

# A Roadmap for Growing the Farm to Early Care and Education Movement



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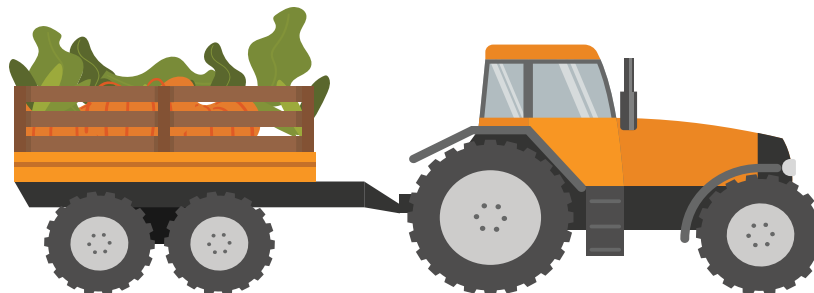
Farm to Early Care and Education (Farm to ECE) is a national movement that works to connect early childhood programs with local food sources to support nutrition education and healthy eating among young children.<sup>1</sup> The movement is marked by a set of four core activities taking place in early learning settings:

nutrition  
education

on-site  
gardening

family  
engagement

local food  
procurement





## INTRODUCTION

Nationally, early care and education (ECE) settings are a significant opportunity to promote healthy eating and nutrition education. Approximately 55% (11 million) of children under 5 not in kindergarten attend care through a non-parental arrangement at least once a week. Of these, 66% of children attended formalized child care arrangements such as home-based care, center-based care, Head Start, or pre-kindergarten programs.<sup>2</sup> However, 16.6 percent of households with children under age 6 face food insecurity. Early learning settings offer an important opportunity for young children to eat nutritious foods, develop healthy eating habits and food preferences, and learn about the importance of nutrition and physical activity.

Access to, and consumption of, fresh fruits and vegetables have lifelong benefits for health and well-being. Yet less than 50 percent of children are consuming the recommended amounts of vegetables, and less than 30 percent are consuming the recommended daily amount of fruit.<sup>3</sup> Across the country, for low-income households, the rate is even higher at 38.3 percent.

Together, we can change our systems to better support early childhood nutrition and teach lifelong healthy habits.



An illustration of a tightrope walk across a chasm. On the left, a flagpole with an orange flag stands on a rock. A tightrope is stretched from the flagpole to a small stand on the right edge of the chasm. The chasm is a deep, brown, rocky gap. The text is positioned above the tightrope.

**Numerous policy and programmatic barriers exist that make promoting child nutrition and health difficult in early care and education settings. These include:**

### **Nonexistent or weak nutrition and health standards for early childhood settings in many states**

State child care licensing regulations are designed to ensure minimal health and safety standards for ECE settings. Many states do not adequately address the best practices for promoting child nutrition and health in settings through their licensing standards. As of 2017, only 20 states featured child nutrition components within their health and safety indicators,<sup>4</sup> even while participation in the Federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) has been shown to increase access to nutritious meals across early childhood settings. Furthermore, only 61 percent of eligible centers and 67 percent of eligible home-based providers participate in CACFP.<sup>5</sup> State QRIS are another mechanism to recognize high-quality providers and promote health and nutrition efforts like Farm to ECE through a set of voluntary standards.

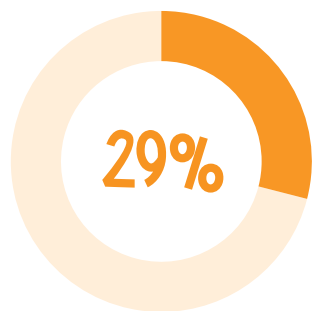
### **Inadequate financing of the early care and education (ECE) system**

While there are several federal funding streams supporting early childhood programs, the majority of U.S. children are served in ECE settings where families are spending an average of 24% of their income to cover the cost.<sup>6</sup> Because 24% of income looks different across income levels, this only amplifies the inequities in care: low-income families have access to lower quality care than higher-income families, including access to less nutritious food. The expensive burden of offering high-quality care is on ECE providers, many of whom already struggle to make ends meet for their programs. As a result, the high cost of quality care also impacts the quality of the food offered in ECE settings.

