

# Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division Research Update

▪ Marjuyua Lartey, PhD, RD

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The Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division (ICN ARD), funded through a grant administered by the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services (USDA FNS), conducts ongoing research to enhance Child Nutrition Programs (CNPs). For comprehensive reports on ICN ARD's research projects, visit <https://theicn.org/research>. Stay informed and engaged with the latest research in child nutrition (CN) and ICN ARD!

## RECENTLY COMPLETED RESEARCH

### Environmental Scan of Instructional Technology Used to Develop and Deliver Virtual Training

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual training has surged in prevalence, reshaping the landscape of education and professional development. With lockdowns and social distancing measures in place, traditional in-person training became impractical, leading to the rapid transition towards digital platforms. This shift was not limited to academic institutions; businesses and organizations swiftly adopted virtual training solutions to upskill their workforce remotely. The trend has also highlighted the importance of adaptable and interactive online learning platforms, paving the way for innovative teaching methods and technologies. The Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) has been able to develop and deliver virtual training through synchronous and asynchronous options to educate CN Program providers for years. Because the instructional technology (IT) landscape is ever-evolving, organizations like ICN must regularly reassess their tools and strategies to leverage the most effective and up-to-date technologies for optimal learning outcomes. As a result, this study aimed to identify and describe the IT used by applicable industry, allied organizations, and universities to provide virtual training for CNP professionals.

To accomplish these research objectives, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants (n=26) from various organizations that provide CNP training, State agency personnel (n=10), allied organization personnel (n=7), higher education professionals (n=6), and consultant trainers (n=3). The interviews included participants with varying years of experience, from one year to more than 20 years. Each interview lasted 60 minutes and was conducted remotely using the Zoom virtual platform.

Some findings from this study are:

1. The benefits of IT for virtual training are instructional technology usability, participant flexibility, training availability, trainer preference, interactivity, data generation, and translation and accessibility.
2. The challenges of IT for virtual training are technology problems, participant issues, and active participant engagement.



3. The trends focused on incorporating adult learning principles when planning the training, ensuring participant engagement, including relevant information and training schedules.
4. Best practices included highlighting the importance of utilizing adult learning principles, instructor preparation, developing training with relevant information, encouraging participant engagement, ensuring technology support was available as needed, and practicing virtual etiquette.

Currently, the research report is in the final stages of preparation. The results of this study will be accessible on the ICN website in early Winter.

### **Needs Assessment of Native American/Tribal School Nutrition Programs**

Understanding the unique requirements of School Nutrition Program (SNP) operators serving Native American and tribal schools is paramount for ensuring the well-being of students in these communities. These operators face distinctive challenges, including cultural considerations, dietary preferences, and potential logistical hurdles in accessing traditional foods and ingredients. Understanding if the needs of specific communities require tailored approaches in menu planning, procurement strategies, and educational initiatives is pivotal to organizations designed to deliver training, technical assistance, and education to SNP operators. The purpose of this research study was to explore the needs of professionals providing meals in Native American and Tribal SNPs through the development of a needs assessment survey.

To accomplish the research objectives, the researcher used a mixed-method research approach. In the project's initial phase, the researcher completed face-to-face and virtual interviews with State agency personnel, USDA regional office personnel, and school nutrition (SN) professionals supporting and serving Native American and Tribal schools (n=7). In the project's next phase, the researcher utilized a face-to-face expert work group (n=11) of SN professionals, including USDA FNS representatives, State agency personnel, and SN professionals, to review and confirm the needs assessment statements and make survey recommendations for dissemination and delivery. For the final phase, the researcher finalized a draft needs assessment survey for Native American and Tribal SNPs.

The interview findings indicated that (a) State agencies have successfully established robust relationships with SN professionals in Native American and Tribal schools, (b) SN professionals are actively engaged in seeking and cultivating resources pertinent to their field, and (c) SN professionals express a preference for concise, easy to read training materials for SN staff. Surprisingly, SN professionals feel isolated and often feel disconnected from peers facing similar community challenges and needs.

