

# Demonstrating the Effectiveness of Farm to ECE

Establishing Pilot Sites and Proofs-of-Concept to Support Systems Change

*Policy Brief 2*





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for their support of this roadmap. Special thanks to all the groups and individuals involved in Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) efforts; the ECE providers committed to our young children; the array of ECE advocates working to create better policies and systems; the Farm to School and community-based food advocates, doers, and thinkers who have been the heart of the resurgence of local food systems; and the small and mid-sized farmers committed to a healthy community-based food system.

This document has been modified from an original version, which was a collaborative effort between talented staff and consultants who contributed their research, writing, and editing, including Soumya Bhat, Kelly Etter, and staff at Social Impact Advisors.

Finally, we would like to extend our deepest gratitude to all the individuals who took part in the 9-state Farm to ECE Community of Practice (CoP) for close to a decade, with a special extended note of appreciation for the individuals who provided additional time and insight to inform these briefs: Dara Bloom (North Carolina State University, North Carolina), Stacy Daniels (Wilkes Community Partnership for Children, North Carolina), Monica Griffin, MS, RD, LD (Quality Care for Children, Georgia), Caroline Hundley (Chick & Sprout, formerly with Center for Environmental Farming Systems, North Carolina), Charlotte Neely (Wayne Action Group for Economic Solvency, North Carolina), Lynn Policastro (Wake County Smart Start, North Carolina), and Audra Wieser Larson (The Parenting Place, Wisconsin).

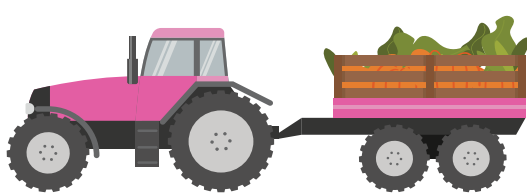




# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	3
<b>THE ROLE OF PILOT SITES</b>	<b>8</b>
New Mexico Farm to Preschool Pilot	10
Equity Considerations in Pilot Site Selection	11
<b>SHOWCASING A PROOF-OF-CONCEPT</b>	<b>12</b>
State Examples	15
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVANCING FARM TO ECE THROUGH THE USE OF PROOFS-OF-CONCEPT</b>	<b>16</b>
ECE Providers	17
Farmers & Food Producers	19
Policymakers	20
Advocates	21
<b>APPENDIX A</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>END NOTES</b>	<b>31</b>





Pilot sites and proofs-of-concept are powerful tools that bring Farm to ECE's vision to life.

A Farm to ECE pilot site is a testing ground for innovation, while a proof-of-concept is an example of successful implementation.

The process of creating a proof-of-concept frequently begins with a pilot site where ECE programs implement one or more Farm to ECE elements, such as

