

# 2018 National Farm to Early Care and Education Survey

## Farm to Early Care and Education: Supporting Healthy Futures for All Children

Farm to early care and education (ECE) brings the three core elements of farm to school – local food procurement, gardening, and food and agriculture education – into all types of ECE settings, including preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start, and programs within K-12 school districts. ECE settings are critical spaces to reach young children and their families, as about 11 million children under the age of 5 spend an average of 35 hours a week in ECE settings in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Farm to ECE enhances education and food purchasing practices at the program and community levels in order to advance health and wellbeing, engage families and communities, and enhance the quality of the ECE setting. Farm to ECE aims to advance racial and social equity by increasing access to healthy, local foods and high-quality education opportunities for all children.

## The 2018 National Farm to Early Care and Education Survey

The National Farm to School Network (NFSN), in partnership with Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems, launched the 2018 National Farm to Early Care and Education Survey in the spring of 2018. ECE providers across the country were surveyed to learn about current farm to ECE initiatives, including motivations for participation and challenges to starting or expanding farm to ECE practices. The survey also gathered information from sites not yet participating in farm to ECE to better understand barriers and needs for support. The 2018 survey is based on previous farm to ECE surveys conducted in 2012 and 2015.

Survey respondents were recruited from a compiled list of emails of licensed and exempt providers from across the U.S., including center-based and home providers, Head Start and Early Head Start, public and private preschools, and preschool and childcare in K-12 school districts. The survey was offered in both English and Spanish. Across the U.S., there are approximately 118,000 family child care providers and 129,000 center-based ECE sites.<sup>2</sup> Efforts were made to obtain representative responses from across ECE site type and across states and regions. Provider email lists were unavailable in some states and territories, thus limiting survey distribution in those areas. Despite this, the 2018 survey offers a representative snapshot of farm to ECE initiatives across the U.S.

## CORE ELEMENTS OF FARM to ECE

### Education

Students participate in educational activities related to food, agriculture, and nutrition.

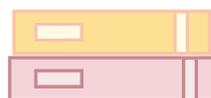


### Procurement

Schools purchase, serve, and promote local foods in their cafeterias.

### School Gardens

Students learn about food, agriculture, and nutrition through gardening.



## Who we heard from:

Out of 2,030 surveys, respondents represent 46 states<sup>3</sup> and serve 255,257 young children. States with the highest number of responses include Iowa (167 responses), Washington (153 responses), and Wisconsin (123 responses). Regions<sup>4</sup> with the highest number of responses were the Mountain Plains (468 responses) and Western Region (337). Respondents represented all types of ECE settings, with the highest number of responses from child care centers (740 responses) and licensed family child care (711 responses).

## What we heard about farm to ECE:

**49%** of respondents, located in 46 states, currently participate in farm to ECE.

**14%** of farm to ECE participating respondents started activities in the past year, 33% have been engaged in farm to ECE activities for more than 5 years.

**30%** of respondents plan to start farm to ECE activities in the next year.

## Farm to ECE reach:

Farm to ECE is in all types of ECE settings and reaches children of all socioeconomic groups.

## Types of ECE sites reporting farm to ECE activities:

- Licensed family child care (37%)
- Child care center (34%)
- Private preschool (20%)
- Head Start and/or Early Head Start (13%)

Other types of participating sites: State preschool (public preschool program) (6%), Preschool or child care in K-12 district (3%), Tribal child care (1%), Unlicensed family child care (<1%)

**34%** of farm to ECE participating sites serve 50% or greater free/reduced meal eligible children.

## Farm to ECE benefits:

ECE providers see the benefits of farm to ECE and so do children, families, staff, and community members.

## Percentage of respondents already participating in farm to ECE activities who said these were "very important" motivations.

-  Teaching children about where food comes from and how it is grown (96%)
-  Improving children's health (95%)
-  Providing children with experiential learning (95%)
-  Accessing fresher, higher-quality foods (94%)
-  Engaging parents and families (92%)
-  Supporting local farmers (90%)
-  Meeting learning and programmatic standards (85%)
-  Lower meal costs (80%)
-  Enhanced public relations (77%)
-  Supporting the local economy and community (64%)

## Percentage of respondents who report feedback on farm to ECE from these groups as positive or very positive:

-  Children (82%)
-  Parents (73%)
-  ECE staff (62%)
-  ECE administration (53%)
-  Community members (35%)
-  Farmers (29%)

## Farm to ECE activities:

While farm to ECE looks different at every site, the most commonly reported activities align with the three core elements of farm to ECE.

### Most frequently reported farm to ECE activities:



Educated children about locally grown food, how food grows and/or where it comes from (76%)



Planted or worked with children in an edible garden at the site (75%)



Served locally grown food in meals, snacks, or taste tests (69%)

Other activities include holding taste tests/cooking demonstrations of garden grown food (49%), conducting field trips to farms, gardens, and/or farmers markets (46%), and holding taste tests/cooking demonstrations of locally produced foods (41%).

