

# Farm to Early Care and Education Continues to Foster Bright Futures for Children and Communities



**Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) promotes child health and well-being and increases access to healthy foods through a collection of strategies that are centered in experiential learning and family and community engagement.**

Farm to ECE brings three core elements — gardening, food and agriculture education, and local food procurement — into every type of ECE setting, including family child care homes, child care centers, Head Start, and preschools in K-12 districts. Not only does farm to ECE create opportunities to influence the eating habits of children at a critical time in development by encouraging children to eat fresh, wholesome foods, but, when approached equitably, has the potential to reduce health and education disparities, improve household food security and food access, and support community food systems.

Farm to ECE’s many benefits provide a unique opportunity to address the challenges providers face during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though ECEs have provided critical services for families with young children during the pandemic, child care workers continue to be underpaid, with one in three childcare workers experiencing food insecurity<sup>1</sup>. COVID-19 safety measures such as closures and group size limitations have put additional burden on the already strained and inadequately funded ECE system. Many providers, farm to ECE supportive organizations, and government agencies have seen the opportunity to improve

## CORE ELEMENTS OF FARM to SCHOOL



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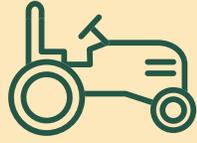
“Farm to ECE has had a wonderful impact on science, cultural sharing and introduction to new foods for the children (and families). It was very influential in helping our program remain open during COVID.”

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# Why Farm to Early Care and Education?



**Kids  
Win**



**Farmers  
Win**



**Communities  
Win**

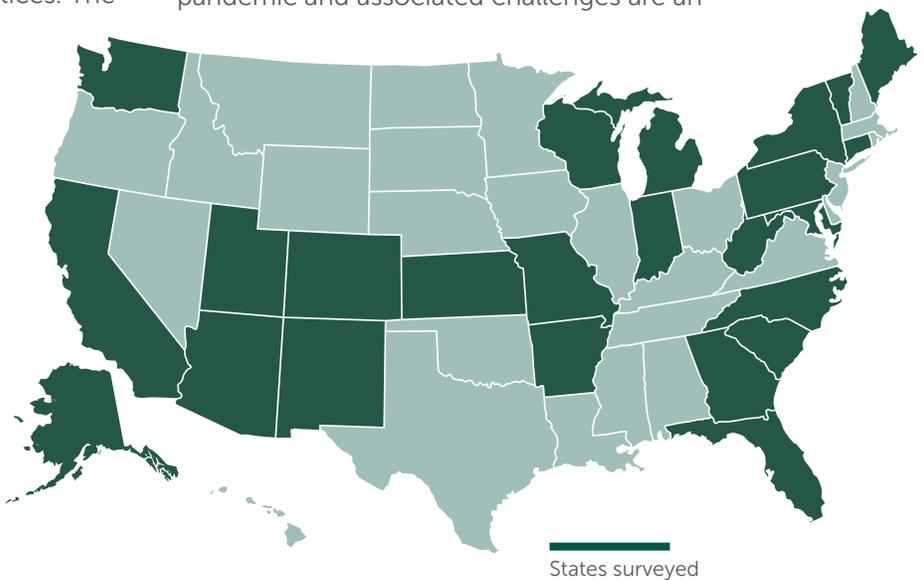
food access for families, communities, and ECE staff impacted by the pandemic while simultaneously supporting local farmers and vendors struggling under the strained supply chain by building capacity and infrastructure for local procurement and other farm to ECE activities<sup>2</sup>.

