

# Alaska SNAP-Ed Long-Term Evaluation for the Matanuska-Susitna SiteA

*Prepared Summer 2024*

*by*

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# Introduction

Beginning in the spring of 2024, the SNAP-Ed team at University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension planned a long-term evaluation of SNAP-Ed activities in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley. The purpose of this evaluation was to discover the long-term impacts of direct education delivered to elementary school students, as well as the long-term effects of policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change efforts in a local food pantry.

The evaluation consisted of three different surveys administered to three groups of participants:

1. Teachers who had hosted the Nutrition Educator for one or more series of direct nutrition education classes in their elementary classrooms;
2. Staff and volunteers at the local food pantry where the Nutrition Educator implemented a PSE change; and
3. Clients of said food pantry.

This first section describes results gathered from surveys of the teachers who hosted SNAP-Ed direct education in their classrooms.

## Teachers' Observations

### Context

There were 26 teachers in total involved with Matanuska-Susitna "Mat-Su" SNAP-Ed over the course of the last six years. Schools in the Mat-Su school district were chosen as delivery sites due the high number of Title I schools. Teacher's impressions of the effects of the lessons were gathered in pursuit of results related to the national SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework's long-term indicator on healthy eating, labeled as LT1.

The Nutrition Educator conducted multiple series of lessons in elementary classrooms at Title I schools between 2018 and 2023. Lessons were conducted using one of three elementary level curricula from the SNAP-Ed Library: *Choose Health: Food, Fun, and Fitness (CHFFF)*; *Show Me Nutrition*; and *Cooking with Kids*. Depending on the curriculum, each series consisted of six to nine weekly lessons, with lesson length ranging from 30 to 45 minutes, and minor schedule adjustments due to weather-related school cancellations.

### Methods

Surveys were distributed via email to teachers with whom the Nutrition Educator had partnered to conduct one or more series of direct nutrition education lessons over the previous 6 years. Of 26 teachers who received the survey, 19 responded. Responses were collected within two weeks of distribution. Teachers answered open-ended questions regarding their observations of

students' food choice behaviors. Questions were designed to elicit responses aligned with Long Term Indicator LT 1: Healthy Eating from the SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework. This indicator assesses whether healthy eating behaviors, such as consuming more than one type of fruit and vegetable each week, and choosing foods low in added sugar, are sustained at least 6 months after the intervention. Please see the appendix for the full survey.

Responses were coded for initial themes by the program assistant, who convened a group of three and confirmed the themes by inter-rater coding. After coding exercises, the program assistant triangulated the data with the previously collected pre- and post-tests from the Mat-Su series participants.

## Results

Teachers were asked to respond to a total of five questions relevant to capturing possible changes related to LT1 on healthy eating knowledge and behaviors. Questions from all instruments are listed in the appendix. Not all themes were present in all five questions, and the following summaries represent totals across various combinations of question responses.

The first theme that emerged from teacher responses was observing an increased student knowledge of how to make healthy food choices. Sixteen responses across the question set mentioned observations of students demonstrating an increase in knowledge of how to make healthy food choices. For example, one teacher mentioned "students started being more aware of what they were consuming as evidenced by the discussions taking place during lunch and snack time," while another mentioned using the knowledge as a class: "When someone isn't sure if a snack is healthy we use the things that Ms. Harmon taught us to determine if it is healthy or not."

In addition, more specific themes emerged regarding a) youth knowing how to read nutrition labels, with seven responses across the questions mentioning students demonstrating knowledge of how to read nutrition labels; and b) youth showing awareness of sugar content, with nine responses across the questions mentioning students showing awareness of the sugar content of various foods.

The next theme that emerged was teachers sharing observations that students had demonstrated healthy food choice behaviors. Sixteen responses across the questions mentioned evidence of students making healthy food choices, such as "Better lunch choices being made," and "They are bringing in much healthier snacks and lunches because of it."

More specific themes that emerged included a) youth choosing lower-sugar snacks and drinks, with three responses across the questions noting students choosing lower-sugar snacks and beverages; b) youth choosing whole grains, with two responses across the questions noting students choosing whole grain foods; c) youth eating more fruit, with four responses across the

questions that mentioned students eating more fruits; d) youth eating more vegetables, with two responses across the questions that mentioned students consuming more vegetables; and e) youth try new foods and/or recipes, with four responses across the questions noting students trying new foods and/or recipes.

