

FOOD and NUTRITION EDUCATION in COMMUNITIES

programs that turn research into action

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Research-to-Action Brief

Better EFNEP outcomes where Community Nutrition Educators believe in the value of EFNEP and rate their supervisors highly

This Research-to-Action Brief reports on a New York State survey of paraprofessional Community Nutrition Educators (CNEs) in 30 sites of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). This study measured how CNEs felt about their work context and how their perceptions influenced program effectiveness.

Understanding the link between CNE experiences and nutrition behavior change among EFNEP participants can help identify possible strategies to enhance program success.

Measuring work context

Based on interviews with EFNEP staff, a survey was developed to ask CNEs how they felt about their jobs, coworkers, and supervisors. The survey also asked CNEs to rate their self-efficacy, work satisfaction, and views on the program's benefits for participants. All of these factors are part of CNEs' "work context".

Almost all eligible CNEs in these sites answered the survey, for a total of 100 respondents. Data from the 4 sites in New York City had to be left out of the analysis because the extremely large population and program size made data analysis unworkable.

Measuring program success

Behavior change data for 2001 were collected as part of the EFNEP Evaluation and Reporting System. Participants completed a "Behavior Checklist" at the beginning and end of the program.

Behavior change scores for each EFNEP site were calculated as the average of all program graduates' change in reported behavior over the course of the program. We also took into account that high scores at program entry meant less room to improve.

Most CNEs feel good about their work and believe in the value of EFNEP

Most CNEs had positive views of their work context. They gave high ratings to their supervisors' management practices and their relationships with their nutrition co-workers. They were somewhat less positive about their workloads and their relationships in Cooperative Extension outside of nutrition.

Perceived value of EFNEP was very high, with most CNEs agreeing that participants benefit in important ways from the program.

When we investigated which aspects of work context were related to participant behavior change, here's what we found.

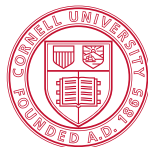
Behavior change is higher where CNEs give positive ratings to their supervisors

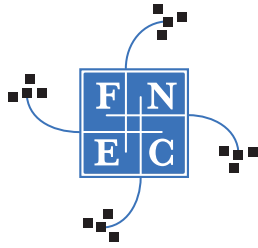
We asked CNEs to rate how often their supervisors practiced 12 categories of managerial behavior [1]. The five managerial practices that had the strongest relationships with participant behavior change were:

- planning
- monitoring
- problem-solving
- motivating and inspiring
- clarifying of roles and objectives

We created a score based on these 5 important categories of managerial practices, using the mean of the ratings provided by all CNEs in the site.

Sites where CNEs gave their supervisors high ratings had the greatest behavior change re-





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Behavior change is higher where CNEs believe in the value of the program

Participants reported more behavior change in the sites where CNEs had the strongest belief in the benefits of the program. In interviews, CNEs told us that their work motivation is based on their desire to help participants, and these results suggest that believing that EFNEP makes a difference may actually help CNEs to be effective in their jobs.

Individual education and greater potential for change were also related to behavior change

On average, about half of program participants received individual rather than small group instruction but this varied from 100% individual instruction in some (mostly rural) counties to 100% group instruction in others.

Behavior change scores were higher in sites that used more individual instruction, as seen in other research [2]. Behavior change was also higher when entry scores on the Behavior Checklist were lower such that participants had more room to improve.

In summary, work context matters

This is the first study to show a link between program outcomes and educators' views of program management and of the value of the program. CNEs' perceptions of their work context can make a difference to program success.

Although this study could not prove that CNEs' perceptions actually caused the difference in outcomes, our interviews with program staff and statistical analyses helped to show that this is likely what happened. Only interventions that change work context and measure program effectiveness over time would be able to prove causality.

But it makes sense that CNEs can be more ef-

fective and motivated when they have positive views of the program and the context where they work.

Strategies for enhancing program success

It's important to cultivate front-line educators' positive perceptions of their work and to provide them with feedback on the ways that their efforts really do benefit program participants.

These results also suggest that increased training to help program supervisors develop effective managerial skills could improve program effectiveness.

While individual instruction was related to better outcomes in this study, it was not possible to control for the number of lessons. Other data suggest that equally good outcomes are possible when EFNEP is delivered to small groups, as long as CNEs are trained in group facilitation skills and participants receive adequate numbers of lessons [3].

For more details:

Dickin, K.L., Dollahite, J.S., Habicht, JP. (2005) *Nutrition behavior change among EFNEP participants is higher at sites that are well managed and whose front-line nutrition educators value the program.* Journal of Nutrition, 135: 2199-2205.

Dickin, K.L. (2003) *The work context of Community Nutrition Educators: Relevance to work attitudes and program outcomes,* Doctoral Thesis, Cornell University, Ithaca.

References cited:

1. Yukl, G., *Development and Validation of the Managerial Practices Questionnaire.* 1988, State University of New York: Albany, NY.
2. Dollahite, J. and M. Scott-Pierce, *Outcomes of individual vs. group instruction in EFNEP.* Journal of Extension, 2003. 41(2).
3. Dollahite, J.S., et al., *Improved participant outcomes with paraprofessional training in a community nutrition program.* J Amer Diet