nutrition  
education

on-site  
gardening

family  
engagement

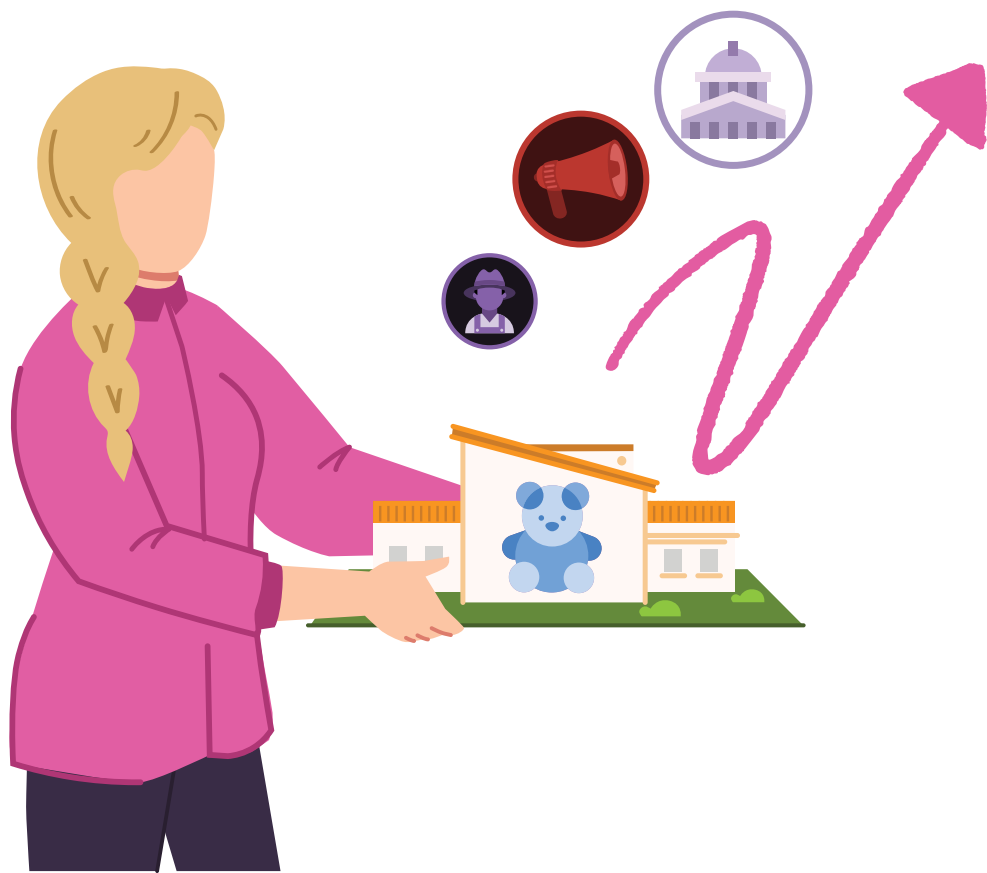
local food  
procurement

These pilot sites serve as real-world models, providing initial evidence of success, identifying challenges, and offering the chance to refine specific strategies.



A **Farm to ECE proof-of-concept** is an early education program that successfully implements the elements of Farm to ECE and produces the outcomes the model is intended to achieve. These programs help different audiences understand what Farm to ECE is, how it looks in practice, and its impact on children and families.

It is an important tool in building broader coalitions and greater engagement in the Farm to ECE movement. A proof-of-concept highlights the ultimate destination for programs on the road to fully implementing Farm to ECE, and is critically important in showcasing Farm to ECE to policymakers and potential funders to support systems change.



This brief outlines the process of working with community partners to identify and utilize pilot sites and proofs-of-concept. It provides state-level examples of how they have been used in practice and offers recommendations for stakeholders and coalitions on how to advance these models to demonstrate the effectiveness of Farm to ECE.

## THE ROLE OF PILOT SITES

A pilot site is a testing ground, offering an opportunity to explore how Farm to ECE can be best operationalized across diverse early care and education settings, including Head Start programs, family child care homes, and private and non-profit programs.

Pilot sites often grow into proof-of-concepts because they account for the localized context and help establish best practices, assess feasibility, and refine implementation before broader adoption.

As one member of the Farm to ECE Community of Practice<sup>1</sup> noted:



*"Pilot programs are a really great way to get started. Test out your idea with just a few willing ECE providers and collect data to show the efficacy of the intervention.*

*You can then use that data to make the case for expanding the program. It's also nice to start with a pilot program so that you have the opportunity to work out the kinks."*



## Pilot sites serve several critical purposes:

### Testing and Refining Practices

Programs can experiment with different Farm to ECE activities tailored to their specific community.

### Demonstrating Impact

Data collection from pilot sites can be used for continuous improvement and provide tangible evidence of success, strengthening the case for expansion.

### Building Collaboration

By engaging providers, families, farmers, and other partners, pilot sites foster shared learning and collective ownership.

### Promoting Sustainability

Through training and technical assistance, pilot sites build institutional knowledge, enabling programs to sustain and expand Farm to ECE efforts.

### Creating Champions

Successful pilot sites become champions for Farm to ECE, sharing their experiences with peers, policymakers, and funders.



