

Retention in Georgia SNAP-Ed Nutrition Education: Study Results



Background

In Federal Fiscal Year 2024 (FFY 2024), the Public Health Institute Center for Wellness and Nutrition (PHI CWN) in collaboration with the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) conducted a brief evaluation to better understand issues around participation and retention in SNAP-Ed direct nutrition education programming.

Methods

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with nutrition educators from Georgia SNAP-Ed implementing agencies (IAs). A semi-structured interview guide was developed to better understand participant satisfaction, engagement and retention in SNAP-Ed nutrition education classes. KIIs were conducted and transcribed via Zoom and reviewed for accuracy. All transcripts were de-identified to ensure participant confidentiality. Once cleaned, transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose, qualitative data analysis software, for coding. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data. A priori codes were developed, and themes and subthemes guided the code development. Nutrition educators were recruited through emails sent to each IA by DFCS staff.

Following the interviews and data analysis, the preliminary results were presented and discussed during an in-person convening with a group of nutrition educators in Georgia. Nutrition educators were able to reflect on the results and generate more ideas to improve engagement and retention for SNAP-Ed nutrition education programs.

Results

About Nutrition Education Classes/Instructors

KIIs were conducted with five nutrition health educators, which included registered dietitians and administrative staff from three IAs. The educators ranged in experience from less than a year to six years and taught different curricula such as Cooking Matters for Teens and Adults and train-the-trainer model lessons.

Satisfaction

Interviewees were asked about participants' overall satisfaction with nutrition education classes. Some IAs collect feedback data from participants formally through paper and electronic surveys, while others have informal discussions before or after class to learn more about class participants' experiences. Overall, interviewees described the feedback received as positive, describing the classes as fun, helpful and informative. There were very few instances in which the interviewees shared receiving neutral or negative feedback from the participants. One example of constructive feedback received was the need for more diverse cooking ingredients in the Cooking Matters classes.

“I think people are very satisfied overall.... Sometimes people are like ‘we wish there was more meat’, but we only have so much money to buy food and stuff like that. So, I think overall people are very happy.”

– Nutrition Educator

Interviewees mentioned some barriers they have encountered with the evaluation surveys, required by SNAP-Ed to assess program outcomes. Some interviewees mentioned that the surveys are lengthy and older adult participants can have difficulty completing online surveys. Additionally, the font size of paper surveys was also reported as an issue for some. Some nutrition educators stated that they offer extra assistance to ensure completion of the surveys and also provide encouragement to motivate the participants to finish the lengthy surveys.

Engagement

Engagement is the level of participation in SNAP-Ed classes, which includes paying attention and sharing thoughts and information with others in the class. When interviewees were asked about participants' level of engagement in nutrition education classes, they reported that engagement can vary. Interviewees noted that engagement depends on multiple factors, such as the personal life circumstances of participants, class time and location, and the reasons for enrolling in the class.

Interviewees stated that classes have high participation when the nutrition educators make the effort to build rapport with the class participants. This could include starting classes with icebreaker activities and encouraging participants to interact with one another. One interviewee described that participation often increases when people join classes in “pairs”, like a couple or two good friends. The “pair” allows others in the class to feel more comfortable in the class, in turn increasing their own level of participation.

“Typically, the way it works is that we have two ladies...almost every class that are best friends. And so, they come together, and they bring this energy of connection.”

– Nutrition Educator

One nutrition educator shared that a trusted member of the community – a pastor – helped to recruit participants for the nutrition education classes. The same educator shared the benefit of culturally adapting recipes and the class curricula to entice as well as engage participants in classes.

“The other thing that I had a problem with, especially when I started marketing [the class] to them, was the recipes. They were not really culturally-sensitive...My people were telling me: why should we join for these things, because we don't eat this...[My agency] allowed me to let them have their own recipes that they can share in class and I think that kind of interested them as well.

-Nutrition Educator

Interviewees also mentioned that assigning participants roles in the class or having participants make decisions within the class structure may increase engagement. For example, one nutrition educator discussed giving youth opportunities to weigh in on class decisions, like what foods should be included in taste tests, so that youth are interested in eating the foods provided. Another nutrition educator stated that she likes to ask questions of participants such as, “Have you seen this in your everyday life?” or “Have you experienced this?” to try to get participants more involved and more interested.

Retention

Retention is defined as attending all the classes or completing the entire nutrition education series or program. While each implementing agency has their own method for tracking retention, most nutrition educators interviewed said that retention varied based on the class.

Reasons mentioned for lack of retention varied based on multiple factors related to the program and participants; however, lack of transportation was a primary barrier. Many interviewees mentioned that participants needed personal transportation since public transportation was inaccessible in some areas due to inconvenient bus stop locations or expensive fares. One interviewee mentioned that their organization found additional partners to donate bus passes so participants could attend classes consistently.

