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The School Nutrition Specialist credential
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THE SCHOOL NUTRITION PROFESSION IS AN ALPHABET SOUP OF VARIOUS ACRONYMS that are fairly critical to know: NSLP, SBP, CACFP, SFSP, SSO, FFVP, CNP, SNP, OVS, M/MA, WG, F/R, CEP, ADP, MPH, HACCP, RFP, AR, USDA, FNS, SNA, ICN, ANC, NSLW, NSBW, SLHD, CNR, DGA, SN—whew! (Now, add those to all the abbreviations we use in text and social media conversations today!) But the focus of this article is on an acronym not included above that demonstrates you know all these different contractions—and much, much more! I’m speaking of the **SNS, the School Nutrition Specialist** credential.

SNA created the SNS credentialing program in 1997 to elevate professional standards, enhance individual performance and promote the professional image of experts working in school nutrition. The first exams were administered in 1999 to 56 brave souls, including me, in Tampa, Fla. We had little idea of what to expect about the test, and no one to ask for advice about its wide-ranging, comprehensive content. When I finished the exam booklet and put my pencil down, I took a moment

to look around, recognizing a few of the others and reflecting on the different career paths we’d followed to come together in this room.

I suspect that each of us had advantages in certain content areas. The director sitting in front of me ran a wonderful program in an affluent area, but none of her schools participated in the School Breakfast Program. How did she answer questions about breakfast? The major city director seated to my right was another

How many did you get right? *National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, Summer Food Service Program, Seamless Summer Option, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, Child Nutrition Program, School Nutrition Program, Offer versus Serve, Meat/Meat Alternate, Whole Grain, Free/Reduced-Price, Community Eligibility Program, Average Daily Participation, Meals Per Labor Hour, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points, Request for Proposal, Administrative Review, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, School Nutrition Association, Institute of Child Nutrition, Annual National Conference, National School Lunch Week, National School Breakfast Week, School Lunch Hero Day, Child Nutrition Reauthorization, Dietary Guidelines for Americans, School Nutrition (magazine, of course!)*



talented school nutrition professional. A dietitian with a master's degree, she had been hired into an administrative job, and I felt sure she had little or no experience in a school kitchen or with setting up a serving line. Did she have to guess at questions related to meal prep? Personally, I was concerned about some questions about unfamiliar financial documentation—OMG!

Once we'd all completed the exam and compared notes, many of us were completely convinced that we'd missed too many questions, and we braced ourselves for the inevitability of a second attempt in the future. I can't recall exactly how long it took to receive the results (though it seemed like *years*), but eventually the news arrived. I had passed—and so had the two other directors I mentioned. Like registered dietitians (RD), certified executive chefs (CEC), certified public accountants (CPA) and many other professionals, we could now add SNS—that special combination of letters, reflecting an impressive level of expertise in our business—after our names. We were now credentialed as School Nutrition Specialists (SNS).

At press time, approximately 1,570 individuals currently hold the SNS designation. It is an impressive fellowship, and being a part of this group is an accomplishment that still fills me with tremendous pride.

JOIN THE CIRCLE

It may be an elite fellowship, but it's not an exclusive one, as there are many, *many* qualified school nutrition leaders working in schools, districts, state agencies and food-service companies who have the experience, education and skills to pursue the SNS credential. I've seen periodic social media group discussions about the SNS, with participants curious about why they should consider investing the time and energy to earn the credential and *how* to go about it, including the best ways to prepare for the exam.

Let's start with the "why." As more individuals achieve the SNS—and use it in their communications—it means greater recognition of the credential both within and outside the profession. Designations of professional competency typically command greater respect. For one thing, it signals to the unaware that this is a bona fide profession full of complexities with standards and rules to follow that require training and expertise in many areas. This is important, as school nutrition programs face a number of challenges that keep them in the public eye, from supply chain disruptions that affect daily menus to changing rules about the availability of free meals.

For the individual, the SNS credential is a showcase of well-earned expertise and accomplishment. It conveys authority and know-how not only within the school nutrition segment but in other areas of the education community, as well. In some districts, it can even have a positive effect on career advancement prospects! And, of course, it's a personal achievement that can bolster pride and self-confidence. An overview of the credential appears in the box on page 5.

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RAISE YOUR OWN AWARENESS

Having earned and maintained my SNS for so many years, I *know* it has made a difference in my career, but I prefer to share the example of the time I wrote a letter of recommendation for a manager who was applying to become a director in a small district. The interviewer took out my letter and asked her what the SNS in my signature meant. She explained, and he asked, “Can *you* get that?” She affirmed that she could—and she was ultimately offered the job. This spring, I reached out to a few newly credentialed school nutrition professionals to learn why *they* made the decision to pursue the SNS.