## New Mexico Farm to Preschool Pilot

The New Mexico Department of Health provided funding to pilot Farm to Preschool sites across the state.



The pilot put Farm to ECE ideas into practice and showed early signs of success encouraging children to eat more vegetables.

Read [here](#) (see page 15) to learn about one of the participating programs

"The opportunity to pilot the Farm to Preschool project allowed us to put ideas into action, test what worked, and witness real impact. By funding six sites across New Mexico, the pilot showed how connecting young children to local food, gardens, and nutrition education can spark healthy habits early on. It also laid the groundwork for launching the NM Grown program for early childhood education statewide"

**Rita Conden,**  
Program Manager,  
Obesity, Nutrition, & Physical  
Activity Program,  
New Mexico Department of Health

## *Equity Considerations in Pilot Site Selection*

Not all ECE programs have the same access, opportunities, or resources to engage in Farm to ECE. In choosing pilot sites, equity should be a priority, with a focus on programs that may face systemic or historical barriers to engagement. Factors such as cultural considerations and financial limitations should be taken into account when supporting providers in adopting Farm to ECE practices. By pairing pilot sites with targeted support, Farm to ECE programming can be expanded to these programs that might otherwise face barriers to participation. As such, pilot site selection should be considered based on the capacity to provide tailored technical assistance and other supports while prioritizing equity.



## SHOWCASING A PROOF-OF-CONCEPT

Proofs-of-concepts are examples that can be used to showcase the model to a variety of audiences, including policymakers and funders who are often far removed from the day-to-day work. Experiential advocacy opportunities, such as visits to a proof-of-concept site, can compel those with political or financial influence to see, feel, and understand Farm to ECE in a way that drives them to become Farm to ECE champions.





To make a proof-of-concept visit compelling, it is important to think like the audience that you are trying to engage. For example, policymakers will have specific motivations for their visit, including wanting to demonstrate their support for nutrition and early care education, garnering media attention for themselves or an issue they want addressed, or using the site as a venue to announce an aligned initiative they are championing. Funders typically seek to learn about innovative practices and their impact on the community. When designing a site visit, coalitions should identify the narrative they want to convey and illustrate it in a way that connects with the intended audience.

Site visit time will likely be limited, so it is important to decide which activities and materials will make the strongest impression in the shortest amount of time. For example, watching children engaged in a Farm to ECE activity, observing an educator demonstrating or training on a Farm to ECE-related program component, or touring the most visually appealing gardens will leave a lasting memory. These experiences can be paired with key messaging and, as relevant, identification of ways the stakeholder could further support the coalition (e.g., funding needs).

When site visits are not possible, a proof-of-concept can be shared through visual or written communication.

At minimum, descriptions should include:

- **Farm to ECE Activities**

A detailed overview of the Farm to ECE activity(ies) and successes implementing nutrition education, gardening, food procurement, and/or family engagement activities. Descriptions should include their frequency and impact.

- **Challenges Overcome**

A transparent account of challenges faced, and the strategies used to address them. Sharing these lessons normalizes the learning curve and helps other programs navigate challenges.

- **Benefits and Outcomes**

Clear evidence of the benefits and outcomes achieved through the Farm to ECE activities such as improvements in children's eating habits, increased family engagement, or stronger community connections.







To maximize its impact, a compelling description of any proof-of-concept should also:

### **Accommodate a Variety of Stakeholders**

To strategically engage policymakers, it may be useful to have multiple proofs-of-concept showcasing Farm to ECE in a center, a rural area, or across each corner of a state. Language may need to be adjusted depending on if the goal is to engage funders, inspire other ECE providers, or advocate for policy change. The content should be focused and aligned with the intended goals.

### **Incorporate Visuals**

Written materials should include photos and other visuals of children, families, and ECE providers participating in Farm to ECE. Images of children engaged in hands-on gardening or enjoying healthy meals help bring the proof-of-concept to life and make it more relatable.

### **Keep It Concise**

By focusing on the most impactful elements and keeping the language clear and accessible, readers are more likely to engage with the material, understand it, and share it with others.