## 2021 National Farm to Early Care and Education Survey

In 2021, the National Farm to School Network, in partnership with Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems, surveyed ECE providers in 26 states to learn about current farm to ECE initiatives and their reach; motivations, challenges, and supports needed to sustain and expand participation; and the effect, if any, of COVID-19 on farm to ECE and local purchasing practices. The survey also gathered information from programs not participating in farm to ECE to better understand the barriers and supports needed. The survey was adapted from previous farm to ECE surveys conducted in 2012, 2015, and 2018<sup>3,4</sup>. Researchers targeted 28 states and were able to obtain a list of emails of licensed and licensed exempt providers from 26 of those states. Four states in each of the seven USDA regions<sup>5</sup> were chosen to represent a spectrum of racial diversity and farm to ECE supportive

policies and infrastructure, including the existence of statewide farm to ECE networks and positions. Survey respondents were recruited from the email lists, including center-based and home providers, Head Start and Early Head Start, public and private preschools, and preschools in K-12 districts. Five states sent the survey to providers directly.

Alternate states were also identified in the event a contact list could not be obtained. As the 2021 survey used stratified sampling and previous years used snowball sampling, limitations exist for comparison of 2021 results with previous survey years. In total, 95,149 sites were reached with the survey with a response rate of 3.1%. There were 2,914 total survey respondents with 2,397 indicating they participated in farm to ECE. The ongoing pandemic and associated challenges are an



important consideration in interpreting the results, just as the previously discussed stratification which differs from the 2018 version makes comparisons from earlier versions difficult. Despite these challenges, analyses and discussions of the farm to ECE activities, motivations, challenges and barriers, and opportunities are presented as the most current national perspective on farm to ECE.

## Growing Support for Farm to ECE



**81% of respondents currently participate in at least one farm to ECE activity**

- **18%** of respondents started participating in farm to ECE this past year
- **36%** of respondents have participated in farm to ECE for between one and five years
- **33%** respondents have participated in farm to ECE for more than five years

An additional **14%** plan to start farm to ECE activities in the future.

## Who's Participating



**Percentage of total farm to ECE participants by setting:**

- Family Child Care (**39%**)
- Child Care Centers (**36%**)
- Private Preschools (**13%**)
- Head Start and/or Early Head Start (**3%**)

**47%** of farm to ECE participating sites receive Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) funding for meals

**33%** of farm to ECE participating sites serve 50% or greater children who are eligible for free/ reduced price meals

## The Many Benefits of Farm to Early Care and Education

The multifaceted approach of farm to ECE leads to many benefits for ECE providers, families, children and communities.



**Most frequently reported "very important" motivations for farm to ECE for participating sites**

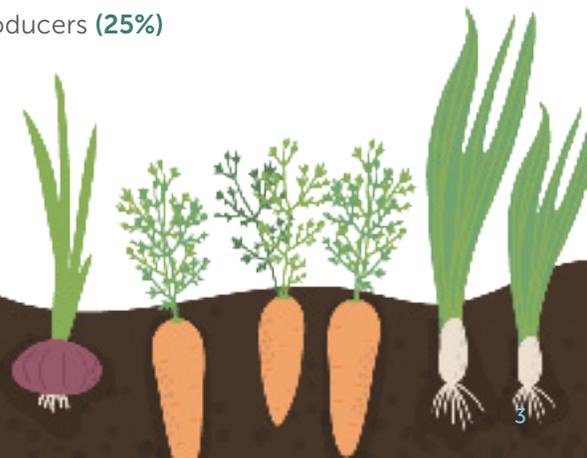
- Improving children's health (**92%**)
- Providing children with experiential learning (**87%**)
- Teaching children about where food comes from and how it is grown (**87%**)
- Provide fresher or higher-quality food to children (**84%**)
- Support local farmers and local economy (**72%**)

Additional motivations include lower meal cost (63%), engaging and motivating staff (61%), engaging parents and families (61%), meeting learning and programmatic standards (58%), and appeal to new/ potential families (50%).



**Percentage of respondents who report feedback of farm to ECE from these groups as "positive" or "very positive"**

- Children (**74%**)
- Families (**66%**)
- ECE Staff (**54%**)
- ECE Administration (**49%**)
- Community Members (**31%**)
- Farmers/Producers (**25%**)



## Farm to Early Care and Education Happenings

There are many different farm to ECE activities sites incorporate depending on their own needs and motivations.



