

Exploring the Uniqueness of Child Nutrition Programs in Large School Districts



National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi
1-800-321-3054

2006

This publication has been produced by the National Food Service Management Institute–Applied Research Division, located at The University of Southern Mississippi with headquarters at The University of Mississippi. Funding for the Institute has been provided with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, to The University of Mississippi. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of The University of Mississippi or the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

The information provided in this publication is the result of independent research produced by NFSMI and is not necessarily in accordance with U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) policy. FNS is the federal agency responsible for all federal domestic child nutrition programs including the National School Lunch Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the Summer Food Service Program. Individuals are encouraged to contact their local child nutrition program sponsor and/or their Child Nutrition State Agency should there appear to be a conflict with the information contained herein, and any State or Federal policy that governs the associated child nutrition program. For more information on the Federal child nutrition programs please visit www.fns.usda.gov/cnd.

National Food Service Management Institute The University of Mississippi

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

The National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) was authorized by Congress in 1989 and established in 1990 at The University of Mississippi in Oxford. The Institute operates under a grant agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

PURPOSE

The purpose of NFSMI is to improve the operation of Child Nutrition Programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination. The Administrative Offices and Divisions of Technology Transfer and Education and Training are located in Oxford. The Division of Applied Research is located at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

MISSION

The mission of the NFSMI is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs.

VISION

The vision of the NFSMI is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in Child Nutrition Programs.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Headquarters

The University of Mississippi
Phone: 800-321-3054
Fax: 800-321-3061
www.nfsmi.org

**Education and Training Division
Technology Transfer Division**
The University of Mississippi
6 Jeanette Phillips Drive
P.O. Drawer 188
University, MS 38677-0188

Applied Research Division
The University of Southern Mississippi
118 College Drive #10077
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601-266-5773
Fax: 888-262-9631

Acknowledgments

WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY

**Mary Frances Nettles, PhD, RD
Research Scientist**

**Deborah H. Carr, PhD, RD
Director, Applied Research Division**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Charlotte B. Oakley, PhD, RD, FADA

EXPLORING THE UNIQUENESS OF CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS IN LARGE SCHOOL DISTRICTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The largest public school districts in the United States are responsible for educating a high percentage of public school students in the nation; therefore, school nutrition programs in these districts have the greatest potential for influencing the nutritional health and wellbeing of children nationwide. Previous research has indicated that large school districts serve a demographically different student body, have a greater percentage of economically disadvantaged students, and operate in complex political and financial environments than smaller school districts (Casserly, 2005; Snipes, Doolittle & Herlihy, 2002).

Limited research exists on issues related to operating school nutrition (SN) programs in large school districts. To address this issue, the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), Applied Research Division initiated a research study to identify the unique issues associated with school nutrition programs in large school districts. The specific objectives for the study were to determine operational issues and practices SN directors encounter in large school districts, identify characteristics and qualities needed to be a successful SN director in a large school district, and identify whether training is needed to develop these characteristics and qualities.

NFSMI researchers assembled an expert panel of SN directors from large school districts to ascertain their opinions regarding operational issues, challenges, and training needs specific to

those who operate SN programs in large school districts. NSFMI researchers developed a three-section survey from the qualitative data obtained during the expert panel discussion session. In the first section, participants indicated their agreement with 52 operational issues and practices related to SN operations in large school districts. Agreement was rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Participants also indicated how often each operational issue/practice was encountered or performed by use of a 5-point scale that ranged from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*daily*). In section two, participants indicated how important each of 33 characteristics or qualities was to being a successful SN director in a large school district and also specified their opinion of the importance of training to develop these characteristics/qualities. In both instances, importance was rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not important*) to 4 (*very important*). In section three, participants provided additional information about themselves and their SN operation.

For this research study, NFSMI researchers defined large school districts as those with 30,000 or more student enrollment which resulted in a study sample of 232 school districts in the seven USDA regions. Researchers mailed the survey, a cover letter, and a self-addressed, postage-paid return envelope to the study sample of 232 school nutrition directors. Researchers then sent a follow-up letter to all SN directors encouraging their response. These efforts resulted in a 42% response from the SN directors.

The majority of SN directors who responded to the survey were female (75.8%) with a Master's degree or higher (56.8%). They have worked in SN programs for 15 years or more (70.5%) and in their current position for less than ten years (59.9%). Over one-third (36.6%) had worked on the SN management team in their current district prior to taking the SN director position and 19.4% worked as a SN director in another large school district. Respondents were

from all USDA regions, with the highest percentages from the Southeast (30.9%), Western (23.4%), and Southwest (16.0%) regions. More than one-half (55.8%) of SN directors were employed in districts ranging in size from 30,000 – 49,000 students while 10.5% of respondents work in districts with greater than 100,000 students.

Results of this study suggest that the SN director position in a large school district is generally not an entry-level management position in SN and that those school district administrators who hire SN directors value prior management experience in large school districts. Current SN directors recognize the importance of experience on the SN management team in large districts as well as educational backgrounds in nutrition and/or business. Given the impending retirements of SN directors in large school districts and propensity of many SN directors to ascend from the ranks of the SN management team, there is a need to prepare middle management SN professionals and others to lead SN programs in large school districts.

The SN directors who responded to this survey were from all seven USDA regions and represented districts containing 20 to over 150 feeding sites and student enrollments ranging from 30,000 to over 100,000. Regardless of the size of school district, there was strong agreement in respect to the operational issues and practices encountered by SN directors in large school districts. In other words, SN directors, regardless of the size of their large school district, are encountering similar operational issues.

The SN directors who participated in this study rated 29 of the 33 characteristics and/or qualities needed by SN directors in large school districts 3.5 or greater on a 4-point scale, which signifies these characteristics and qualities are important or very important for a SN director to be successful. Regardless of school district size, there was strong agreement in respect to the characteristics and/or qualities needed by SN directors in large school districts. When asked to

indicate the importance of training to develop these characteristics and/or qualities, the SN directors rated 31 of the 33 characteristics and/or qualities phrases 3.0 or greater on a 4-point scale, suggesting that school nutrition directors recognize that training is important to assist in the development of these leadership qualities.

Over one-third (36.9%) of survey respondents indicated that they will be retiring in the next five years and another 14.7% are not sure if they will retire, indicating that there may be the impending retirement of 50% or more of these current directors of large SN programs within the next five years. The findings of this study suggest that education and training programs are needed to assist in the preparation of SN professionals to operate SN programs in large school districts. These programs should target SN professionals who work on management teams in large SN programs as well other SN directors from smaller school districts. The operational issues and practices related to SN operations in large school districts as well as the characteristics and qualities of directors operating SN programs in large school districts identified in this research study should provide the foundation for these education and training programs.