

Farm to Early Care and Education 101: A Roadmap for National Farm to School Network Core Partners

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FARM to SCHOOL
NETWORK

farmtoschool.org/earlychildhood

Purpose and scope

This resource is intended for use by National Farm to School Network Core Partners (State and Regional Leads) to facilitate increased connectivity with early care and education stakeholders and to support advancement of farm to school in early care and education settings across the country.

NFSN's vision for the future of farm to early care and education:

- Access to healthy, local foods, gardening opportunities and food-based activities to enhance the quality of the educational experience as the “new normal” in early care and education
- All early care and education providers, regardless of geographic location, type of program or socioeconomic status, have the information, resources and support to successfully implement farm to early care and education initiatives
- Communication of farm to early care and education outcomes and benefits as parallel and aligned with the goals and priorities of the early care and education community
- Engagement of a wide variety of stakeholders (e.g., teachers and providers, parents, producers, policy makers, state agencies, advocacy and professional development organizations) and sectors (e.g., food systems/supply chain, public health, early care and education quality improvement) with the goal of expanding access to healthy, local foods and high quality educational experiences for young children

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This document is adapted from an original resource developed in partnership with Ecotrust (www.ecotrust.org).

Early care and education 101

What is farm to early care and education?

Farm to early care and education is a group of strategies and activities that offer increased access to healthy, local foods, gardening opportunities and food-based activities to enhance the quality of educational experience in all types of early care and education settings (e.g., preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start, programs in K-12 school districts). In addition to promoting health, wellness and high quality educational opportunities, farm to early care and education also expands healthy food access and family engagement, provides additional market opportunities for farmers and supports thriving communities.

- **Connection to K-12 farm to school:** Farm to early care and education applies the same three core elements of farm to school – education, gardening and procurement – to early care and education settings with the aim of reaching children ages 0-5, their families, teachers and caregivers.
- **Why “early care and education”?:** NFSN uses “farm to early care and education” for two primary reasons: (1) to be inclusive of all early care and education settings and (2) to better align our work and communication with the early care and education community. “Farm to early care and education” is inclusive of “farm to preschool,” “farm to childcare,” “farm to early childhood” and other similar expressions, and the terms are often used interchangeably. Additionally, “farm to early care and education” and “farm to school in early care and education” may also be used interchangeably.

Why focus on early care and education settings?

Farm to school activities are a natural fit for the 0-5 age group and offer extensive benefits in these young years. Farm to early care and education is a critical strategy for early childhood development for three important reasons: health, parent and community engagement and high-quality education opportunities. These key reasons parallel the priorities of the early care and education community and highlight how farm to school activities help providers meet their goals of providing the highest quality care and educational experience available to their children.

- **Health:** The earliest years of life are formative years for developing taste preferences and eating habits. Farm to early care and education activities like taste tests, cooking lessons and gardening offer repeat exposure to new, healthy foods, promoting lifelong healthy food preferences and eating patterns and decreasing the risk for obesity in childhood and beyond.
- **Parent and community engagement:** Gardening and food-related activities appeal to parents and create more opportunities for meaningful family engagement. Young children take home the excitement of learning about new foods and act as a catalyst for change, influencing parent and family food choices. Additionally, farm to school benefits the entire community. Purchasing local creates market opportunities for family farmers, and food-based learning educates teachers and providers about healthy habits and their local food system.
- **High-quality education:** The experiential learning opportunities associated with farm to early care and education enhance the learning environment, can help achieve early learning standards and support appropriate cognitive, emotional, social and physical development, important priorities for children, parents and providers.

Early care and education program structure

Early care and education programs are structured in a wide variety of ways. Very broadly, there are two types of early care settings: family child care homes and child care centers.