Seven responses across the questions mentioned students sharing healthy food choice knowledge with other people, including classmates and family members.

Nineteen responses across the questions mentioned students found the lessons to be engaging and enjoyable.

The remainder of responses were categorized as no response, no change, or negative feedback. Twelve responses across the five questions mentioned no change, or provided some form of negative feedback. These responses included phrases such as “Their habits seem to be about the same,” and “Not consistently, but the seeds of information have been planted” when asked whether teachers witnessed any changes in student eating or activity habits.

The themed observations summarized above were aligned with short-term responses from participating youth as reported in PEARS. Teacher observations were consistent with student self-reports on the grades 3-5 Nutrition Education Survey from the past three reporting years. On pre- and post- tests delivered before and after each series of nutrition classes, the percentage of students reporting they eat vegetables and fruit every day increased, while the percentage who reported they never eat fruits and vegetables decreased. The pre- and post-tests also showed an increase in students reporting they choose healthy snacks most days, and a decrease in those who never choose healthy snacks.

This second section describes results gathered from surveys of the food bank staff members and current food bank volunteers.

## Food Bank Staff Observations

### Context

As a complement to the classroom intervention, the Nutrition Educator also conducted Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) work at the Mat-Su Food Bank. PSE efforts seek to make healthy choices easier by implementing changes in organizations or physical and social structures. In the PSE work at the Mat-Su Food Bank, The Nutrition Educator assisted the food pantry with changes aimed at making it easier for clients to make healthier choices and improve their ability to manage food resources.

The Nutrition Educator connected the food bank with the Alaska Tilth program, which was able to supply fresh local produce; helped the food bank plan a layout highlighting the healthiest choices for their new location; and implemented various methods of displaying healthy eating messages. Nutrition information was presented on a TV screen in the food pantry waiting area, and flyers with MyPlate information were also made available in this area.

Healthy recipes for available produce were displayed on a recipe wall for clients to browse and take with them. Both nutrition information and recipes or how-to-use information were posted on an assortment of “shelf nudges” throughout the food selections, to highlight available healthier options as clients made their choices.

The interventions at the food pantry targeted two long term indicators from the SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework: LT1 Healthy Eating (described above), as well as LT2 Food Resource Management, which measures changes in behaviors that improve a person’s ability to stretch their food budget and ensure that they have sufficient nutritious food. The target audiences for all the Food Bank interventions are SNAP-eligible adults and families, and any other food insecure individuals accessing the food bank.

The food bank portion of this evaluation consisted of two surveys: one for staff and volunteers, and one for food bank clients.

## Methods

Surveys were distributed via email and responses were collected within two weeks. Food bank staff and volunteers responded to categorical questions about produce availability and nutrition information access, as well as open-ended questions regarding the perceived effectiveness of the nutrition messaging. Questions were designed to elicit responses aligned with long term indicators LT1 and LT2, Healthy Eating and Food Resource Management, described above, from the SNAP-Ed evaluation framework. The full survey administered to food bank staff and volunteers can be found in the appendix.

## Results

The questions asked of food bank staff and volunteers were aimed at collecting observations on any changes relevant to SNAP Ed’s long term indicators on Healthy Eating (LT1) and Food Resource Management (LT2).

Overall, the themes that emerged relevant to food bank staff and volunteers included both an acknowledgement of having access to the information themselves, as well as observations of client engagement with nutrition related information resources. Eleven responses across three qualitative questions mentioned the partnership with SNAP-Ed providing their clients with increased knowledge of how to make healthy food choices. One response stated: “The benefits

of healthy food choices are clearly posted throughout our facility, thereby, encouraging clients to make healthy and balanced selections,” and that because of the available information, clients “can clearly see what healthy food choices are.”

In two responses across two of the questions, respondents noted participants learning or accessing nutrition information. Two additional responses mentioned staff or volunteers learning or accessing the available nutrition information themselves. In another theme, two responses across two questions noted clients received education on new or unfamiliar foods. The final category that emerged were from three responses across all questions that included a suggestion or mentioned seeing no change in clients’ knowledge or behavior.

In response to a scaled question on produce access, 88.9% of respondents indicated the availability of fresh produce has increased since the start of the partnership.

Staff and volunteer participants were also asked to rate the extent to which they believe SNAP-Ed provides clients with the necessary resources to select and prepare healthy meals and snacks. All participants answered that SNAP-Ed does this at least somewhat, with over half (55.6%) replying that it prepares clients “to a great extent.”