## State Examples



### Louisiana

Louisiana provides a notable example of how states can establish and utilize proofs-of-concept to further the Farm to ECE movement. The state partnered with a site managed by the Children's Coalition in northern Louisiana to demonstrate the integration of Farm to ECE activities within an early care setting (Appendix A).

In particular, the Children's Coalition showcased expertise in nutrition education and family engagement.

This proof-of-concept is now a key resource on the state Farm to ECE workgroup's website, making it an accessible tool for policymakers, ECE providers, farmers, advocates, and other stakeholders interested in Farm to ECE initiatives. By incorporating photos and direct quotes, the document effectively highlights the program's successes, the implementation process, and the barriers faced, offering a comprehensive perspective for adapting and scaling the initiative.



### Georgia

Wande Okunoren-Meadows has been a leading advocate for Farm to ECE. As Executive Director of the Hand, Heart, + Soul Project, she leverages local successes to demonstrate the potential of integrating nutrition and wellness into early learning settings. Previously, as Director of Community, Quality, and Engagement at Little Ones Learning Center, she established a community garden that gained recognition from former Georgia First Lady Sandra Deal. This success story served as a proof-of-concept that demonstrated how grassroots efforts can generate public support and policy interest—helping build momentum for broader advocacy efforts.

At the state level, Okunoren-Meadows has collaborated with coalitions and policymakers to position Farm to ECE as a strategy to improve child nutrition and foster community engagement. By highlighting real-world outcomes from her proof-of-concept site, she has strengthened the case for expanding these initiatives statewide, demonstrating how local innovation can drive systemic change.<sup>2</sup>

## Recommendations for Advancing Farm to ECE Through the Use of Proofs-of-Concept

The ECE system faces significant socioeconomic and structural challenges. For many, this includes funding limitations and workforce shortages, which complicate innovation. These recommendations aim to offer actionable steps to utilize proof-of-concept sites, but success in scaling Farm to ECE is inherently tied to an ongoing need to address larger systemic barriers.



## ECE Providers



### **Invite others to learn from your proof-of-concept site**

If your program is already engaged in Farm to ECE initiatives, or you are ready to start, offer your site as a model for others. Plan to share your program's successes and challenges, creating opportunities for peers to learn from your experience and grow together.

### **Build partnerships**

Forge alliances with local farmers, food producers, and community organizations to strengthen your resources and share expertise. These relationships can boost the sustainability and impact of your program.

### **Advocate for sustainable funding**

Champion increased policy and funding support for Farm to ECE programs. Effective advocacy with policymakers will spotlight the critical needs and potential benefits of these initiatives.

### **Invest in staff development**

Prioritize ongoing professional development for your team. By enhancing their knowledge and confidence in Farm to ECE practices, you ensure the long-term success of these programs.

### **Engage with a Farm to ECE curriculum**

Many Farm to ECE curricula exist. For example, a supplement to The Creative Curriculum, one of the most widely used early childhood education curricula, has been developed to support Farm to ECE integration. Tools like these can help advance your proof-of-concept and deepen Farm to ECE practices within your program.

- **A Guide to Using The Creative Curriculum ®**  
for Infants, Toddlers & Twos to Support Farm-to-ECE Models
- **A Guide to Using The Creative Curriculum ®**  
for Preschool to Support Farm-to-ECE Models







# Farmers & Food Producers



## **Demonstrate resilient food supply chains**

Partner with ECE centers as proof-of-concept sites to establish direct, stable, and efficient supply chains for fresh, local foods. These partnerships showcase how Farm to ECE models can increase food access, support providers, and even reduce costs through shorter and less complicated supply chains.

## **Showcase children in hands-on learning**

Engage children in experiential learning—farm visits, on-site demonstrations, or virtual farm tours—so proof-of-concept sites can illustrate the impact of connecting young children with local food systems

## **Refine offerings to ECE needs**

Work closely with ECE providers at proof-of-concept sites to understand their unique food service needs, from portion sizes to child-friendly produce. These collaborations can highlight best practices and scalable models for integrating local foods into early learning environments.

