

2026 Research Agenda

PURPOSE

The School Nutrition Association (SNA) outlines 5 research priority topics for school nutrition research, identifying specific sub-topics and areas of focus, as well as recommended research strategies to strengthen the base of knowledge in each priority topic area.

The guiding principle for our research agenda is SNA's vision, which ensures every student has equal access to nutritious meals at school that promote optimal health and well-being. All of these topics may not be new to the field of school nutrition; however, each of them is of importance to school nutrition professionals and requires research to be better understood.

5 RESEARCH PRIORITIES



**Meal
Participation**



**Emergency
Preparedness &
Feeding Strategies**



**Rural
Districts**



**Staffing &
Finances**



**Value &
Outcomes of
School Nutrition
Programs**

ABOUT SNA

The School Nutrition Association (SNA) is a national, nonprofit professional organization representing 50,000 members who provide high-quality, low-cost meals to students across the country. SNA empowers and supports school nutrition professionals in advancing the accessibility, quality and integrity of school nutrition programs. For more information, please visit www.schoolnutrition.org.

AREA	FOCUS	STRATEGIES
Meal Participation	- Challenges, drivers - Technology integration - Marketing strategies	- Assess impact of healthy school meals for all on participation - Analyze student participation and satisfaction - Identify current seat times (and stakeholder perceptions of seat times) for lunch periods and effects on academic success, eating behavior changes, and health outcomes - Assess impact of digital signage, apps, and other technologies on the School Nutrition (SN) landscape - Describe how alternative meal delivery systems have impacted participation - Describe best practices for marketing and serving meals in non-traditional ways (hybrid or virtual) - Assess impact of meal preparation/sourcing (scratch cooking, farm-to-school, etc.) on participation
Emergency Preparedness & Feeding Strategies	Comprehensive evaluation of impact across multiple sectors	- Assess impacts of emergency situations (weather events, pandemics, etc.) on school meal programs - Identify procurement challenges due to supply chain issues - Describe best practices for menu adaptation during emergencies - Identify labor issues and adaptations during unexpected occurrences
Rural Districts	Comprehensive assessment and audit of characteristics defining rural districts	- Evaluate ability for SN professionals in rural districts to meet and maintain professional standards - Identify drivers and challenges to training rural SN staff in a virtual environment - Describe oversight and management of meal programs, including characteristics of those charged with day-to-day responsibilities - Identify procurement challenges and best practices - Investigate relationship between rural child food insecurity and school meal participation
Staffing and Finances	- Promote school nutrition professionals as experts in the field - Build a cadre of qualified personnel to lead the next generation of school nutrition professionals	- Identify effects of implementing healthy school meals for all (HSM4A), including staffing, unpaid meal debt, and financial outcomes - Assess impact of professional standards on recruitment/retention of qualified employees - Assess the current use of mentorship - Describe perceived current education needs - Investigate relationships between certification/training and retention, bonuses, and salaries - Identify best practices for reducing or eliminating unpaid meal debt, including how state agencies, school districts, and how cities/states can support school nutrition programs - Describe best practices in SN program human resource management, including reducing staff turnover and succession planning - Describe trends in salaries and benefits by position, state, district size, etc. - Assess how staffing, procurement, and finances will impact forthcoming regulatory (salt, Buy American, added sugar) requirements - Assess financial impacts of competitive foods and alternative delivery methods on SN programs
Value & Outcomes of School Nutrition Programs	- Evaluate the impact of school meal participation on classroom attendance, educational performance, behavioral outcomes, school medical personnel visits and dietary intake - Comparison of nutritional quality, cost efficiency, and/or student consumption between school meals and meals prepared at home - Explore potential challenges surrounding compliance with regulations associated with ultra-processed foods (UPFs)	- Identify the operational challenges and drivers associated with compliance related to ultra-processed foods (UPFs) regulations (such as staffing, procurement, etc.) - Analyze relationships between school meal participation and educational, behavioral, health outcomes at the school and district levels - Investigate effects of healthy school meals for all on attendance, performance, behavior, and health outcomes