

## **INSTITUTE OF CHILD NUTRITION APPLIED RESEARCH DIVISION SPRING 2021 RESEARCH UPDATE**

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### **BACKGROUND**

The Institute of Child Nutrition, Applied Research Division (ICN, ARD), located at The University of Southern Mississippi, with headquarters at The University of Mississippi, conducts research to promote continuous improvements of child nutrition programs. Funding for the ICN is provided through a grant administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Services (FNS). The research summaries presented in this update represent the most recently completed projects for ICN, ARD. A full report of each research project can be found at <https://theicn.org/research>.

### **PROJECTS**

#### **INSTITUTE OF CHILD NUTRITION COVID-19 TASK FORCE, PHASE I**

When the novel coronavirus of 2019 (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, nationwide school closures were one of the first precautions taken to control the spread of the virus. With limited information on how school nutrition (SN) professionals responded to the unexpected operational changes due to COVID-19, researchers established the COVID-19 Taskforce to accomplish the following research objectives: (a) investigate the experiences of school nutrition program (SNP) directors and State agency (SA) staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, (b) identify SNP directors' and SA staffs' perceived barriers to school meal preparation and service, as well as their ideas and intentions to mitigate challenges and navigate concerns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic; and (c) provide practical applications for these findings through the development of training and resources that provide guidance and support for SNP directors in the 2020–2021 school year.

To accomplish these research objectives, focus groups were conducted with SN professionals (n=23) and SA directors (n=5) in July 2020. Focus groups included participants across all seven USDA regions and various National Center for Education Statistics urban-central locale categories (i.e., city [small, medium, large], suburb [small, medium, large], town [fringe, distant, remote], and rural [fringe, distant, remote]). Each focus group lasted 60–90 minutes and was conducted remotely using the Zoom virtual platform. The questioning sequence employed in all focus groups reflected a pragmatic inquiry tradition and a grounded theory method analysis process.

Findings from this study shed light on the unique challenges and positive outcomes SN professionals experienced during COVID-19 school closures. Because SN professionals had minimal time to prepare, many of the reported challenges revolved around transitioning into and/or developing novel emergency feeding techniques. Due to the fluidity of the situation and a

lack of involvement in the planning process, SN professionals also reported facing challenges with preparing for the upcoming school year. In contrast, many SN professionals also reported unforeseen positive aspects from the experience, which could influence how SNPs are looked upon and operate in the future. In addition, many SNP directors also noted how the experience brought their team closer together and motivated them to form new partnerships outside of their SNPs.

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

This study aimed to explore the role and impact of chefs in SNP operations. The research objectives were to (a) investigate and identify the job duties and responsibilities of chefs working in SNPs; (b) identify the hiring requirements related to educational attainment and previous work experience; (c) identify SN directors' and chefs' perceptions, preferences, and behaviors related to chefs working in SNPs; and (d) identify the impact of chefs working in SNPs on school food quality, school food palatability, school food variety, students' food consumption, school meal program participation, program finances, student engagement activities, nutrition education, and staff training.

To accomplish the research objectives, the researcher used a multi-phased research approach. In Phase I, the study utilized a holistic, multiple-case study design during visits to six school districts in six states, representing five USDA regions. Data was collected in this phase to inform the development of the project's survey instrument for Phase II. In Phase II of the project, the researcher utilized an expert panel of 16 SN professionals to develop and evaluate a survey instrument. For the final phase, Phase III, a national survey was conducted to address the study's purpose and objectives.

The outcomes of this research indicate there is significant agreement between the perceptions of SN administrators and SN chefs on the role, job duties and responsibilities, and impact of a chef on SNP operations. The information gained from this study will be essential for developing the appropriate recruitment tools, training resources, mentoring opportunities, professional development opportunities, and performance assessments necessary for attracting chefs to and retaining them in SNPs.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN AND FORMATIVE RESEARCH OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES IN SUPPORT OF SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS – PHASE I**

The purpose of this study was: to (a) identify specific strategies schools, districts, and stakeholders are utilizing to engage students in school meal program participation and healthy eating behaviors within the context of the SNP; (b) determine the methods used to promote sharing of information regarding SNP-to-student and student-to-student; and (c) assess the impact of each of these strategies on the students' perception of school meals, students' food selection and consumption, school meal program participation, and students' healthy eating behaviors.

This project used a qualitative research design. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews via Zoom technology. Phase I was instrumental in garnering SNP stakeholders' knowledge about the strategies and activities used to increase participation and to promote

healthy nutrition in schools. Stakeholders also reported the challenges and best practices involved in employing those strategies and activities.

This study identified three emerging strategies that SNP stakeholders use to engage students in school meals to maintain or increase school meal program promotion and participation. One theme was *Adapting to Student Needs and Preferences*, with subthemes of 1) menu development, 2) the cafeteria environment, and 3) food accessibility. Another theme was *Marketing the SNP*, with subthemes of 1) social media, 2) digital media, and 3) traditional marketing tools. The third theme was *Stakeholder Engagement*, with subthemes of 1) nutrition education, 2) communicating with stakeholders, 3) collaborating with stakeholders, 4) involving various stakeholders in activities that promote student engagement, 5) engaging students in decisions related to school meal programs and 6) employing interactive activities with the students to encourage student engagement.

Results of this study identify student engagement activities in school meal program participation and promotion and what is being done to promote healthy eating practices. This information can help guide the development of technical assistance, training, or resources dedicated to promoting student engagement in school meal programs.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Dr. Marjuyua Lartey is currently Interim Director of the Institute of Child Nutrition, Applied Research Division at the University of Southern Mississippi. She completed a PhD. in Nutrition and Food Systems at the University of Southern Mississippi as well as her Master's Degree in Human Nutrition and dietetic internship to become an R.D. at the same university.

Dr. Lartey's career encompasses nearly 25 years of teaching, research, and practice in the field of nutrition and dietetics. Most recently, she has spent 12 years conducting research related to youth and Child Nutrition Programs. In addition to research, Dr. Lartey experiences include working on the collegiate level as an instructor and assistant professor as well as serving as a clinical dietitian in a hospital setting.