## **Use proof-of-concept sites to advocate for policy change**

Leverage real-world examples to demonstrate how Farm to ECE strengthens local food systems and economies. Partner with proof-of-concept ECE sites to collect data, share success stories, and engage policymakers in creating supportive policies.

# Polymakers



## **Visit ECE centers**

See firsthand how Farm to ECE initiatives positively impact children, families, and communities. Direct experience can deepen understanding and inform improved policy solutions.

## **Collaborate with coalitions and advocacy groups**

Work closely with ECE coalitions to identify policy gaps and funding shortfalls. Understanding these challenges will help you advocate for more effective solutions.

## **Invest in infrastructure**

Allocate and allow funding to be used for critical infrastructure, such as on-site kitchens and outdoor learning spaces. These investments will enable ECE centers to implement Farm to ECE programs more effectively.

## **Simplify administrative processes**

Consider how paperwork and other regulatory practices might be burdensome for providers. Work to make programs more accessible to providers and establish pathways that allow ECE programs to easily engage in Farm to ECE.



# Advocates



## **Offer financial support for pilot sites**

Recognize that ECE programs are often under-resourced. Stipends or other financial incentives can help ECE providers engage in Farm to ECE advocacy. When a provider is asked to spend time advocating for Farm to ECE, especially outside of work hours, an equitable approach is to consider reimbursing them for their time. This will lower barriers to provider advocacy and encourage more programs to participate.

## **Maintain an active network**

Keep a well-organized list of ECE providers. This resource will be invaluable for connecting and expanding the network of Farm to ECE programs.

## **Participant in showcasing farm to ECE through a proof-of-concept site**

Since ECE providers are busy during the day, offer to lead tours of sites for policymakers, funders, and stakeholders to illustrate the feasibility and benefits of Farm to ECE. A strong proof-of-concept will help other providers understand how to implement similar activities.

## **Focus on quality and expansion**

Work to improve existing programs by integrating new elements like local food procurement and enhanced family engagement. Ensure that the quality of programming remains high to create a lasting, positive impact.

Pilot sites and proofs-of-concept both serve as important tools for Farm to ECE expansion. By leveraging pilot sites, engaging stakeholders, and clearly demonstrating impact, states and communities can build a stronger case for policy change and sustainable funding. As Farm to ECE continues to grow, these tools are essential for driving momentum, fostering collaboration, and ensuring equitable access to high-quality early care and education experiences.

# FARM TO EARLY CARE & EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Appendix A

CHILDREN'S COALITION FOR  
NORTHEAST LOUISIANA

*LOUISIANA FARM TO ECE WORKGROUP*



## BACKGROUND

Farm to Early Care and Education (F2ECE) is a movement to incorporate healthy foods and experiential learning for young children in early care and education settings through on-site gardening, nutrition education (i.e., cooking and taste tests), family engagement, and the purchase of local foods.<sup>[1]</sup>



Photo 1: Monroe, Louisiana

The Children's Coalition for Northeast Louisiana (henceforth referred to as "the Coalition") is a Child Care Resource and Referral agency (CCR&R)<sup>[2]</sup> based out of downtown Monroe, operating a variety of early care and education programs, including Ready Start and Early Head Start.<sup>[3]</sup>

In total, the F2ECE program serves about 175 kids across six centers focused on 3- and 4-year-olds with the support of 24 teachers.

Information contained in this brief was compiled based on interviewing staff and a review of the Coalition's website and resources.



**ON-SITE GARDENING**



**NUTRITION EDUCATION**



**FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**



**LOCAL FOOD PROCUREMENT**

In Louisiana, F2ECE efforts have gained momentum the last few years and have been supported by the Louisiana Farm to ECE Workgroup. As part of the Louisiana Farm to ECE Workgroup 2023 Strategic Plan, they identified a collective goal to uplift paradigms of successful F2ECE programs. This brief is the first in this series and spotlights the Children's Coalition for Northeast Louisiana and their leadership on F2ECE.



