

## Building the Leadership Capacity of North Carolina's Child Nutrition Professionals

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*Please note that this study was published before the implementation of Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which went into effect during the 2012-13 school year, and its provision for Smart Snacks Nutrition Standards for Competitive Food in Schools, implemented during the 2014-15 school year. As such, certain research may not be relevant today.*

### INTRODUCTION

Prior to 1997, professional development opportunities offered to North Carolina's child nutrition directors, supervisors, and managers focused almost exclusively on the technical or management aspects of their jobs. In 1997, the Division of Child Nutrition Services, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) conducted a statewide survey of child nutrition directors and supervisors. The survey indicated a critical need for leadership training based on the diverse job responsibilities facing child nutrition professionals as they manage the complex operations of today's school nutrition programs.

The impetus for designing a leadership development program for child nutrition professionals was the contemporary belief that the leadership capacity of everyone in an organization must be developed in order for the organization itself to excel. The decentralization of educational decision-making and the focus on accountability for performance have made leadership development even more critical in recent years. This is especially true in the field of child nutrition where professionals may be the only administrators within a school system who truly operate with a "bottom line." Child nutrition professionals not only must operate programs efficiently in order to make a profit or break even financially, but also they must serve attractive and nutritious meals.

Leaders at the state level recognized a need for another degree of intervention to ensure the success of child nutrition services in the state. In response to this need, representatives of the North Carolina Division of Child Nutrition Services and the Collegium for the Advancement of Schools, Schooling, and Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro designed the Educational Leadership Academy for the approximately 250 child nutrition directors and supervisors in North Carolina's school districts. In an effort to further the reach of the Academy, selected topics were lifted from its curriculum, adapted for use with site managers, and delivered in one-day, "drive-in" sessions for child nutrition managers across North Carolina.

Armed with the survey results and visionary leadership at the state level, the process of designing, developing, and delivering a leadership training program for child nutrition professionals began. State leaders agreed that the Academy's training and development activities should provide child nutrition professionals with the opportunity to enhance their self-understanding and develop new skills to advance their school nutrition programs. The Educational Leadership Academy emphasizes critical leadership issues, including the need for continuous improvement, change, risk taking, clarity and constancy of purpose, agreement over values and belief systems, and "student-focused" child nutrition programs.

The development and delivery of Academy training programs and activities included the following criteria:

- Programs must offer participants continual opportunities for introspection, reflection, and renewal.
- Collaborative communication is essential for the program's content and activities to match the needs and expectations of directors and supervisors.
- Programs must include assessment of individual participants' leadership skills and knowledge with feedback from the assessment instruments. The feedback must serve as the basis for personal planning, growth, and development.
- Programs must take into account the complexity of the contemporary leadership challenges facing child nutrition professionals.
- Training activities must be interactive and experiential.
- Presentations must be congruent with adult learning styles.
- Programs must provide participants with the opportunity to learn new leadership skills and competencies, as well as enrich the leadership capabilities they have learned from previous experiences.

### **Academy Content**

The Collegium developed, with input from child nutrition leaders, the framework and content of the Academy. It also had responsibility for deciding the specific curriculum design and sequence of delivery, based on "best practices" in leadership development. The Collegium delivered the initial academy over a three-year period, beginning in the 1997-98 school year and concluding in 1999-00. The training was provided over five consecutive days in the six North Carolina Child Nutrition Service Regions with groups comprised of approximately 30 to 35 directors and supervisors each. The Collegium carefully constructed the curriculum design and program content to include training and development experiences that would result in personal mastery; the opportunity to understand both the "world" of school organizations and the impact of the external environment on the life of the child nutrition leader; and reflection on practice. The Collegium also was strategic in selecting program trainers with educational backgrounds and experiences that allowed participants to connect with these instructors on a personal level.

Day One of the Academy began with participants considering their most critical leadership challenges, their model of effective leadership in child nutrition programs, and the person who had most influenced their leadership style. This activity was followed by a module entitled, "Learning from a Master: Yourself," which was based on research published in the late 1980s (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). Participants examined those factors that had most "shaped" them as leaders in order to understand how this shaping both helped and hindered their responsiveness to challenges.