Breanna Ziesemer, MS, RD, LD, SNS, Nutrition Manager, **IDEA Public Schools**, a charter program **in Texas**, began her career in K-12 school nutrition in May 2020, and she saw preparing for the SNS exam as a perfect opportunity to gain greater knowledge about her new profession. “As a dietitian, you learn very little about school nutrition during your schooling,” says Ziesemer. “Sitting for the SNS exam was, in my opinion, one of the best decisions I could have made for my career.”

Prior to school nutrition, Ziesemer had worked at a long-term care facility. While meal

patterns and regulations were conceptually similar, she discovered that school meals meant “a whole new ballgame!” In addition, she’d picked an extraordinarily challenging time to make the move, with so many programmatic aspects up in the air, thanks to the pre-vaccination days of the pandemic. “Will students come back to school in the fall? Will the waivers be extended? Will we have food? What if the whole team must be put on quarantine?” she remembers. “The first six months of my experience were among the most challenging professional situations I’d ever encountered.”

The hits just kept coming. In February 2021, “Snowpocalypse” paralyzed much of Texas. “When the storm hit, nearly all our central office employees—except for me and one other member of our Operations team—were without power and internet for days. Suddenly, I was thrown into areas of our program that I had never been involved in before!” Ziesemer recounts of her eye-opening introduction beyond the nutrition focus that had been her primary responsibility.

“I saw the complexities of Finance and Operations, and at that point I committed to sitting for the SNS exam the following June.”

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SCHOOL NUTRITION SPECIALIST (SNS) OVERVIEW

DEFINITION: A School Nutrition Specialist is a professional who has successfully passed a comprehensive exam, demonstrating they have the knowledge and competencies necessary to manage school nutrition programs in today's challenging climate. Individuals who have earned the SNS credential are dedicated to the achievement of high professional standards and professional development. The credential is valid for three years and may be renewed for additional three-year periods upon maintenance of ongoing training credits.

ELIGIBILITY: There are academic and experiential requirements to sit for the SNS Exam. There are two options featuring different combinations, but, fundamentally, eligibility requires a solid understanding of the K-12 school nutrition segment. Download the *SNS Credentialing Exam Handbook & Application* for all the specific details: www.schoolnutrition.org/sns.

WHO EARNS THE SNS? Primarily people who work in school nutrition, including staff at both the building and district level, state agency representatives and industry representatives who want to demonstrate an understanding of the field. The SNS is also an option for college faculty and researchers, trainers, consultants and SNA/state affiliate staff. You do not have to work in a school district or be a member of SNA to be a School Nutrition Specialist. Note: There has been recent interest in the SNS by Registered Dietitian Nutritionists and Nutrition and Dietetic Technicians, Registered (RDN/NDTR) since the Commission on Dietetic Registration began recognizing the SNS Exam as a means to earning CPEUs for those credentials.

FUN FACT: The original designation was School Foodservice and Nutrition Specialist (SFNS). SNA leadership opted to drop "foodservice" from the name and acronym in 2004.

EXAM CONTENT: The current SNS exam is 220 multiple-choice questions based on four key areas that are aligned with USDA's professional standards and encompass nine knowledge/content areas and competencies (below). Candidates have four hours to complete the exam.

Key Area 1 Nutrition	Key Area 2 Operations	Key Area 3 Administration	Key Area 4 Marketing and Communications
Menu and Nutrition Management (17% of the Exam)	Facilities, Technology and Equipment Management (5%); Food Production, Inventory and Operation Management (15%); Procurement Management (5.5%); Food Security, Sanitation and Safety (14.5%)	Financial Management (16%); Human Resources Management (10%); Program Management and Accountability (10%)	(7%)



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Her goal, says Ziesemer, was not so much to add letters after her name, “but to accept the challenge of preparing for and passing the exam as a pathway to better understanding the field.”

A year later, as a recipient of the SNS credential, Ziesemer remains entirely enthusiastic about her decision. “My knowledge and abilities are more well-rounded,” she says. And while her primary responsibilities involve menu creation, nutrition education and vendor relations, “I can now confidently participate in conversations with upper management regarding operational or financial matters that previously would have intimidated me. This has allowed me to position myself as a leader in our program, even without the title of a director, which allows me to better advocate for my staff and our students.”

ANY TIME IS THE “RIGHT” TIME

In **Jerome (Idaho) School District #261**, Katie Rogers, SNS, Food Service Director, wonders if, at 26, she’s one of the youngest to earn the SNS credential. “Even if not the youngest, it was a huge feat to do so at half the age of most directors,” Rogers says.

“As an industry member, I am so proud to have earned my SNS credential, demonstrating my knowledge of K-12 child nutrition programs...Earning the SNS credential is something I would encourage all my colleagues to do.”

