

Importance of Competencies to Being a Successful School Nutrition Director



Mary Frances Nettles, PhD, RD and Deborah H. Carr, PhD, RD
National Food Service Management Institute
Applied Research Division
The University of Southern Mississippi



IMPORTANCE OF COMPETENCIES FOR SUCCESSFUL SN DIRECTORS

Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations for Functional Area Sub-Scores

FUNCTIONAL AREA	SN DIRECTORS ^{abc} Mean ± SD	DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS ^{ad} Mean ± SD
Food Production and Operation Management	3.79 ± 0.35	3.74 ± 0.41
Financial Management	3.79 ± 0.41	3.71 ± 0.45
Food Security, Sanitation, and Safety	3.66 ± 0.36	3.60 ± 0.40
Program Management and Accountability*	3.65 ± 0.46	3.52 ± 0.53
Menu and Nutrition Management	3.64 ± 0.46	3.58 ± 0.51
Procurement and Inventory Management	3.52 ± 0.53	3.41 ± 0.57
Facilities and Equipment Management	3.38 ± 0.55	3.35 ± 0.55
Human Resource Management	3.33 ± 0.55	3.21 ± 0.59
Technology and Information Systems*	3.23 ± 0.72	2.94 ± 0.87
Marketing and Communication*	3.18 ± 0.66	2.90 ± 0.73

^a Scale = 4 (extremely important) to 1 (not important)
^b Functional area mean scores presented in descending order based on SN directors' responses
^c N varies from 335 to 346
^d N varies from 267 to 272
* p<.005

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to determine the importance of competencies for a school nutrition (SN) director as perceived by SN directors and district administrators.

METHOD

- Previous research by the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division identified ten functional areas and 23 competencies needed by SN directors to effectively lead their programs in the current environment.
- A survey was developed that asked SN directors and district administrators to rate the importance of the 23 competencies to being a successful SN director using a 4-point scale, 4 (*extremely important*) to 1 (*not important*).
- Surveys were mailed to random samples of 700 SN directors and 700 district administrators stratified by USDA region.
- Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics and t-tests.
- Sub-scores were computed for each of the ten functional areas using the supporting competency statements.

RESULTS

- Survey respondents included 352 SN directors (50%) and 274 district administrators (39%).
- Over one-third of SN directors reported their direct supervisor was the superintendent (35.6%), while 25.4% indicated the business administrator.
- Administrators (44.2%) described their job title as superintendent, business administrator (25.4%), or assistant superintendent (15.3%).
- SN directors rated all competencies 3.0 or greater and administrators rated 20 of the 23 competencies 3.0 or greater indicating a high level of agreement that the competencies are important to the success of SN directors.
- “Establishes policies and procedures to ensure food is prepared and served in a sanitary and safe environment” was rated the most important competency by both groups.
- Competencies with the lowest mean ratings by SN directors and district administrators were similar and included “develops a systematic approach for marketing the school nutrition program” and “establishes a communication infrastructure with stakeholders to promote the school nutrition program.”
- The functional areas with highest mean ratings from both groups were food production and operation management and financial management.
- T-tests were used to assess differences in functional area sub-scores based on participants' job title. Three functional areas demonstrated significance (P<.005).
- The three functional areas were program management and accountability, technology and information systems, and marketing and communication. In all cases, the means of the SN directors were significantly higher than those of district administrators.

APPLICATION

Research-based competencies are important to the foundational success of SN directors. Those seeking careers as SN directors should possess knowledge and skills related to the competencies. These competencies can serve as the framework for professional development, mentoring, and other succession planning activities to prepare SN professionals for district-level responsibilities.