The content for the second day of the Academy consisted of a personality inventory that allowed directors and supervisors to better understand the strengths of their particular personality type, as well identify potential areas of development (Briggs and Myers, 1998). Participants were asked to examine their current critical leadership challenges in the context of their personality profiles. Day Two also included training in understanding the school environment and the importance of a healthy culture in schools and cafeterias, examining issues around facilitating desirable changes in their programs, and measuring their personal preferences for leading change (Musselwhite & Ingram, 2000). The day concluded with an assessment designed to help participants better

understand their interpersonal needs and how those needs impact their leadership abilities (Consulting Psychologists Press, 1996).

The third day of the Academy centered on the importance of team building in a child nutrition program. The directors and supervisors examined team roles and applied this information to activities in an effort to better understand their teams “back home.” The day also emphasized child nutrition’s role in site-based management and empowerment.

The importance of better decision-making in child nutrition programs was the focus of Day Four. Directors and supervisors explored the decision-making process and developed ways to enhance their effectiveness as leaders. A complex organizational simulation was utilized to provide participants with an opportunity to work through issues of quality, teamwork, team leadership, decision-making, and chaos (Musselwhite, 2000). Participants also were asked to apply these lessons to challenges in their respective school districts.

The final day, Day Five, brought all previous lessons together through reflection on the week’s activities. The child nutrition leaders then set goals and plans for follow-up when they returned home.

### **Academy Follow-Up**

As a follow-up to each of the weeklong academies, the Collegium conducted focus group sessions with training participants. The focus groups, which were held several months after the training, were designed to determine the impact of the Academy experience on the participants, generally, as well as evaluate the training’s effectiveness on them as child nutrition leaders, specifically.

Consistently, participants in the Academy indicated that the leadership development experience had positively impacted their leadership abilities. The feedback from the focus group sessions resulted in the continuation of the original Academy and creation of a second, more comprehensive, Academy for those who participated in the first training session. The content for Academy II will consist of continuous improvement planning in child nutrition programs, including data-driven decision-making, resource leveraging, taking change to the next level, becoming an effective communicator for child nutrition programs, enhancing personal and professional relationships, and strategies for leading diverse employee groups. In Spring 2003, the Collegium resumed the delivery of the original Academy and was scheduled to begin delivery of Academy II sessions in Fall 2003.

### **Training for Site Managers**

Also, the Collegium is in its fifth year (2003-04) of providing leadership training to site managers throughout North Carolina. During the first two years of leadership development training, site managers were invited to attend a day-long academy on “Learning from a Master: Yourself,” which had been a part of the program content for child nutrition directors and supervisors. Approximately six weeks after participating in this initial training, site managers attended a second academy on goal setting and planning. This introduced models for establishing personal and professional goals and developing plans for their accomplishment. In the third year of this program, the participants focused on team building and formulating concrete strategies for

team development. In 2002-03, the program emphasized creating an environment for success through strategies related to communication, motivation, mentoring, and coaching. In this, Year Five, site managers now have an opportunity to explore concepts related to conflict resolution and managing employees effectively.

With the leadership program for site managers, representatives of the Collegium and the North Carolina Child Nutrition Services Section have made a conscious effort to provide a continuum of training that builds on content from year to year. The training also equips participants with concrete strategies to apply in their school districts. Additionally, the Collegium has been careful to select trainers, with whom program participants can connect, a factor that has been critical to the program's success.

## CONCLUSION

As challenges facing all types of organizations have grown and become more complex, it has become imperative that states develop the leadership capacity of its child nutrition professionals. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction recognized the need to move beyond technical and management training in order to provide leadership development for leaders in nutrition. The ongoing evaluation of these programs includes participant evaluations at the conclusion of each academy and follow-up focus group sessions. These evaluations indicate that the academies have a positive impact on the kind and quality of child nutrition services being delivered in the school districts and schools of North Carolina.

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## BIOGRAPHY

**Coble** and **Clodfelter** are, respectively, director and program director of the Collegium for the Advancement of Schools at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.