Regarding nutrition displays, the nine respondents agreed that they influence clients either somewhat (33.3%) or a great deal (66.7%).

All staff and volunteer respondents indicated seeing clients interact with the nutrition messaging, either frequently (44.5%) or sometimes (55.6%).

The third section that follows describes results gathered from clients that visited the food bank in person during the survey collection period.

## Food Bank Client Responses

### Methods

Both hard-copy and electronic versions of the survey were available for food bank clients to take. All 41 responses received were hard-copies, returned via business reply mail between 3 and 8 weeks after the surveys were distributed. The survey consisted of 11 scaled questions regarding food behaviors, produce access, and nutrition messaging, as well as 3 open-ended questions about the nutrition information. Four of the scaled questions were retrospective, asking participants to compare their current eating habits to those of one year ago. The full survey can be found in the appendix.

## Results

Responses to the scaled questions showed a majority of participants increasing target behaviors. Just over half of all respondents reported consuming more fruits and vegetables and eating fewer sweets than one year ago, while three-quarters reported drinking fewer sweetened beverages. The tables below show detailed breakdowns of responses to the scaled questions.

A large majority of respondents (95%) indicated that they eat more than one type of fruit and vegetable each week at least sometimes.

Most respondents (82%) noticed the recipes and nutrition messaging, and all indicated the messaging was either somewhat useful (36%) or definitely useful (64%). More than three-quarters of respondents had tried a food recipe they had obtained at the food bank at least once, with 15% having done so three or more times. Only 22.5% had never tried one.

The following percentages reflect participants who answered each question. In some cases, participants left a question blank.

Table 1: Reflections on Healthy Food Choices

<b>Question: Compared to a year ago...</b>	<b>More</b>	<b>Same</b>	<b>Fewer</b>
Ate more fruit	51.2%	39%	9.8%
Ate more vegetables	51.2%	41.5%	7.3%
Consumed regular soda or other SSBs	2.5%	22.5%	75%
Ate desserts and other sweets	4.9%	43.9%	51.2%

Table 2: Weekly Consumption of a Variety of Fruits and Vegetables

<b>Question</b>	<b>Yes, always</b>	<b>Yes, often</b>	<b>Yes, sometimes</b>	<b>No</b>
Do you eat more than one type of fruit in a week?	17.5%	42.5%	35%	5%
Do you eat more than one type of vegetable in a week?	22%	51.2%	22%	4.9%



Table 3: Food Bank Produce and Nutrition Information Access

Question	No	Not sure	Yes
Did you have access to a variety of fresh produce on your most recent food bank visit?	4.9%	14.6%	80.5%
Was produce easy to access?	7.5%	7.5%	85%
Did you notice any signs, recipes, or other messages about choosing healthy foods?	5.1%	12.8%	82.1%

Survey participants were asked three open-ended questions about the nutrition messages they see at the food bank.

When asked to share a story about trying a new food or recipe due to the messages, 13 of 21 responses indicated the participant had tried a recipe. Of those 13 responses, 8 named or described a specific type of recipe, and seven shared positive feedback about the recipe, such as “great,” “we loved it,” and “I liked it so much I added the recipe to my notebook.” One response gave negative feedback: “salmon patties--won't do patties again--not a seafood lover.”

Respondents were asked to share the most helpful thing they had learned from the nutrition messaging. Fifteen of 28 responses provided at least a basic answer of something they learned from the nutrition information, such as “new recipes,” “healthy eating,” “sugar free information,” and “there are many ways to use the canned meat.” Three responses indicated general positive sentiments about the foodbank.

The final open-ended question asked for anything participants would like to share about the food messages at the food bank. Of 25 responses to this question, seven expressed gratitude or appreciation for the food bank and its staff rather than the nutrition information. Six responses expressed general positive sentiments about the nutrition information. One response expressed neutral feelings about the information (“No issues”).

The final section ahead summarizes the overall findings across the survey pools and provides recommendations for future survey iterations as well as for program planning.

## Overall Conclusions and Recommendations

Across the survey pools, SNAP-Ed received feedback that target groups are improving the knowledge and behaviors targeted by the Nutrition Educator's interventions.