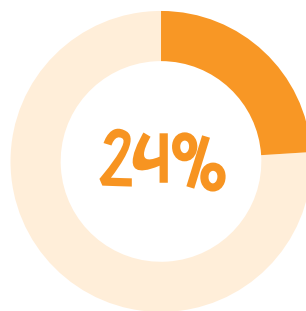
### **Lack of connection between the food and ECE systems**

Despite serving many of the same young children, the systems governing food and ECE programs are largely disconnected and operate within silos. Even at the federal level, the CACFP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, while the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and Head Start are managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This fragmentation is further reflected by different funding streams, standards, and advocacy organizations at the state level. There is a need to bridge the gap between the two systems at the state level and strategically collaborate to achieve the common goal of improving child nutrition.

These systemic failures to support a cohesive ECE system have created a missed opportunity, with significant and lifelong emotional and academic implications for children, such as an increased risk of developmental and behavioral issues that go unnoticed or are unfairly punished (e.g., suspensions and expulsions), due to poor training and a lack of awareness about early intervention strategies.<sup>7</sup> Poor childhood nutrition is also associated with an increase in children's risk of poor school performance and health disparities into adulthood.<sup>8,9,10</sup>



Food Insecurity in Black Households



Food Insecurity in Hispanic Households

These inequities are evident when examining disparities by race and income. Research shows that 29% of Black households and 24% of Hispanic households report having children who are not eating enough,<sup>11</sup> emphasizing the importance of the ECE system in stabilizing food security for children. In addition to the health outcomes for children, the inequities persist in the broader food system. Historically, government policies within food production and distribution have produced inequities for farmers of color, who comprise only 5% of the farmers in the U.S.<sup>12</sup> For example, the USDA credit programs gave decision-making power to local entities that intentionally discriminated against Black farmers, denying them loans or offering inaccurate information about the application process.<sup>13</sup> While the federal government has taken steps to begin to repair this harm, there are still inequitable systems in place.<sup>14</sup> For example, U.S. agriculture policy preferences subsidies to larger-scale commercial farms (and the majority of these subsidies go to crops like corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton, and rice). Smaller farms, and especially farmers of color, are less likely to receive any government payments.<sup>15, 16, 17</sup> These discriminatory policies, coupled with the systematic land loss faced by racial minorities in the U.S., result in inequitable outcomes for Native American, Black, and Latinx farmers.



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## Farm to School as the Precursor to the Farm to ECE Movement

The Farm to School movement—begun in the late 1990s and catalyzed substantially with WKKF support since 2002—established some common factors for successful local food components in education, such as integration of healthy eating into the curriculum, the establishment of school gardens as centers for experiential learning, eat-what-you-grow empowerment, and the purchase of local food served by schools.



Led nationally by the National Farm to School Coalition, FoodCorps, School Food Focus (now merged with FoodCorps), and hundreds of state and local efforts, the ideals for and the practicalities of creating and sustaining Farm to School efforts can be found throughout all 50 states and Washington, D.C., resulting in nearly 22 million kids in approximately 54,000 schools being able to access locally grown foods. Working with schools (administrators, school food staff, teachers, and parents), the agriculture communities (local farmers, food distributors, and local food advocates), and policymakers, the Farm to School movement helped change and coordinate several systems, including:



Education with its own set of rules; curriculum needs and requirements; meal procurement criteria and budgets; and the cultures of teachers, staff, and parents.



The food system including farmers, distributors, and wholesalers, and an array of local, state, and national farm groups.



Nutritionists, public health experts, and advocates committed to enhancing access to and consumption of nutritious foods.



