

# Participants in school-based gardening and food programs found to benefit from lasting impacts on dietary behaviors

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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* 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 the 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."

**More information:** Christine St. Pierre et al, Participant Perspectives on the Impact of a School-Based, Experiential Food Education Program Across Childhood, Adolescence, and Young Adulthood, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2023.10.012](#)

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