Participants in School-Based Gardening and Food Programs Benefit From Lasting Impacts on Dietary Behaviors

Thousands of students have successfully participated in the FRESHFARM FoodPrints program over the past 15 years, according to a new study in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior

Philadelphia, January 8, 2024 – To encourage fruit and vegetable consumption among youth, experiential food education programs such as gardening and cooking lessons have increased across both community and school settings. A recent research article in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, published by Elsevier, revealed how this early learning positively influenced food decisions as children grew older.

Lead study author Christine St. Pierre, MPH, RD, Department of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Milken Institute School of Public Health, The George Washington University, explained, “While food education programs are evaluated, much of the evidence of program impact comes from evaluations less than a year after the class, and little is known about the enduring impact through childhood and into adulthood.”

This study explored the experiences of current and alumni participants of the FRESHFARM FoodPrints food education program, which is embedded in more than 20 elementary schools within a large urban public school district in the eastern United States. The program’s first school partnership was established nearly 15 years ago, and the oldest alumni participants are now young adults. A network of alumni has been established and maintained as the program has grown, providing a unique opportunity to gain insight into the experiences of both current participants and those who have aged out of the program.
Researchers observed classes and interviewed program coaches and staff to prepare for focus group sessions. Focus groups were recruited among current and alumni students. Questions were designed to gain insights into the typical participant experience, current nutrition behaviors, food environment, and impression of the FoodPrints program.

Nine emergent themes were identified in three categories of impact: immediate, beyond the classroom, and sustained. The immediate impact of the programs included enjoyment of food experiences, hands-on learning of food skills, and connection with peers through a shared experience. Beyond the classroom experience, the programs shifted individual and family food choices and increased involvement of students in family food practices and interest in fresh food options at school. Appreciation for fresh food, openness to trying new foods, and confidence in making food decisions were the sustained benefits of the programs.

St. Pierre commented, "While we recognize the demands on education resources and the precious time of teachers, findings in this study suggest that investment in experiential food education in elementary school can provide an important contribution to the continuation of healthy dietary behaviors as children grow up."
Notes for editors


The article is openly available at https://www.jneb.org/article/S1499-4046(23)00533-X/fulltext.

Conflict of interest: Christine St. Pierre has worked as an evaluation consultant for FRESHFARM separately from this research. FRESHFARM had no role in the design of this study, data analysis, or preparation and approval of the manuscript.

Full text of the article is also available to credentialed journalists upon request; contact Eileen Leahy at +1 732 406 1313 or jnebmedia@elsevier.com to obtain a copy. To schedule an interview with the author(s), please contact Kathy Fackelmann, director of media relations, The George Washington University, kfackelmann@gwu.edu.

An audio podcast featuring an interview with Christine St. Pierre, MPH, RD; and other information for journalists are available at www.jneb.org/content/mediapodcast. Excerpts from the podcast may be reproduced by the media with permission from Eileen Leahy.

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The Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior features articles that provide new insights and useful findings related to nutrition education research, practice, and policy. The content areas of JNEB reflect the diverse interests of health, nutrition, education, Cooperative Extension, and other professionals working in areas related to nutrition education and behavior. As the Society’s official journal, JNEB also includes occasional policy statements, issue perspectives, and member communications. www.jneb.org

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