

Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division Research Update

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

RECENTLY COMPLETED RESEARCH

Child Nutrition Rapid Online Survey Series

The Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division (ICN ARD) developed a multi-year study to address issues and challenges impacting the child nutrition environment. The project included four rapid online surveys designed to address the following areas: a) Child Nutrition Program (CNP) challenges and support systems, b) culinary training needs of School Nutrition Program (SNP) professionals, c) training needs of SNP professionals, and d) training needs of Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) professionals.

Survey One, addressing the CNP challenges and support systems, has been completed and the data analyzed. The survey responses revealed that 78% of respondents cited the children and/or students as the most rewarding aspect of their job, contributing significantly to job satisfaction. Additionally, 91% of participants are happy working in their CNP and 65% are optimistic about the future of their CNP. Respondents also reported strong support from coworkers (69%) and local administration (68%). Additional survey findings associated with this project will be available on the ICN website in early spring.

Survey Two, assessing the culinary training needs of SNP professionals, had a total of 1,725 individuals to complete the survey. Participants in this study showed the highest interest for culinary training was in increasing vegetable variety and appeal (82%), reducing sodium and sugar while maintaining flavor (78%), and speed scratch-based food production (78%). A detailed report on these findings will be available in the spring.

Survey Three, addressing the training needs of SNP professionals, received 777 valid responses. Texas had the highest number of respondents (23.7%). When asked about training needs over the next two years, School Nutrition management and other respondents expressed a high demand for in-person training in food production (17.8%), program management (17.6%), menu planning (15.9%), and financial management (15.7%). The findings from this survey, along with the full report, will be available in the spring on the Institute's website.



Analysis of the survey data for Survey Four (training needs of CACFP professionals) is underway, with the final report expected to be released in Spring 2025.

Food Trends in K-12

In April 2024, the ARD conducted an online survey on Food Trends in K-12 education, gathering responses from 1,691 school nutrition professionals, including directors, managers, staff, chefs, and state agency representatives. Participants were asked to identify foods, flavors, seasonings, sauces, condiments, and dining options that are currently popular, growing in popularity, or fading in popularity. The results from the top two tertiles of data on currently popular and emerging food items are featured in a digital publication titled *Served Magazine*. This dynamic presentation includes a curated list of the top foods in K-12 settings, accompanied by recipes and additional resources valuable for school nutrition professionals involved in menu development and food service in local SNPs.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Program Operations Research

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

The purpose of this study is to identify perceptions and practices for selecting and incorporating menu items that reflect the cultural background of students served in SNPs nationwide. The research is currently underway, and you may be contacted via email to participate in the study.

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

The study aims at identifying the challenges school nutrition professionals face in offering scratch-prepared foods in schools, including exploring barriers such as cost, food quality control, compliance with nutrition standards, equipment limitations, staff skill levels, availability of local and traditional foods, and stakeholder demand. Additionally, we seek to gather recommendations on strategies, resources, and best practices to overcome these challenges. A survey is scheduled for early Spring 2025 for this study.

Meeting the Challenges of Serving Scratch-Prepared Foods in Child and Adult Food Programs

The purpose of this project is to identify: 1) the challenges affecting the ability of CACFP operators to provide scratch-prepared foods, including equipment, facility, time and budget constraints, operator skill levels, food safety concerns, and meeting the food preferences of program recipients; 2) the extent to which these challenges are prevalent in CACFP sites across the U.S.; and 3) recommendations for strategies, techniques, and best practices to address these challenges, such as training, resources, and grants. The findings of this study will help CACFP operators overcome identified obstacles through targeted resources and trainings to improve operational efficiency and meal quality.

Exploratory Investigation of the Challenges and Drives for Serving Local Foods in Rural School Districts

The purpose of this project is to identify 1) the challenges affecting the ability of rural school districts to serve local and culturally relevant foods; 2) the degree to which these challenges are prevalent in rural school districts in the United States; 3) key drivers related to serving local and culturally relevant foods; and 4) sustainable strategies, resources, and best practices for serving local and culturally relevant foods in rural school districts. This research project will address critical issues surrounding food access and cultural relevance in rural school districts and provide valuable insights into the unique barriers faced by rural communities. Additionally, this research has the potential to contribute to improved dietary habits and student engagement and strengthened connection to local food systems in rural settings.

Human Resource Research

Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills for Chefs Working in Schools

The Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills (CKS) research aims to create an evidence-based competency framework that outlines the essential knowledge and skills required for chefs in SNPs. All data collection and analysis for this project have been completed. The researcher is currently developing a comprehensive CKS resource and report, which will include results and practical tools such as a job description template, performance management templates, and a career development template. A full report and the CKS resource will be available on the ICN website in early spring.

Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills for School Nutrition Directors

The CKS for School Nutrition Directors project aims to establish a comprehensive competency framework for school nutrition directors. The researcher has been diligently working to define the essential knowledge and skills required for success in the role of a school nutrition director in the 21st century. The first phase of the project, involving interviews and Delphi discussions, has been completed. The next phase will focus on confirming and validating these competency statements. School nutrition professionals now have another opportunity to contribute to this important research by participating in face-to-face and virtual expert panel meetings, which are scheduled for mid to late spring.

Social Media for Child Nutrition Program Employee Training Across Generations

The purpose of this project is to further understand the use of social media as a potential resource for CNP professionals to address the unique challenges that come with training and providing professional development, information dissemination, community building, and knowledge sharing among employees from different generations. In an era where communication technologies are rapidly evolving, understanding how social media can facilitate information dissemination is crucial. This investigation will likely help identify strategies for leveraging social media as a tool for improving skills and knowledge in CNPs.

Customer Satisfaction

Revise and Validate ICN ARD High School Student's Participation and Satisfaction Survey

The purpose of this project is to revise and validate ICN ARD research-based tools to capture high school students' perceptions, behaviors, and recommendations on their participation and satisfaction with meals served under the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program. Validated tools will facilitate ongoing assessment and adaptation of meal services, ensuring they align with the evolving needs and preferences of high school students. By focusing on student feedback, valuable insights can be gained to improve program offerings and encourage student engagement in the SNP.

BIOGRAPHY

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