- **Family child care** is home-based care that is provided for pay in the private family home of the caregiver.
- **Child care centers** provide care in facilities that vary in terms of their size and structure of operations. Settings may be privately or publically funded, operate as for- or non-profits and may or may not operate in partnership with a K-12 school district. A few of the most common categories of child care centers include:
 - **Head Start** is a federally funded program administered by state or local grantees aimed at providing high quality early learning opportunities to low-income children and families.
 - **Preschools or child care in a K-12 district** may be funded by local district funds from the Department of Education, city/district general funds and/or Title I funds. (Title I funds are federal funds provided to school districts to support high quality education for children from low-income families.)
 - **State preschool programs** can be found in 41 states and DC and are state funded preschool programs. These programs may be administered through other entities (including Head Start or K-12 districts) and the number of children reached and income guidelines for participation vary from state to state.
 - **Private preschool or child care** is paid for by parents, not public funds. These may include the larger for-profit chains, including KinderCare and La Petite Academy as well as smaller, independently owned programs.

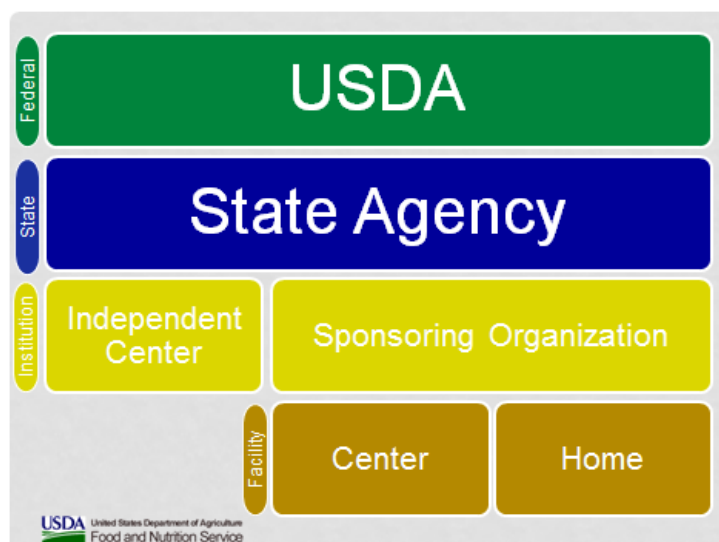
Farm to early care and education activities can be incorporated into any setting, although it is worth noting that the regulatory environment, educational standards, hours of operation, meal programs and more will all vary depending on the site and the state where the site is located.

Meal programs in early care and education settings

Meal programs vary widely in early care and education settings. Some sites serve three full meals plus snacks, while others might serve only snacks or no food at all. Some sites receive a federal reimbursement for meals, while others do not. The federal equivalent to the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) for early care and education settings is the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). CACFP also funds meal programs at homeless shelters, afterschool programs, adult care centers and group homes. Like NSLP, CACFP is a federal reimbursement for meals and is administered by state agencies (often but not always the state Department of Education). CACFP is available to child care centers as well as to family child care providers, however, it is not as widely adopted among early care and education settings as NSLP is amongst school districts. Find information about the agency that operates CACFP in your state here: <http://www.cacfp.org/resources/usda-stage-agencies/>.

In many cases, early care and education settings (especially small child care centers and family child care homes) work with a **Sponsoring Organization** that administers CACFP, as opposed to working directly with a state agency (see figure titled, “CACFP Structure”). You can find CACFP sponsors in your state here: <http://www.cacfp.org/resources/tools-providers-centers/find-a-cacfp-sponsor/>

Figure 1: CACFP Structure



Farm to school in K-12 vs. early care and education settings

There are a few important distinctions that can help inform your work:

- **Meal programs:** Nearly all K-12 school districts participate in NSLP whereas early care and education meal programs vary widely in terms of CACFP participation. Early care and education sites generally do not offer a la carte choices or multiple meal options and are more likely to serve family-style meals, which provide more time for children to eat and more opportunities for adults to model and nurture good eating habits.
- **Local food procurement:** While many K-12 school districts purchase most of their foods from broadline distributors, early care and education sites may purchase foods from a variety of sources, including the grocery store, farmers' market or a broadline distributor, depending on the size of the program. Early care and education programs tend to purchase at smaller volumes, which can be a good fit for farmers who may not have enough volume to work with a school district, however, it makes it difficult to access volume discounts that may be available to larger school districts.
- **Class size and schedule:** Early care and education programs tend to have smaller numbers of children and varied schedules (child care might be for only a few hours or it might be half or full days). Smaller groups of children provide greater flexibility, while shorter days may limit some activities.
- **Year round operation:** Early care and education sites are more likely than K-12 school districts to remain in operation in the summer months, making it easier to highlight a wide variety of local foods when they are in season.
- **Curriculum:** The common core is becoming the standard for K-12, while experiential and play based education – grounded in applicable state and/or national early learning standards – is emphasized in early education programming. Farm to early care and education activities such as gardening, cooking and tasting meet many cognitive, emotional, social and physical learning objectives for young children.
- **Parental involvement:** Parental involvement tends to be strongest during the early childhood years, which can be a substantial asset for farm to early care and education programming. Additionally, this can prepare parents to expect and support farm to school programming in the K-12 years.

Getting started in farm to early care and education

Where do I start?

Use these tips to inform your work as you get started:

- **Read NFSN's fact sheet:**
 - *Getting Started with Farm to Early Care and Education:* <http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/getting-started-with-farm-to-early-care-and-education>
- **Connect with NFSN Farm to Early Care and Education Associate:** NFSN staff may be able to connect you to existing activity in your state or facilitate connections to local early care and education organizations. See <http://www.farmtoschool.org/earlychildhood> for contact information.
- **Think back to how you got started with farm to school:** What did you do to learn the ins and outs of school meals? How did you figure out who to talk to?
- **Introduce your existing contacts to the idea of farm to early care and education:** Ask these contacts: What's already happening in this area? Where are the leverage points and areas of overlap?
- **Start small:** Find one early care and education site or provider who can mentor you and answer your questions, perhaps in exchange for help finding local farmers or starting an edible garden.
- **Include early care providers and agencies in your current farm to school activities.** Invite them to join farm to school networks, listservs and events in your state or region. School garden groups are an especially good place to begin integrating early childhood stakeholders since the differences between K-12 and early care and education garden programming is less than the differences in meal programs or classroom curricula.
- **Be flexible!** This document serves as a starting point, but like farm to school in K-12, the nature of this work is such that you will have to do some additional research into programs in your home state and adapt your plans accordingly.

What if early care and education doesn't fit within my scope of work?

Farm to early care and education can have a direct, positive impact on K-12 farm to school programs. Research has shown that children develop many of their habits and preferences for fruits and vegetables prior to age five. As a result, by engaging children in eating healthy, local foods, gardening opportunities and food-based activities at an early age, we lay the groundwork for both successful farm to school programming at the K-12 level, and for a lifetime of healthy habits for these children.

For NFSN Core Partners, depending on your position and the organization or agency for whom you work, early care and education may or may not fit within your scope of work. Start by reviewing your scope explicitly with an eye to early childhood programs. Often, farm to school programs not only encompass early care and education, but can be greatly enhanced by the inclusion. If a Core Partner's scope of work is explicitly focused on K-12 school districts, there may be other creative solutions such as a Co-Lead for farm to early care and education. Additionally, a growing number of states have farm to early care and education points of contact within their state agencies whom you may be able to partner with to connect with early care and education providers. This partnership may allow you to support farm to early care and education without exceeding your scope of work.