The preponderance of teacher feedback expressed appreciation for the Nutrition Educator. Combined with the feedback indicating how much the students enjoy the lessons, and the many observations of increased healthy eating behaviors, the results suggest that the direct education series are effective, and support the continuation of the Nutrition Educator's presence in Mat-Su classrooms. The only request for improvement received on this survey was from a teacher who would like to have the test scores. In future school years, the Nutrition Educator should ensure teachers receive the data from the students' pre- and post- tests.

Future food bank programming should integrate staff and volunteer suggestions on nutrition messaging, such as having a list of recipe substitutions available, and hosting a teaching day where clients would be able to "get recipes, ask nutrition questions, learn to can."

For ease of aggregation, future surveys for these groups should have the same scales across the groups.

Open-ended handwritten questions were not an effective approach for food bank clients who had limited time during their visit and who were primarily focused on obtaining services. Future survey iterations could use multiple choice or scaled questions with an "other" category, and only one open clearinghouse question at the end.

Similar to longitudinal tracking of adult SNAP-Ed participants that has been done in other evaluations (e.g Wardlaw & Baker, 2012), we recommend, when feasible, following up with the cohorts of students at least six months later, consistent with the minimum length of time needed to measure results for LT1 and LT2. This would provide continuing confirmation of the effectiveness of the SNAP-Ed interventions.

# Appendix: Surveys

## SNAP-Ed Teacher Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey about the results of SNAP-Ed nutrition education in your classroom. Your participation helps us measure the impact of SNAP-Ed work in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley.

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1. What information from the nutrition classes have your students remembered and repeated?
2. Share a story about how your students have benefitted from nutrition education.
3. Have you seen any unexpected results in your students related to the nutrition classes?
4. Have you witnessed any changes in your students' eating or activity habits?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

## SNAP-Ed Food Bank Staff and Volunteer Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your participation helps us measure the impact of SNAP-Ed work in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley.

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1. How has the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables changed since the beginning of this partnership?  
 Increased                      Stayed the Same                      Decreased
2. To what extent does SNAP-Ed provide your clients with the resources they need to confidently select and prepare healthy meals and snacks?  
 Not at all                      Somewhat                      A great deal
3. To what extent does the display of healthy foods and/or nutrition information influence your clients to make healthier choices?  
 Not at all                      Somewhat                      A great deal
4. How often do you witness clients interacting with or remarking on the nutrition messaging available at your site?  
 Frequently                      Sometimes                      Seldom/Never
5. Share a story about how the work of SNAP-Ed has impacted your staff, volunteers, and/or clients.
6. Has the work of the Nutrition Educator made it easier for your clients and their families to make healthy food choices? Please describe.
7. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about the role of SNAP-Ed at your organization?

## SNAP-Ed Food Bank Participant Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your participation helps us measure the impact of SNAP-Ed work in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley.

Please think back to your eating habits last spring (before the food bank moved into its new location).

1. Compared to one year ago, rate the amount of fruit you eat each week.  
I eat more now      I eat the same amount      I eat less now
  
2. Compared to one year ago, rate the amount of vegetables you eat each week.  
I eat more now      I eat the same amount      I eat less now
  
3. Compared to one year ago, rate the amount of regular sodas or sugar-sweetened beverages you drink each day.  
I drink more now      I drink the same amount      I drink fewer now
  
4. Compared to one year ago, rate the amount of desserts and other sweets you eat (not the low-fat kind).  
I eat more sweets now      I eat the same amount      I eat fewer sweets now
  
5. Do you eat more than one type of fruit throughout the week?  
No      Yes, sometimes      Yes, often      Yes, always
  
6. Do you eat more than one type of vegetable throughout the week?  
No      Yes, sometimes      Yes, often      Yes, always

Think about your most recent visits to the food bank.

7. Did you have access to a variety of fresh produce?  
Yes      No      Not sure
  
8. Was the produce easy to access?  
Yes      No      Not sure

9. Did you notice any signs, recipes, or other messages about choosing healthy foods?

Yes                      No                      Not sure

10. How useful do you find the information on healthy foods?

Definitely useful                      Somewhat useful                      Not useful

11. How many times have you tried a food or recipe you wouldn't normally try due to seeing these messages or recipes?

3 or more times                      1-2 times                      Never

12. If you tried a food or recipe you wouldn't normally have tried due to these messages, please share one or more stories about the experience.

13. What is the most helpful thing you have learned from the information provided at the food bank?

14. Is there anything you would like to share about the food messages you see and receive at the food bank?

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