Research findings from the expert panel work group meeting highlight several key insights:

1. Establishing robust and collaborative relationships with SN professionals, state agencies, and peers in analogous roles and environments is crucial for fostering an adequate support network.
2. State agencies maintain a desire to comprehend the distinctive requirements of Native American and Tribal SN programs, emphasizing a commitment to tailored support.
3. Both state agencies and professionals in the field exhibit complementary resource and training needs.



4. There is a consensus on the need to promote the extensive resources provided by the ICN, encompassing a spectrum of in-person and virtual resources, training modules, and networking opportunities.

A significant research outcome is the development of a preliminary draft for a comprehensive needs assessment for Native American and Tribal schools working with the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Currently, the research report is in the final stages of preparation. The results of this study will be accessible on the ICN website in early Winter.

## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

### Program Operations Research

#### **Child Nutrition Rapid Online Survey Series**

To respond effectively to changes or crises in the CN environment, the ICN ARD researchers have developed a multi-year study designed to provide reliable, timely evidence on the impact and effects of activities in the CN environment that may have an impact on policymakers, CNP providers, CN industry partners, allied organizations, and other stakeholders. This project, spanning four rapid online surveys, aims to discern trends and bridge data gaps in CNP operations.

#### **Perceptions and Practices of Incorporating Culture-Specific Menu Items in School Meals**

Studying the perceptions and practices surrounding incorporating culture-specific menu items in school meals is an imperative area of research with far-reaching implications. It holds the potential to foster inclusivity and celebrate diversity within school settings. Not only will understanding how different cultures are represented in school menus acknowledge students' varied backgrounds, but it can also positively impact student engagement and satisfaction, potentially leading to higher participation rates. By delving into this topic, the outcomes can forge a path towards more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and nutritionally balanced school meal programs that cater to the diverse needs of the student population. This study will identify perceptions and practices for selecting and incorporating menu items that reflect the cultural background of students served in SNPs nationwide.

#### **Meeting the Challenges of Serving Scratch-Prepared Foods in School Meal Programs**

Understanding the multifaceted details required to provide scratch-prepared meals within school meal programs is critical to successfully adopting this practice. This responsibility demands a strategic approach encompassing various elements, from sourcing quality ingredients to optimizing kitchen workflows and ensuring compliance with dietary guidelines. Furthermore, engaging with stakeholders, including students, is essential. The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges affecting the capability of school nutrition professionals to offer scratch-prepared foods in schools, the degree to which the challenges are prevalent in SNPs across the United States, and recommendations for strategies, techniques, and best practices to mitigate these challenges (i.e., training, resources, grants, etc.).



## **Human Resource Research**

### **Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills Research Series**

The Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills (CKS) series contains ICN ARD's signature research-based resources for CN professionals. The CKS resources identify the competencies, knowledge, and skills most professionals in the CN industry need to perform their job functions effectively.

### **Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills for Chefs Working in School Nutrition Programs**

This iteration of the CKS series is an expansion of previous research conducted by ICN ARD to explore the roles, responsibilities, and impact of chefs working in SNPs, which resulted in the development and administration of a national survey to address job functions, titles, descriptions of SN chefs and perceptions, preferences, practices, behaviors, and impacts of chefs working in SN operations from the perspective of SN leadership and SN chefs. The project aims to develop an evidence-based competency framework to establish requisite knowledge and skills for chefs in SNPs.

### **Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills for School Nutrition Directors**

The ICN ARD is updating the CKS resource tailored for SN directors, last released before implementing the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. The study aims to establish a robust competency framework for SN directors to reflect changes in regulations and SNP practices.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Marjuyua Lartey, Ph.D., RDN, is director of the Applied Research Division of the Institute of Child Nutrition at the University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.