### Most frequently reported ways to use on-site edible gardens:

- Taste testing (62%)
- Classroom lessons and curricula (61%)
- Produce food to supplement program meals (38%)

### Most frequently served local foods\*:



Vegetables (28%)



Fruit (28%)



Milk (24%)

\*Percent of respondents reporting purchasing local foods to serve at least a few times per week.

## Most frequently used sources for purchasing local foods:

- Direct from farmers markets (34%)
- On-site or community garden (31%)
- Direct from individual farmers/producers (28%)

Of all respondents, **54%** anticipate increasing local food purchases in the next 2-3 years.

## Farm to ECE challenges:

While interest in farm to ECE grows, barriers to participation still exist.

### Percentage of respondents who listed as a major or minor barrier to farm to ECE participation:

- Limited funding for supplies (68%)
- Limited staff time to develop and implement lessons (51%)
- Limited staff knowledge of gardening (48%)
- Limited staff knowledge on local foods (47%)
- Limited parent interest and engagement (46%)

### Percentage of respondents who listed as a major or minor barrier to purchasing local foods:

- Cost/price of item (67%)
- Seasonality of fruits and vegetables (65%)
- Reliability of product supply (54%)
- Finding suppliers/farmers to provide local food (54%)
- Knowing how to order local items (50%)

## Respondents share in their own words:

We think it is important to support local farmers and to give children the experience of planting and eating produce. We need to continue to find ways to make local produce accessible and affordable for our poverty level families.

-Head Start staff in New York

We put a lot of focus on helping the kids in our care connect with nature and realize where the food they eat comes from.

-Licensed family child care provider from Utah

By eating locally and seasonally, I believe that we will be healthier, happier, more connected, and more centered individuals and communities. It is a great honor for me to teach and share this with the 6 children (and their families) that come to my home day care each and every day.

-Licensed family child care provider in Pennsylvania

The children loved our garden last year--this year it will be bigger and better.

-Child care center staff in Pennsylvania

## Growing Farm to ECE Opportunities

With 49% of respondents already participating in farm to ECE and another 30% ready to start, the need for support and resources to implement farm to ECE – along with the benefits of farm to ECE to children, communities, and farmers – will continue to grow.

Participating providers see a wide range of farm to ECE benefits including increasing access to higher-quality foods, engaging parents and families, offering meaningful experiential learning, and at the same time, improving children's health. Providers are not the only ones excited about farm to ECE. Respondents report 82% of children, 73% of parents, and 62% of staff provided positive or very positive feedback to farm to ECE initiatives. The benefits of and enthusiasm for farm to ECE are reaching diverse ECE settings and children of diverse racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Despite potential barriers to farm to ECE, providers are successfully integrating all three core elements, including using local foods in meals and snacks (69%), gardening (75%), and educating children about where food comes from and how it grows (76%). Respondents are making great use of gardens, from taste testing (62%) and classroom lessons (61%) to producing food for program meals (38%). Local food use will likely continue to grow in ECE settings. Of all respondents (even those not participating in farm to ECE), 54% anticipate increasing their local purchases in the coming years, increasing markets for local farmers and further bolstering local food systems and economics.

## What's Next for Farm to ECE?

The farm to ECE movement is building momentum at the national, state, and local levels. The National Farm to School Network (NFSN) works with our partners and members across the country to implement farm to ECE as a policy, systems, and environmental change strategy. As a hub for information, networking, and advocacy, NFSN connects people to resources, people to people, and people to policy in order to expand and institutionalize farm to ECE at the national level.

In states across the country, farm to ECE stakeholders are coming together in state farm to ECE networks and coalitions to collaboratively support farm to ECE opportunities including policy advocacy, training and technical assistance, funding, and alignment with state ECE standards. State agencies, Extension programs, and nonprofits are establishing farm to ECE focused positions in order to grow the movement. In communities and ECE sites, creative and passionate providers and community members are building stronger community food systems and healthy children with innovative approaches to connecting young children and their families to local procurement, gardening, and food and nutrition education.

Everyone has a role to play in continuing the growth of farm to ECE. Learn more about NFSN's farm to ECE work, find partners in your state, and learn how to get involved with farm to ECE at [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.

- 1 Child Care Aware of America. About Child Care. 2018. Accessed at <http://usa.childcareaware.org/families-programs/about-child-care/>.
- 2 Office of Administration for Children, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE), 2010-2015. 2015. Available from: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/national-survey-of-early-care-and-education-nsece-2010-2014>.
- 3 No survey responses were received from Delaware, Mississippi, South Dakota, Tennessee, Washington, D.C., or the U.S. territories.
- 4 United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. FNS Regional Offices. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fns-regional-offices>



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The data presented here is from a 2018 strategic sampling of ECE sites across the United States conducted by the National Farm to School Network in partnership with Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems.