



Results from a National Survey of Early Care and Education Providers

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GROWING STRONGER TOGETHER

The National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing and food and agriculture education into school systems and early care and education settings.

Farm to school in early childhood builds healthy kids with bright futures

The early childhood population faces a number of significant challenges. Nearly 23 percent of children ages 2-5 are overweight or obese in the United States. These children are at higher risk for significant health challenges, social issues and emotional problems, limiting their ability to function well in school and setting them behind at a critical stage of development. Additionally, exposure to poor quality early care and education settings can delay academic, social and emotional development, further reducing school readiness.

The opportunity

Eight million children spend an average of 33 hours per week in early care and education settings, making these venues a vital place to reach children and families with messages and activities that promote healthy habits and high quality education, like farm to school. In these early years, children are developing taste preferences and eating habits that will influence their health for a lifetime. High quality early education programs also have long term benefits for social, cognitive and emotional development, setting the stage for success in school and beyond.

Farm to school also expands healthy food access and family engagement.

Farm to school initiatives can increase food security for children and families by increasing access to fresh, local foods. Integrating farm to school into early care and education settings provides all children with opportunities for improved health and valuable learning experiences, opportunities particularly vital for our most vulnerable children.

A national survey of early care and education sites

In 2015, the National Farm to School Network surveyed early care and education providers across the country to better understand their current farm to school initiatives, motivations for applying farm to school and challenges to starting or expanding these activities. We received responses from **1,496 providers** serving **183,639 young children** in **49 states and Washington D.C.** The snowball sampling method used in the survey helps us get a glimpse of what support is needed to grow these activities, but it is not a complete picture and should be reviewed alongside results from the current USDA Farm to School Census on preschools and child care in K-12 districts.

What is farm to school in early care and education?

Farm to school is a group of activities and strategies that offers increased access to healthy, local foods, gardening opportunities and food-based learning activities to enhance the quality of the educational experience. Farm to school works well in all types of early care and education settings, inclusive of, but not limited to, preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start/ Early Head Start and programs in K-12 school districts.

What we heard from early care and education providers across the country:

Farm to school is on the rise in early care and education settings:

- 48 states and Washington, D.C., have farm to school taking place in early care and education sites in their state, up from 39 states in 2012
- 54% of respondents, 812 sites, are currently integrating farm to school activities
- 28% of respondents plan to start farm to school activities in the future
- 18% of respondents started activities in the past year

Farm to school benefits all children, regardless of socioeconomic status:

- 40% of sites reporting farm to school activities have greater than 50% enrollment of low-income children

Farm to school works in any environment to improve the educational experience:

Types of early care and education sites participating in farm to school activities:

- Child care centers
- Family child care
- Private preschools
- Head Start/Early Head Start
- Preschools or child care in K-12 districts

Teachers and early care providers see the difference

Top three reasons respondents reported participating in farm to school*:

- Teaches children about where food comes from and how it is grown (95%)
- Improves children's health (95%)
- Provides children with experiential learning (94%)

Additional motivations for integrating farm to school include: Access to fresher or higher quality food (79%), supporting local economy and community (64%), lowering meal costs (63%), appealing to parents (61%), and supporting local farmers (61%)

*Percent of respondents who identified these motivations as very important



Early care and education sites are incorporating all elements of farm to school:

Top three farm to school activities at early care and education sites:

- Educating children about locally grown food, how food grows, where it comes from (85%)
- Planting or working with children in an edible garden (78%)
- Serving local foods for meals and snacks (63%)

Other activities reported include: Taste tests and cooking demonstrations of local foods (32%), taste tests and cooking demonstrations of garden produce (22%), special food and farm day or event (19%), farmer visits (17%)

Early care and education sites plan to increase spending on local food:

Farm to school initiatives, including those in early care and education settings, can stimulate local economic activity through local purchasing and job creation. Survey respondents purchasing local foods for meals and snacks spent an average of 28% of their food budget on local products, and 74% of sites currently purchasing local foods anticipate their local purchases increasing in the next 2-3 years.

Most frequently served local foods*:

- Vegetables (54%)
- Fruit (54%)
- Fluid Milk (50%)
- Other Dairy (33%)
- Meat/Poultry (29%)

*Percent of respondents who reported purchasing local foods serve these local foods at least a few times a week

In their own words

"Young children have proven that they are more willing to try new foods when they are involved in growing, harvesting and preparing their foods."

Preschool in K-12 district staff, OR

"Not only do school gardens provide rich experiences with nature and the outdoors, but they also provide great educational opportunities for gross motor skills, fine motor skills, socialization, stress management and earth science."

Child care center staff, IA

But many early care and education sites still face challenges to purchasing local products:

Most frequently reported barriers to purchasing local products:

- Cost/price of items (84%)
- Seasonality of fruits and vegetables (76%)
- Unreliable supply (62%)
- Finding new suppliers/farmers (62%)
- Obtaining information about product availability (60%)
- Knowing how to order local items (58%)
- Delivery consideration (57%)
- Storage (55%)

*Percent of respondents who identified these as either a major or minor barrier

Growing opportunities in early childhood

Despite challenges, early care and education providers are invested in the benefits of farm to school. With **54 percent** of survey respondents integrating farm to school strategies now and **28 percent** planning to start in the future, food-based education is transforming the early learning environment to promote healthy relationships with food and high quality learning experiences.

Survey results show that farm to school strategies are being integrated in all types of communities and program models. Respondents confirmed that farm to school is happening in early care and education settings in **48 states and Washington, D.C.**, and **40 percent** of these active farm to school sites have **greater than 50 percent enrollment of low-income children**. Respondents ranged from large day care centers to small, family child care homes, public and private preschools, and Head Start locations.

Early care and education providers are successfully integrating all three core elements of farm to school: **education** activities related to agriculture, food, health or nutrition (85%); **school gardens** where students can engage in hands-on learning (78%); and **procurement** of local foods for snacks, meals or taste tests (63%). Those providers purchasing local foods are spending an average of **28 percent of their food budgets** on local foods, and most plan to increase that amount in the next 2-3 years.

These strategies are most effective when applied together, and can have **long-reaching benefits for kids, farmers and communities**. But there are challenges to procuring local food for early care and education sites, including price, seasonality and supply, finding and working with farmers, and storage.



How can we help grow farm to school in early care and education settings?

The National Farm to School Network is working to ensure more children, families, early care and education providers, and communities have access to the benefits of farm to school.

In its role as a hub for information, networking and advocacy, the National Farm to School Network educates early care and education stakeholders at the local, regional and national levels on the opportunities inherent in farm to school for early childhood development.

We also train our farm to school partners to be leaders in applying farm to school in early care and education settings, convene national stakeholder groups to increase connectivity among diverse early childhood partners, and advocate for policies that support high quality early care and education and healthy local food systems.

Why farm to school in early care and education settings?

Farm to school is a critical strategy for early childhood development for two important reasons: health and high-quality learning.

Farm to school activities, like taste tests, cooking and gardening, offer repeat exposure to new, healthy foods; promote lifelong healthy food preferences and habits; and decrease the risk for obesity in childhood and beyond. The experiential learning opportunities associated with farm to school enhance the learning environment and can help achieve early learning standards, important priorities for children, parents and providers.

Additionally, farm to school benefits the entire community. These activities appeal to parents and create more opportunities for family engagement, purchasing local creates markets for family farmers, and food-based learning also educates teachers and providers about healthy habits and local foods.

How you can help

You can help advance the goals of farm to school in early care and education settings in your community by joining the National Farm to School Network and connecting with farm to school leaders in your state and region.

Get started at farmtoschool.org/earlychildhood

KIDS WIN

Farm to school provides all kids access to nutritious, high quality, local food so they are ready to learn and grow. Farm to school activities enhance classroom education through hands-on learning related to food, health, agriculture and nutrition.

FARMERS WIN

Farm to school can offer new financial opportunities for farmers, fishers, ranchers, food processors and food manufacturers by opening the doors to an institutional market worth billions of dollars.

COMMUNITIES WIN

Buying from local producers and processors reduces the carbon footprint of food transportation while stimulating the local economy. Educational activities such as school gardens and composting programs help to create a healthy environment around the school community.

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The National Farm to School Network conducted a snowball sampling of early care and education sites across the U.S. in the fall of 2015. The data presented here is from that sample and additional research. Visit farmtoschool.org/earlychildhood to learn more.