**Overall, the Farm to School movement sets the stage and provided inspiration and lessons learned for Farm to ECE, a movement to shift the status quo even further.**

## Farm to ECE: A Movement to Change the Status Quo

There is a national movement underway to create a stronger connection between farmers growing fresh, locally sourced food and the ECE community. Through awareness, advocacy, training and technical assistance, and infrastructure development, state-level Farm to ECE models are working to provide young children with healthy food options, improve eating habits, increase parental awareness and involvement in child nutrition and health, support farmers, and promote knowledge and awareness about gardening, agriculture, and local foods.

## Early Care and Education: A Primer

Connecting ECE providers to locally sourced food presents a unique set of challenges in the early childhood space. The fragmented nature of the ECE system makes implementing interventions like Farm to ECE more complicated than Farm to School. Unlike the K-12 system, ECE is provided through a mixed-delivery system with several program types, each with its own eligibility, funding streams, and regulations. The major ECE funding streams and various types of settings used to serve young children are shown on the next page. In addition, many ECE programs have different state agencies administering the programs, different regulations related to procurement, food preparation, and child nutrition, as well as different eligibility, support, and accountability mechanisms for programs. When working with these settings, it is important to recognize variations in how they are funded, how they are regulated by the government, and their ability to recruit and compensate the practitioners who are caring for the children.



### Head Start

Largest federal early childhood program for children from birth to five governed by program standards that define a high level of quality.

Center Based

School Based

Family Child  
Care Homes

### State Pre-Kindergarten

State-funded early childhood programs typically serve 3- and 4-year-olds in school-based programs governed by program standards that are primarily academically focused.

School Based

Center Based

## Early Care and Education

### Child Care and Development Block Grant

Federal child care subsidy program for low-income working families used to offset the cost of child care for children up to age 12, governed by licensing standards focused primarily on healthy and safety.

Center Based

School Based

Family Child  
Care Homes

Family, Friend &  
Neighbor Care

In-Home Care  
(e.g., Nanny)

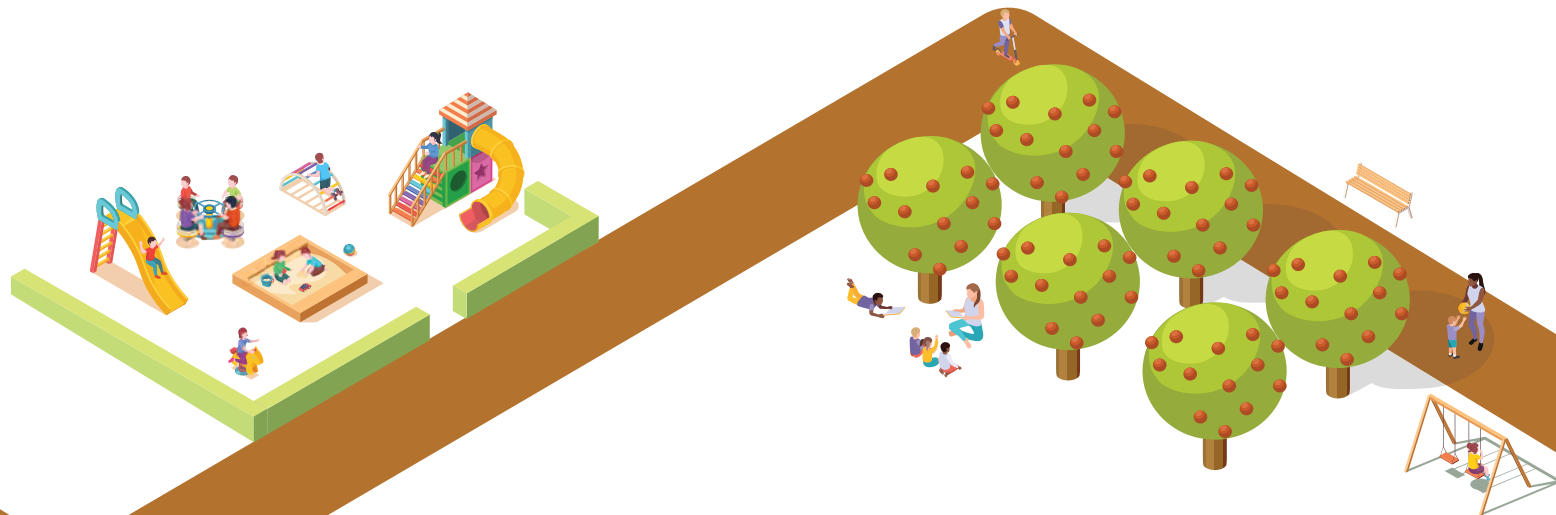
### Parent-Paid Early Care and Education