As a new director, Rogers was getting an on-the-job, deep-end-of-the-pool education about the many wide-ranging areas of operating a school meals program, but in passing the exam, her confidence soared. “I felt like I had an understanding of things before, but now, I am a certified expert!” This confidence in her knowledge, Rogers says, boosted her decision-making with significantly less second guessing.

She’s particularly a fan of *School Food & Nutrition Service Management for the 21st Century, 6th Edition*, by Dot Pannell-Martin and Julie Boettger, a textbook that SNA recommends as a resource to prepare for the exam. “Even if you aren’t ready for the SNS exam, I would highly recommend this book, as it explains every detail in school nutrition in a digestible format,” says Rogers.

As President-elect of the Idaho School Nutrition Association, Rogers finds the SNS also offers enhanced networking. “SNA is extremely welcoming and assimilating, but within the School Nutrition Specialist community, you feel even more that everyone has the same goals and ideas as you do,” she says. “We are all here to run the best programs we can by being innovative, flexible and knowledgeable. I encourage anyone to join the SNS community!”



PERSIST, DON'T RESIST

Alison Powers, MBA, RDN, SNS, is Midwest Regional Sales Manager with J.T.M. Food Group. “As an industry member, I am so proud to have earned my SNS credential, demonstrating my knowledge of K-12 child nutrition programs—even if it took me two tries!” Powers is unabashedly passionate about school nutrition, and she believes the SNS offers her “professional leverage” to succeed in the K-12 sales segment, along with enhanced leadership opportunities.

“Having worked on both sides of the desk within the K-12 foodservice profession, as an operator and industry partner, I was admittedly cavalier when first studying for this test,” Powers recounts. “After failing my first attempt, I cracked down and studied rigorously for three months.” One helpful tool was an analysis of her initial test results, which highlighted areas of competency, as well as areas requiring more work. This helped Powers to focus her subsequent studies on sections where she had “knowledge deficiencies.” She passed on her second try.

The process of earning her SNS credential cemented her admiration and respect for her customers and the expertise required to operate a school meals program, says Powers. And she’s found that the SNS gives *her* greater credibility and respect with customers who appreciate this demonstration of her knowledge. “Earning the SNS credential is something I would encourage all my [industry] colleagues to do,” Powers urges.

LEARN AND EARN

The SNS credential is a mark of excellence and achievement that reflects what it takes to manage school nutrition programs in today’s challenging climate, and it is something you *earn*. But the preparation effort alone proves well worth the time investment—I know some people who have studied for the exam just to improve their knowledge base without actually sitting for the test! Not only will you gain a better understanding of different areas

of the business, but it will leave you better able to analyze, question and discuss operational issues with confidence.

In the remaining weeks of 2022 and into the beginning of 2023, the SNS exam will be administered in nearly a dozen different states, with more dates being added all the time. Some candidates will devise their own study program, while others will collaborate on the process in different ways, including splitting up subject areas and leading mini review courses for the group. Many state associations that plan to host the exam support the effort by offering—often free—study courses.

SNA has built an online resource center, SNS Preparation Central (www.schoolnutrition.org/snsprep), to help candidates prepare for the exam. It includes details about the in-person SNS Credentialing Preparation Course offered at SNA national conferences. You will also find links to several helpful downloadable resources, including an SNS Suggested Study Plan, Sample Course Agenda, SNS Exam Resource Recommendations, SNS FAQs, an “Exam Mindset” infographic, suggestions for setting up a Facebook Study Group and the *SNS Exam Handbook*. Also consider purchasing the *SNS Study Guide* and *School Food and*

Nutrition Service Management for the 21st Century, 6th Edition; you’ll find links to do so in the SNS Preparation Central portal.

Other exam preparation advice collected from social media posts includes:

- ✓ Give yourself at *least* three months to study.
- ✓ Keep national rules and regulations top of mind, rather than focusing on state and local ones.
- ✓ Find a study partner or two; not only will it hold you accountable, but you’ll be able to ask each other questions about areas you don’t know or find confusing.
- ✓ Pay attention to the various math formulas.
- ✓ Don’t just read the resources: highlight, underline and take notes.
- ✓ Check for resources available from your state association.
- ✓ Look to the Institute of Child Nutrition (<https://theicn.org>), especially its financial management modules and other areas where you may need more training.
- ✓ Don’t be intimidated!

PROPER I.D.

I am now retired from the day-to-day business of running a school meals operation but I am still involved in the field as a speaker, trainer, consultant, board member, magazine contributor and active SNA member. Sometimes this leads to an identity crisis about how I might identify myself professionally. When in doubt, I proudly list my job title as School Nutrition Specialist. After all, it describes me to a T. **SN+**

JoAnne Robinett is a sought-after speaker and trainer in school nutrition and the current Chair of the School Nutrition Foundation Board of Directors.



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