### Most frequently reported farm to ECE activities align with the three components of farm to ECE:

- Educated children about locally grown food, how food grows and/or where it comes from **(71%)**
- Planted or worked with children in an edible garden at the site **(65%)**
- Served locally grown food in meals, snacks or taste tests **(65%)**

Other activities include holding taste tests and/or cooking demonstrations of garden grown food (39%), holding taste tests and/or cooking demonstrations of locally produced foods (30%), and conducting field trips to farms, gardens, and/or farmers markets (29%).

## Food, Agriculture, and Nutrition Education

Providers are frequently integrating farm to ECE nutrition education into their activities.

**39%** of farm to ECE participants engage in nutrition education activities at least once per week

**38%** of farm to ECE participants engage in nutrition education activities at least once per month



### Most frequently used curricula by farm to ECE participants

- Curricula developed themselves **(41%)**
- None **(30%)**
- Grow It, Try It, Like It! **(14%)**

## Gardening Activities

Gardening is popular for education and feeding children and families.

**50%** currently have an onsite garden

**22%** want to start an onsite garden



### Most common uses for edible gardens

- Taste testing **(81%)**
- Classroom lessons/curricula **(76%)**
- Food grown to supplement meals **(42%)**
- Food grown for children to take home **(41%)**

## Serving Local Foods

COVID-19 has affected farm to ECE participating sites' local food purchasing.

**26%** of sites' local food purchasing "increased greatly" or "increased some"

**26%** of sites' local food purchasing "decreased greatly" or "decreased some"



### Most frequent local products served at least a few times a week

- Fruit **(43%)**
- Vegetables **(43%)**
- Milk **(38%)**

An average of **30%** of respondents' food purchases were locally grown or produced

### Most frequently used sources of local foods

- Grocery stores/retail outlets **(65%)**
- Direct from farmers market **(37%)**
- Onsite or community garden **(28%)**
- Direct from individual farmers/producers **(26%)**

Of all respondents, **53%** expect an increase in local food purchasing in the next 2-3 years

## Farm to Farm to Early Care and Education Challenges

Challenges to farm to ECE implementation still exist, despite the growing movement



### Most frequently reported major or minor barriers to local food purchasing

- Concerns about food quality **(60%)**
- Concerns about food safety **(60%)**
- Lack of staff interest in preparing local foods **(60%)**
- Lack of kitchen equipment to process/prepare local foods **(59%)**
- Lack of skilled/trained staff to prepare local foods **(59%)**
- Availability of processed/precut products **(57%)**
- State or local purchasing restrictions **(57%)**
- Packaging/size of packaging **(57%)**

Other barriers include seasonality of fruits and vegetables (56%), reliability of local product supply (54%), challenges with payment arrangement (54%), limited onsite storage (53%), finding suppliers/farmers to provide local food (52%), obtaining information about product availability (51%), and knowing how to order local items (48%)



### Most frequently reported major or minor barriers to other farm to ECE activities

- Limited family interest and engagement **(64%)**
- Limited staff interest and engagement **(61%)**
- Lack of outdoor space **(61%)**
- Limited access to appropriate curriculum or lesson plans **(61%)**
- Limited staff knowledge about nutrition education **(60%)**

Other barriers include limited staff knowledge on local foods (57%), limited staff knowledge of

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“I was astonished to hear the children say “pumpkins come from Walmart.”...with the help of the community we were able to turn a vacant, unattractive 4 acres into a vibrant playscape with 12, 4x12 raised garden beds...children have learned to garden! I made changes to the menu to include fresh fruits and vegetables...the community garden was established in 2010 and continues to thrive today!”

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gardening (57%), limited staff time to develop and implement lessons (52%), and limited funding for supplies (45%).

