keith Rushing, PhD

### **BACKGROUND**

The Institute of Child Nutrition, Applied Research Division (ICN, ARD) is a part of the College of Education and Human Sciences at The University of Southern Mississippi. The ARD is the only federally funded national center dedicated to applied research for child nutrition (CN) programs. Funding for the Institute is provided from the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (USDA, FNS), through The University of Mississippi. As a national center, the Institute provides information, conducts applied research, and offers training and education opportunities that are responsive to the needs of CN professionals. The researchers at ARD routinely engage a variety of CN stakeholders to identify current issues for research projects. These stakeholders include program directors, managers, and staff; state agency directors and staff; professionals from non-profit health organizations; food manufacturers, purveyors, and distributors; and kitchen equipment companies. Researchers work closely with the USDA, FNS to select topics that reflect the most current and upcoming regulations to best meet the needs of CN program professionals.

ARD researchers employ multiple methodologies to collect data that include site visits, observations, document/record reviews, structured and semi-structured interviews, expert panels, and expert workgroups. The ARD is scheduled to complete the following three projects by October of 2020: Exploratory Investigation of the Roles, Responsibilities, and Impact of Chefs Working in School Nutrition; Environmental Scan and Formative Research of Student Engagement Practices in Support of School Meals Programs; and Training and Professional Development Needs Assessment for State Agency Child Nutrition Program Professionals Who Work Primarily with School Nutrition Programs. Once the technical reports have been accepted by USDA, FNS as deliverables, they will be available at the following URL:  
<https://theicn.org/research>

### **PROJECTS**

#### **EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF THE ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND IMPACT OF CHEFS WORKING IN SCHOOL NUTRITION**

This is the first known research project to investigate the roles, responsibilities, and operational impact of chefs working within school nutrition (SN) programs. This project included six site visits to SN programs around the country to observe and interview chefs, SN directors, and SN staff. The input from these professionals was used for the development and implementation of a national paper survey. Main survey topics included the following:

- Personal and program characteristics;
- Recruiting and hiring chefs;

- Job duties and responsibilities;
- School nutrition program training for chefs;
- Chef success in SN programs;
- The impact of chefs working in SN programs on meal quality attributes; and
- The impact of chefs working in SN programs on program operations and activities.

Surveys have been gathered, and data analysis is coming to a conclusion. Fact sheets, infographics, and articles regarding the outcome of this innovative research will be made available to the public in the fall of 2020.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN AND FORMATIVE RESEARCH OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES IN SUPPORT OF SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMS**

The purpose of this project is to explore methods used by schools, districts, and stakeholders to promote student participation in school nutrition programs, and to encourage healthy eating behaviors. Phase I included semi-structured interviews with 24 key SN program stakeholders to identify activities that encourage involvement in school meal programs and healthy eating. Preliminary analysis revealed student engagement activities could be categorized into five (5) main themes.

- Integration of nutrition education in several student engagement activities;
- Increasing involvement of students and stakeholders;
- Increasing interaction with students;
- Meeting student's demands; and
- Marketing the SN program.

Phase II of this project has been postponed because COVID-19 has abruptly changed the way SN programs are distributing school meals. The activities SN programs have implemented for student engagement may not be feasible or a priority until the return to more normal operations. Therefore, Phase II of this project, which involves visiting schools to see and learn about activities implemented to increase student engagement, has been postponed.

### **TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR STATE AGENCY CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM PROFESSIONALS WHO WORK PRIMARILY WITH SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS**

The Applied Research Division developed and conducted a national needs assessment study to identify and assess the training and professional development needs of individuals administering the National School Lunch Program. The first phase established questions for the survey using input from a diverse representation of state agency staff in a face-to-face expert workgroup. For the second phase, USDA, FNS representatives and a review panel of state agency directors validated the needs assessment tool. In the third phase, a link to the survey and an invitation to share the survey link with staff was sent to each state agency (and United States Territory) director in the United States. The electronic survey contained the five training topic areas that included conducting reviews; financial management; program administration; procurement; and training, curriculum, and delivery.

The highest-rated training needs were in the areas of procurement and financial management, and the lowest-rated needs were in program administration and training, curriculum development, and delivery. Face-to-face training was the predominant format selected with training occurring preferably in the summer months for one or two days. Some survey respondents reported having five or more years of child nutrition experience with 60% in their

current position at the state agency five years or less, suggesting a need for both basic and advanced level training, and support for retention and succession planning.

The results of this research will be published in a technical report on the ICN website, and the information can be utilized by state agencies, the ICN, and the USDA, FNS to develop both entry-level and advanced-level training. It may also be used to create professional development resources in a variety of formats and modes for state agency staff working with CNPs. This research may also be used to help identify future research projects.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

Dr. Keith Rushing earned a Doctorate Degree in Family and Consumer Sciences Education from Texas Tech University in 2005. In 1993, he became a registered dietitian. Prior to being promoted to Director of the Applied Research Division, of the Institute of Child Nutrition in of 2017, he worked as a research scientist for the Institute.