A large majority of families do not receive support for child care, making it one of the largest household expenditures for working families with children. Most are regulated by licensing standards focused primarily on health and safety.



## A Farm to ECE Roadmap: Core Elements of a Farm to ECE Movement

This Roadmap serves as a guide for creating and scaling statewide Farm to ECE movements that promote racial and economic equity. The Roadmap captures key observations and lessons from the collective learning journey of fourteen organizations and their national technical assistance partners across nine diverse places—Georgia (GA), Iowa (IA), North Carolina (NC), Pennsylvania (PA), Michigan (MI), New Orleans, Louisiana (NOLA), New Mexico (NM), Mississippi (MS), and Wisconsin (WI). Utilizing a collective action model, these organizations gained significant traction in growing the Farm to ECE movement in their respective localities. While each place takes a different approach to the work, some key strategies remain the same across states and localities.



Based on the experience of the nine-state cohort, this Roadmap provides insights and lessons learned on several foundational questions that should be addressed when scaling Farm to ECE statewide. These questions include:



How do you begin to develop a procurement infrastructure to support a stronger connection between farms—specifically, minority farmers—and ECE providers?



Which state partners should be engaged and how should they work together to promote Farm to ECE in the state?



How do you create awareness of the benefits of Farm to ECE and build the case that Farm to ECE models increase ECE provider quality and promote positive health outcomes for children?



What training and technical assistance models are most effective for supporting ECE providers with the implementation of Farm to ECE?



What policy changes are necessary to support and scale Farm to ECE?

To answer these questions, a series of interviews were conducted with organizations in states currently engaged in Farm to ECE, along with their technical assistance partners. Six key elements were identified that work together to result in a successful statewide Farm to ECE movement. Integrated across each of these elements is a commitment to equity.



### **Step 1. Agenda Setting**

Creating awareness of Farm to ECE among policymakers, establishing an end goal of what Farm to ECE is setting out to accomplish, and a plan for how to achieve that goal (i.e., a theory of change or logic model).



### **Step 4. Building a Procurement Infrastructure**

Identifying accessible and affordable ways to procure local food to serve in ECE programs is one of the most exciting aspects of Farm to ECE, especially when pursued at a larger scale.



### **Step 2. Engaging Stakeholders**

Effectively engaging a diverse group of knowledgeable stakeholders that can help drive the agenda.



### **Step 5. Leveraging Key Policy Levers to Support and Scale Farm to ECE**

Effectively expanding Farm to ECE to serve the maximum number of children requires support and expansion from a systemic level, including enabling local, state, and federal policy.



### **Step 3. Establishing a Proof-of-Concept**

Provide a model of how Farm to ECE works and what it looks like in practice. This offers policymakers and others a tangible sense of what the workgroup is striving toward.



### **Step 6. Developing an Evidence Base**

To support policy change, it is critical to demonstrate the impact of Farm to ECE for families, children, ECE programs, and the broader community. Part of the work of expanding Farm to ECE is reliant on developing an evidence base.