“[Retention] fluctuates depending on the location. For example, with certain places, I always have 100% participation throughout because it is part of their programming...especially for a lot of senior places, it might be where they live, or it's part of their group and everything. So, we'll have 100% ...But then, when I have places, like [name of site], for example, it's a health care facility. But a lot of people are homeless, or people are just having a lot of other things going on as well. So, they don't have transportation. That's big, transportation is the biggest issue.”

- Nutrition Educator

Another obstacle to retention was timing and scheduling of classes. Participants have personal commitments, including caregiving, work, health appointments, etc., that may hinder their ability to attend classes regularly.

Concerns were raised about poor marketing or awareness as a potential barrier to retention. Some classes are not described in detail before enrollment, and one interviewee expressed that the marketing used for the classes could be misleading. This could cause disappointment for participants once they attend the class. For example, if a class was primarily focused on nutrition education, some participants who expected a cooking class may feel deceived.

“Personally, I think we have to be very careful how we market it... people are interested because you’re talking about cooking...There are a lot of things involved, especially when you do the theory part, they might be bored because they think we are going to be cooking.”

– Nutrition Educator

There were some “perks” mentioned for class participation that supported class retention. Class participants are generally appreciative of the free meals provided through cooking classes, as well as sample taste tests. Participants were also offered a \$10.00 gift card to purchase groceries during the last class, to demonstrate eating healthy on a budget. Interviewees highlighted that the information received during the class is a “perk” as well as the Nutrition Education Reinforcement Items (NERI), such as measuring cups, water bottles, etc. While participants appreciated the NERI provided, interviewees did not feel it was valuable enough to keep many returning to the weekly classes.

In some cases, classes were mandatory, such as high school classes or classes associated with diabetes management programs. This requirement, in turn, leads to higher retention.

Also, when discussing the results with nutrition educators at an in-person convening, the following ideas were brought up in discussion which can also support engagement and retention efforts (Table 1).

Table 1

Additional Ideas for Improving Engagement and Retention in SNAP-Ed
Assign participants leadership roles (e.g. secretary, roll call, etc.) to facilitate responsibility and ownership
Create playlists with participant input (using Spotify, for example) to keep classes fun
Have the nutrition educators share personal life details/stories to connect with students

Culturally adapt recipes for the class audience (e.g., Jollof rice instead of chicken and rice)
Add a second facilitator for virtual class setting to send chat messages to more fully engage participants
Share the class outline with participants ahead of the first session and ask for feedback on content and lessons
Meet participants before the first class to start building rapport and trust
Provide participants with the opportunity to choose the next taste test recipe

Discussion

Overall, the nutrition educators interviewed provided more information regarding participant satisfaction, engagement and retention for SNAP-Ed nutrition education classes in Georgia. Interviewees reported that participants are generally satisfied and have a positive experience during classes, but may encounter frustrations with fulfilling extensive data collection requirements. Engagement levels vary based on the class structure and participants' personal circumstances. Retention also depends on several factors, including class timing and location, personal circumstances such as transportation and marketing and awareness of the class structure and content.

Despite the overall positive feedback and experiences shared during the interviews, this evaluation highlighted areas for improvement with retention rates in SNAP-Ed nutrition education programming. One study found that *"building trust and community within the program was seen as important"* to improving engagement and retention in SNAP-Ed classes (Gray et al, 2024). Providing structured activities to help build rapport and relationships among the participants could foster a sense of belonging and lead to higher attendance and participation. Additionally, encouraging participants to join the class with peers or family members could increase retention rates.

Transportation is cited as a common barrier to engagement and retention in nutrition education (Haynes-Maslow, Osborne, Pitts, 2019). Providing transportation options such as shuttles, public transportation vouchers, rideshare, etc., could alleviate the difficulty participants experience when attending weekly sessions that are not in convenient locations. Alternatively, classes could also be held in convenient locations where participants frequently visit or live, which could eliminate the need for transportation services.

Studies have also shown that high-value incentives can be considered to maintain high retention and recruitment rates in health-related programming (Michaud, 2022). Increasing the NERI amount and having a better understanding of what participants want and need could increase retention rates.

In conclusion, the evaluation of the SNAP-Ed direct nutrition education program shows that it is well-received by both participants and nutrition educators. While the overall experience has been positive, additional strategies can be used to improve engagement and retention within nutrition education classes.

Recommendations

Recommendations to improve engagement and retention in SNAP-Ed nutrition education include:

- Explore SNAP-Ed partnerships that can support transportation services for participants with limited access to personal or public transportation.
- Survey participants to determine if there are specific Nutrition Education Reinforcement Items (NERI) that would meet their needs/desires.
- Encourage participants to join classes with friends or family to help build a sense of community within the classes.
- Implement relationship-building activities during classes to help others feel more comfortable.
- Schedule classes based on the availability of participants (although this varies) and in convenient locations to alleviate scheduling conflicts.
- Culturally-adapt recipes and curricula to meet the needs of the community.

References

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