Connecting with providers

There are a wide variety of agencies that either directly operate or provide support and technical assistance to early care and education providers. The following agencies can help you connect with providers directly. Ask them for recommendations for providers or groups in your state that might be interested in farm to early care and education:

- Head Start, Early Head Start, Migrant & Seasonal Head Start, American Indian & Alaska Native Head Start
 - Find Head Start/Early Head Start Programs in your area here: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/HeadStartOffices>
 - Find Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Programs in your area here: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/states/collaboration/locator.html>
- National and regional early care and education businesses and organizations (e.g., YMCA, KinderCare)
- Your state's Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) network. Find your CCR&R by contacting Child Care Aware toll-free at 800-424-2246 or online at www.childcareaware.org
- K-12 school districts, many of which operate child care programs or preschool classrooms
- The National CACFP Sponsors Association: <http://www.cacfp.org/resources/usda-stage-agencies/>
- The National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC): <http://www.nafcc.org/>

Connecting with state level stakeholders

Consider connecting with state level agencies and organizations to explore partnership and collaboration opportunities and to identify key individuals who might be interested in farm to early care and education efforts.

- **State Agencies:** The state agencies involved with various early care and education initiatives can vary widely from state to state
 - The agency housing CACFP in your state: <http://www.cacfp.org/resources/usda-stage-agencies/>
 - The agency housing early childhood programs*
 - The agency housing state preschool programs (if applicable)*
 - The Head Start State Collaboration Office: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/states/collaboration/map/index.html>
 - The agency that licenses early care and education providers in your state: <http://www.naccrra.org/public-policy/core-issues/in-the-states>
 - Departments whose work is relevant to farm to school (e.g., departments of agriculture, education)

*Find these agencies in your state in this resource from the BUILD Initiative: [http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Early Childhood Governance for Web.pdf](http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Early%20Childhood%20Governance%20for%20Web.pdf)

- **Advocacy and Professional Association:**
 - State-based affiliates of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): <http://www.naeyc.org/affiliates/offices>
 - State Head Start Associations: <https://www.nhsa.org/head-start-associations-contacts>
- **Your governor**, who may have an Office of Early Learning or other similar initiative related to child education, wellness and nutrition

- **Universities and community colleges** with child development, nutrition, public health, food systems or related fields may have professors or students with interest in farm to early care and education. These contacts can be good partners when seeking funding or intern/volunteer support for research or programming.
- **Funders** in your state or region that are focused on early care and education, who might have good connections, resources, and suggestions
- **Ask your existing contacts**, including your NFSN Regional Lead Agency and your contacts at USDA: Who should I reach out to? Are there state agencies, nonprofits or other community partners that would be good connections to make? Can they recommend someone who has worked in early care for a number of years who could serve as a mentor?

Fundraising for farm to early care and education

Farm to early care and education can often be wrapped into existing farm to school work. Planning or hosting a farm to school conference, listserv, meeting or training? Consider including early care providers and agencies in the funding proposal. Also consider grants from private foundations interested in early care and education, relevant government grants (e.g., USDA Team Nutrition grants, SNAP-Ed funding, USDA Farm to School Grants) and partnerships with state agencies (especially departments of education and public health). Weekly emails from NFSN to Core Partners increasingly include links to grants relevant for farm to early care and education. Finally, consider partnering with an early care and education agency in your state to conduct collaborative fundraising for a shared project.

Important resources

- **NFSN Farm to Early Care and Education Landing Page:**
<http://www.farmtoschool.org/earlychildhood>
- **NFSN's Fact Sheets:**
 - **Getting Started with Farm to Early Care and Education:**
<http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/getting-started-with-farm-to-early-care-and-education>
 - **Local Procurement for Child Care Centers:**
<http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/local-procurement-for-child-care-centers>
 - **Local Purchasing for Family Child Care Homes:**
<http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/local-procurement-for-family-child-care-providers>
- **Farmtopreschool.org**, maintained by the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI) at Occidental College: <http://www.farmtopreschool.org>
- **Growing Farm to Preschool in Your State: A How-To Guide**, from Ecotrust:
http://www.ecotrust.org/media/Farm_to_preschool_digital.pdf
- **Farm to Early Childhood Programs: A Step by Step Guide**, from MSU Center for Regional Food Systems:
http://foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/farm_to_early_childhood_guide
- Visit NFSN's Resource Database (www.farmtoschool.org/resources) and search by "Preschool/Early Care" for wide variety of curricula, gardening guides, procurement information and other farm to early care and education resources