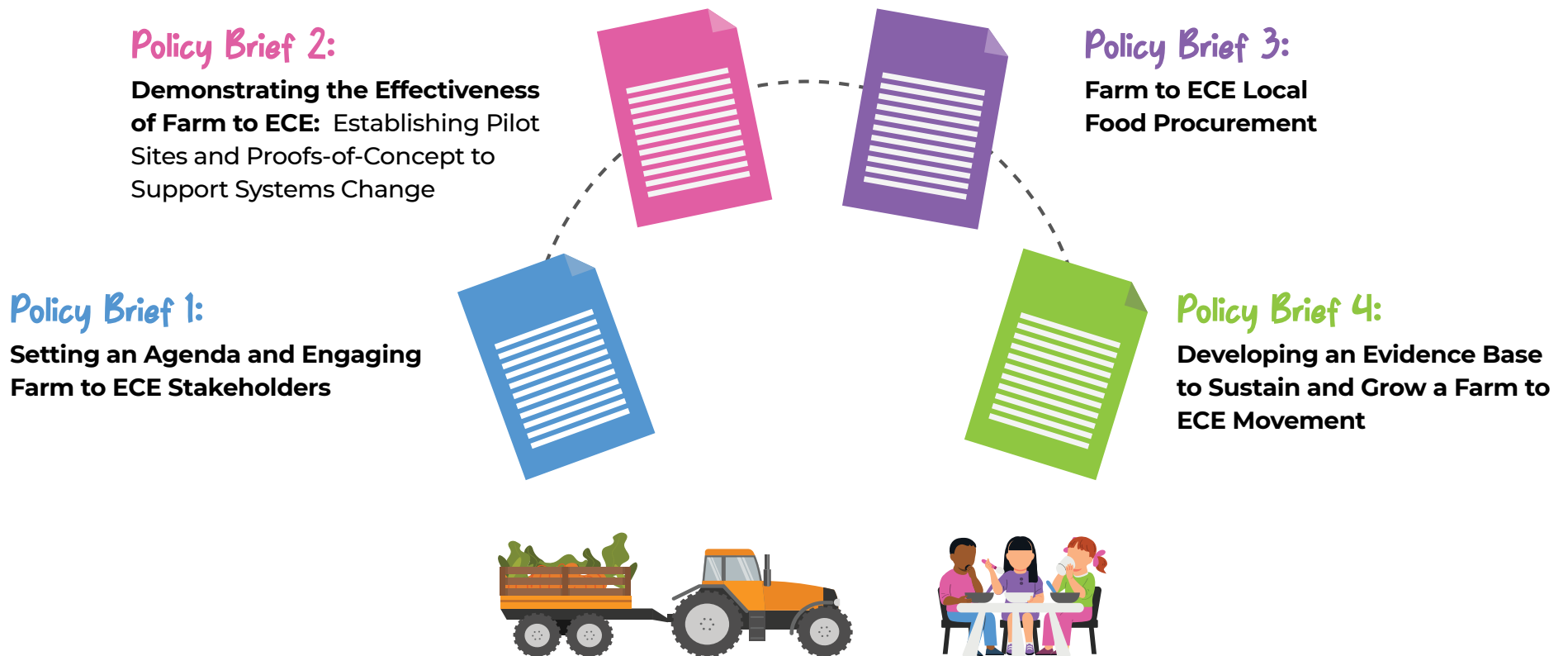




## From a Farm to ECE lens, equity means:

- ✓ ECE providers in every community have equal access to locally grown healthy foods regardless of the race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status of the children served or of the providers.
- ✓ ECE providers have access to local foods and food-oriented curricula that reflect foods common in the races, ethnicities, and cultures of children served.
- ✓ Farmers, regardless of farm size, race, or ethnicity, have equal access to the ECE market.
- ✓ Practices, rules, regulations, and policies that either support or create unequal access for ECE providers, farmers, or children served are addressed, and ones that promote equity are pursued.

Inspired by multiple conversations and surveys with Farm to ECE practitioners across the nine states, four policy briefs provide an in-depth overview of the elements outlined above, including insights into challenges and benefits, lessons learned, and case studies of successful implementation. Integrated across the briefs are policy recommendations in line with step 5, leveraging key policy levers to support and scale Farm to ECE.



## Endnotes

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