



Minnesota School Nutrition Association (MSNA)

Mentorship Program Guidebook

Developed by the MSNA Leadership Development Committee

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Welcome & Why Mentorship Matters



Across Minnesota, school nutrition professionals show up every day to do far more than serve meals. We nourish students, support learning, strengthen local economies, and often provide the most nutritious meals children receive all day.

The MSNA Mentorship Program exists to support you as you navigate this vital profession. Whether you are a seasoned director sharing your expertise or a newer director seeking guidance (or simply a clear roadmap), this guidebook is designed to bring clarity, confidence, and connection.

Together, we play an important role in nourishing Minnesota's children every day.

About MSNA

The Minnesota School Nutrition Association (MSNA) supports school nutrition professionals across the state; from small rural districts to large urban systems, as well as our valued industry partners.

MSNA provides:

- Professional development and leadership opportunities
- Advocacy and representation at the state and national levels
- Networking and peer support
- Resources to strengthen school nutrition programs

MSNA believes that every professional deserves access to tools, education, and support to succeed.



About the Mentorship Program

The MSNA Mentorship Program is designed to:

- Pair experienced child nutrition leaders with newer directors
- Provide practical guidance on the many facets of school nutrition
- Offer flexible support tailored to individual needs
- Serve as a stand-alone reference for those who may not need a full mentorship relationship

This guidebook may be used:

- By mentor/mentee pairs as a shared roadmap
 - By mentees independently as an overview of key topics
 - As a reference tool throughout your school nutrition career
-

Getting Started: Your First Conversation

A successful mentorship begins with connection. Use the questions below to guide your initial conversation.

Get-to-Know-You

- Name, role, and school district
- How long have you worked in school nutrition?
- District size (student count, number of sites)
- Background before school nutrition
- What excites you most about your current role?
- What feels most challenging right now?



Mentorship Goals

- What are you hoping to gain from this relationship?
- Are there specific topics you want to focus on?
- How will you define success together?

Communication & Logistics

- Preferred communication method (email, phone, text, video)
- How often will you connect?
- Will you meet in person when possible?
- Expectations around response times

Roles & Responsibilities

The Mentor

- Share knowledge, experience, and perspective
- Listen actively and offer thoughtful guidance
- Provide encouragement and professional insight
- Maintain confidentiality and professionalism
- Support—not supervise—the mentee

The Mentee

- Come prepared with questions or topics
- Be open to feedback and new ideas
- Respect the mentor's time and boundaries
- Take ownership of learning and growth



Shared Commitments

- Mutual respect and trust
 - Honest communication
 - Flexibility as schedules and needs change
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The Big Picture: School Nutrition in Minnesota

School nutrition programs operate within a highly regulated and interconnected system.

Federal Oversight: USDA

- National School Lunch Program (NSLP)
- School Breakfast Program (SBP)
- Seamless Summer Option (SSO)
- Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)
- Afterschool Snack Program (ASP)
- Meal pattern requirements and Offer vs. Serve (OVS)
- Free and reduced-price eligibility
- Civil Rights requirements
- Procurement and program integrity



Helpful USDA Resources:

- School Meals Overview: [Meals for Schools and Child Care | Food and Nutrition Service](#)
- USDA Food Buying Guide: [Food Buying Guide](#)
- Team Nutrition Resources for Schools: [Team Nutrition](#)

State Oversight: Minnesota Department of Education (MDE)

- Food and Nutrition Services (FNS)
- Program administration and compliance
- Guidance, bulletins, and technical assistance



MDE FNS – NSLP & SBP: [School Nutrition Programs](#)

Program Reviews:

- [Administrative Review](#) (every 5 years)
- [Procurement Review](#) (every 5 years)
- [Resource Management Review](#) (every 5 years)

CLiCS (Child Nutrition Information and Payment System):

- Applications, claims, and agreements
- Direct Certifications
- User IDs and passwords
- Program bulletins and communication

[CLiCS Information](#)

Food Safety & Health: Minnesota Department of Health (MDH)

- Food safety standards: MN Food Code
 - [Certified Food Protection Manager Requirements](#)
 - Food Safety Plans developed for each School and is updated on a yearly basis
 - [Example of Food Safety Plan](#)
 - HACCPs and SOPs for all processes are current, available and reviewed annually by all staff
 - Handwashing, cooling food, thawing food etc.
 - [Example of Washing Hands SOP](#)



