

Institute of Child Nutrition Applied Research Division Research Update

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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, conducts ongoing research to enhance Child Nutrition Programs. For comprehensive reports on the Applied Research Division's projects, visit <https://theicn.org/research/>, where you can stay informed and engaged with the latest research in child nutrition from the Applied Research Division.

RECENTLY COMPLETED RESEARCH

Child Nutrition Rapid Online Survey Series

The 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.

The final survey in the child nutrition rapid online survey series was completed in March of 2025. This survey focused on the training needs of CACFP professionals. Three hundred and eight individuals consented to participate in the research and completed the survey. The respondents included family home care providers, child care directors, CACFP sponsors, and Head Start nutrition administrators. The results of the research indicated that the most significant issues or challenges CACFP professionals face are related to the following: a) identifying resources and assistance to address the procurement of foods to meet children's special dietary needs (84.4% of the respondents), CACFP guidelines (84.1%), and finding fresh fruits and vegetables that meet their CACFP budget (82.8%), and b) addressing training needs including having time to train (63.3%) and finding local face-to-face CACFP training (58.4%).

The findings from this survey and the full report are available on the Institute of Child Nutrition's (ICN) website under the Applied Research Division's tab.

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

In May 2025, the ICN ARD released the Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills (CKS) for Chefs Working in School Nutrition Programs' technical report and resource. The report and resource created an evidence-based competency framework that outlines the essential knowledge and skills required for chefs in SNPs. The resource



includes practical tools to support school nutrition administrators in hiring, retaining, and training school chefs. It includes items such as a job description template, a performance management template, and a career development template. A full report and the CKS resource are available on the ICN website.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Program Operations Research

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

The study identifies 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. The survey to assess the challenges and drivers of serving scratch-prepared foods was completed in early May 2025. Data analysis is underway. The research is nearing completion, and the report and research findings will be available early Spring 2026.

Perceptions and Practices of Incorporating Student-Centered Menu Items in School Meals

This study aims to identify perceptions and practices for selecting and incorporating student-centered menu items in school meals. A survey was developed to assess student preferences and will be administered in Fall 2025. Keep an eye out for an invitation to participate in this timely research.

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; 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. The initial phase of this research involved virtual interviews with CACFP operators, including child care sponsoring organizations, childcare centers, and family childcare providers. Following the interviews, a draft survey was developed and will be distributed nationally by early Spring 2026.

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 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 foods; and 4) sustainable strategies, resources, and best practices for serving local foods in rural school districts. The first phase of this research, virtual interviews with key stakeholders in school districts serving local foods, is complete. The next phase of this project will include an expert panel work group charged with validating the national survey designed to address the challenges and drivers of serving local foods in rural areas. The national survey is scheduled to be released in the Summer of 2026.

Human Resource Research

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. School nutrition professionals participated in an expert panel meeting to confirm the competency, knowledge, and skill statements for directors in March of 2025. The next phase of this project will involve an expert panel meeting to validate the CKS statements. After the statements are validated, the CKS report and resource will be developed. These deliverables will be available on the ICN website in early Spring 2026.

Social Media for Child Nutrition Program Employee Training Across Generations

This project aims to understand the use of social media as a potential resource for CNP professionals to address the unique challenges that come with training and professional development among different generations. This project will involve focus group discussions and a survey to address the changing landscape of training needs among school nutrition professionals and their employers. The project will begin with focus group discussions in Fall 2025 and will solicit participation from current school nutrition directors, managers, and staff.

Customer Satisfaction

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

This project aims 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. The completion of this study will equip school nutrition administrators with the tools necessary to meet the changing expectations of the current student population at the local level, empower students with a voice to share their desires and expectations for the school food experience, and allow administrators the opportunity to pivot or adjust their offerings to encourage participation in school meals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Recruiting and engaging school nutrition professionals is critical for the ICN ARD. The successful completion of each study depends entirely on CNP professionals' willingness to become involved and respond to requests for participation. We acknowledge that without the dedicated support of CNP professionals, the objectives of the research ICN ARD conducts cannot be fully achieved.

BIOGRAPHY

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