## Opportunities for Farm to ECE

As a promising 81% of respondents currently participate in at least one farm to ECE activity, it is clear that the benefits for children, families, communities, farmers, and providers can foster healthy environments and support healthy food access in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. As prevalence of farm to ECE continues to increase, investments and support for farm to ECE at every level will need to grow alongside the movement.

Participants are engaging in all three components of farm to ECE. All three of these components can help mitigate some of the effects of the pandemic on ECE sites, families, and communities. Many participants are utilizing gardening as a strategy to feed children and families, with 50% currently maintaining an onsite garden and 22%

wanting to start one. Of respondents with gardens, 41% grow food for children to take home while 42% use garden grown produce to supplement meals. With 43% of respondents serving local fruits and vegetables at least a few times a week, local procurement is also being used to bolster the local economy and local growers' businesses.

Providers are motivated to help improve the lives of the children and families they work with while supporting the larger community. Among respondents, 92% are looking to improve children's

health, 84% want to provide children with high-quality foods, and 72% would like to support local farmers and the local economy. Providers are not the only ones noticing the benefits farm to ECE offers. Respondents report 74% of children, 66% of families, 54% of staff, and 49% of administration have provided positive or very positive feedback on farm to ECE activities. The benefits of and the enthusiasm around farm to ECE are reaching a range of ECE settings, including centers (36%), family homes (39%), and private preschools (13%) and children of diverse racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

## The Future of Farm to Early Care and Education

Farm to ECE awareness, support, capacity, and implementation is growing at the state, regional, and national levels. Awareness of and dedication to the health of our children, the quality of our ECE programs, and the building of resilient food systems has led to more states forming farm to ECE networks and coalitions to collaboratively support farm to ECE policy, funding, technical assistance, and alignment with state ECE standards. With weak links in our food system and supply chains and inequities in the ECE system spotlighted by COVID, promising national and state funding opportunities are being leveraged to build and sustain healthy ECE environments and farm to ECE programs. Across the country, communities and ECEs work every day to develop creative and inspiring programming that supports the local economy, increases families' access to

healthy foods, and connects children to their culture, the environment, and their role in helping our world stay healthy and thriving for generations to come.

Everyone has a role to play. Grow the movement by connecting with your state and local farm to ECE partners, building relationships across food system and ECE stakeholders, and supporting policy and funding that strengthens food systems and ECE infrastructure. Learn more about how to get involved, explore farm to ECE resources, and connect with partners in your state by visiting [www.farmtoschool.org/ECE](http://www.farmtoschool.org/ECE). Visit [www.foodsystems.msu.edu](http://www.foodsystems.msu.edu) to find resources and research on regional food systems from Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems.

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<sup>1</sup> Dynia, J. M., Koury, A. J., Bate, R. A., & McGinnis, C. (2018). Food insecurity in a nationally representative sample of child care workers [White Paper]. The Center for Early Childhood Innovation at South Side Early Learning. <https://www.southsidelearning.org/whitepapers/early-childhood-food-insecurity>

<sup>2</sup> Lessons from the COVID-19 Experience: Innovations and Strategies for Farm to Early Care and Education Implementation in States and Communities. (2021). National Farm to School Network and Policy Equity Group. [https://assets.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3d913b2d/61390c1e5d450713760359c3\\_FarmtoECE-Covid\\_July2021.pdf](https://assets.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3d913b2d/61390c1e5d450713760359c3_FarmtoECE-Covid_July2021.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Stephens, L., & Oberholtzer, L. (2016). Results from the 2015 National Survey of Early Care and Education Providers: Local Procurement, Gardening, and Food and Farm Education. National Farm to School Network. [Farmtoschool.org](http://farmtoschool.org)

<sup>4</sup> Shedd, MK, Stephens, L, Matts, C, Laney, J. (2016). Results From the 2018 National Farm to Early Care and Education Survey. National Farm to School Network. [Farmtoschool.org](http://farmtoschool.org)

<sup>5</sup> United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service; FNS Regional Offices. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fns-regional-offices>