- **Health inspections**
 - Ensure each school receives 2/year and current inspection is posted in a visible area
 - Manager Licenses are posted
 - Site License to operate are posted
 - **Staff training requirements**
 - USDA Required Trainings
 - Offer VS Serve, Civil Rights
 - [USDA training tracker](#)
 - District Required Training
 - New Hire Trainings
-

Key Focus Areas for Mentorship Discussions

Program Operations

- Staffing and training
- Scheduling and service models
- Kitchen equipment and facilities

Nutrition Standards & Menu Planning

- USDA meal patterns
 - [National School Lunch Program](#)
 - [School Breakfast Program](#)
- [Special diets and accommodations](#)
 - [Special Diet Statement](#)
- Cultural and regional preferences



Financial Management

- [School Nutrition Procurement](#)
- Fund 02 requirements
- USDA regulations
- UFARS compliance
- Budgeting, forecasting, and audits



Procurement & Supply Chain

- Federal and state procurement rules
- Contracts, bids, and quotes
- Inventory management
- Working with vendors and distributors

Food Distribution Program (USDA Foods)

- Commodity entitlement
- Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program
- Net off invoice (NOI)
- Fee for processing commodities
- Brown box commodities

[Food Distribution Program \(FDP\) Information](#)

USDA Foods & Processor Resources:

- Find vendor-specific information on nutrients, allergens, and ingredients in USDA commodity foods:
 - [USDA Foods Database](#)
 - [USDA Foods in Schools Product Information Sheets](#)
- [K12 Foodservice](#)
 - For K12 Foodservice, contact customer service by phone (571) 409-6560, email K12 Foodservice (info@k12servicesinc.com), or consult the broker for respective processors.
- [ProcessorLink](#)
 - Obtain a user account from [Processor Link](#) by clicking the 'Sign Up Now' link.
 - Sign up using your Cyber-Linked Interactive Child Nutrition System (CLiCS) sponsor ID as the Recipient Agency (RA) Number.
 - Once an account is created, log in and select a distributor.
 - Important: Until a distributor is chosen, sponsors are charged commercial pricing for processed items.

Farm to School & Local Foods

- Minnesota Department of Agriculture grants
- USDA Farm to School grants
- Local sourcing and agriculture partnerships

Compliance & Reviews

- Administrative reviews
- Corrective action plans
- Documentation and recordkeeping

Leadership & Professional Growth

- Managing teams
- Navigating change
- Work-life balance
- Building confidence as a director

Acronyms You'll Hear Often

- MSNA – Minnesota School Nutrition Association
- SNA – School Nutrition Association
- USDA – United States Department of Agriculture
- MDE – Minnesota Department of Education
- FNS – Food and Nutrition Services
- SFA – School Food Authority
- NSLP – National School Lunch Program
- SBP – School Breakfast Program
- SSO – Seamless Summer Option
- SFSP – Summer Food Service Program
- CACFP – Child and Adult Care Food Program

- ASP – Afterschool Snack Program
 - MDH – Minnesota Department of Health
 - UFARS – Uniform Financial Accounting and Reporting Standards
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Helpful Resources & Links

- Minnesota School Nutrition Association: <https://www.mnsna.org/>
- USDA School Meals: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals>
- USDA Food Buying Guide: <https://foodbuyingguide.fns.usda.gov>
- Team Nutrition Resources: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/team-nutrition>
- MDE Food & Nutrition Services: <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/FNS>
- CLiCS System: <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/FNS/clcs>
- Minnesota Department of Health: <https://www.health.state.mn.us>
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture: [Farm to School](#)
- School Nutrition Leaders of Minnesota: A member-based association that connects peers through quarterly meetings and a shared blog where members can submit questions and receive expert insights delivered by email - <https://sites.google.com/sndmn.org/sndm-group/home>

Closing Thoughts

School nutrition is complex, meaningful, and constantly evolving, and no one is meant to navigate it alone. Whether through mentorship, professional development, or peer connection, MSNA is here to support you, today and throughout your career.

Thank you for the work you do every day to nourish Minnesota's students.

Date Created: 2026