**6**  
centers

**24**  
teachers

**175**  
young children

Photo 2: Children play in sand and mud.<sup>[4]</sup>



The Children's Coalition of Northeast Louisiana has taken a number of steps to advance their F2ECE efforts. A 2019 Greaxing Gardens grant through the Louisiana State University AgCenter made it possible to offer specific F2ECE support to 20 child care centers by supplying wood for garden beds, soil, seeds, and a F2ECE workshop for program directors. Cindy George—the Farm to Early Childhood Education Coordinator for the Coalition—works as a liaison between the Coalition and centers. During the grant, she made monthly visits to support F2ECE activities at each program. As part of the project, participants held a garden celebration where programs shared photos and their successes.

Since the completion of those grants, Cindy has continued her work with six of the original grantees to sustain their F2ECE efforts and build further capacity. In her work, Cindy provides ideas for curriculum and tips for lessons based on the Louisiana Harvest of the Month.<sup>[5]</sup> Programs also receive supplies that accompany the month's harvest theme. These may include books or planting and harvesting materials.



*Photo 3: A child and teen dig in a raised garden bed.<sup>[4]</sup>*

The Coalition is unique in that F2ECE is integrated across the organization, and not just in ECE programs. At the Coalition's office location in downtown Monroe, their Family Garden boasts a 32-raised bed demonstration garden. The Family Garden provides opportunities for families and little ones to engage in nutrition education, garden training, planting, harvesting, and tasting. Alongside the garden, an outdoor learning area encourages children to explore their senses through a mud kitchen, sand area, sound garden, art center, and a climbing structure (see photo 2).

The Coalition also hosts a variety of successful family and community engagement activities, including Super Saturday. This monthly event features “garden-based activities for children and adults, early childhood activities in the outdoor learning center, healthy cooking demonstrations using fresh produce grown locally, community resources and volunteer opportunities.”<sup>[6]</sup>

*Kids love digging in the dirt in the garden and taste tests, even when they don't like the food they tried. It's fun to see a child's reaction and response to F2ECE activities.*

## THE IMPACT OF FARM TO ECE

The F2ECE movement has always been an opportunity to provide young children with experiential learning, including through gardening and nutrition education while building relationships with local farmers and helping kids have a better understanding of the local agricultural system that supports their community and families.<sup>[7]</sup>

*Incorporating F2ECE can be as simple as connecting learning about foods to learning the color green or the letter B, like asking kids, 'What vegetables do we know that start with B? Broccoli!'*



Photo 4: A young child picks produce from a garden bed.<sup>[4]</sup>

Young children are at a prime age to develop an openness to food. During this time, children are curious about new flavors and learning about health.<sup>[8]</sup> Cindy has developed relationships with the kids through her monthly visits, “When I walk in the door, they know what we’re going to talk about. I will ask, ‘Why do we need to learn about fruits and vegetables?’ and they will answer ‘To keep us strong and healthy!’” By the end of the year, children across these programs can name a lot more fruits and vegetables, helping to support their vocabulary while setting them on a path to a healthy lifestyle.

One of the goals of Cindy’s outreach is to show staff that they do not need to be master gardeners to incorporate F2ECE. As educators, they can weave these activities into their daily routines, such as teaching children new colors or letters, or through conversations over snack or lunchtime.

## CHALLENGES

Like many ECE programs across the country, purchasing local food is a challenge in Northeast Louisiana. This challenge could be due to a number of reasons: center directors may not have relationships with local farmers and producers, they might not be sure where to go, and they are already strapped for time and funding.

Funding can be another barrier to F2ECE activities. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides reimbursement to child care programs that serve healthy meals and snacks to kids, and can be used as a tool for F2ECE.<sup>[9]</sup> While some programs have access to CACFP, smaller programs are less likely to participate in the program. Further, it’s not common knowledge that CACFP funds can be used to purchase gardening supplies if the produce grown will be used for reimbursable meals or nutrition education.<sup>[10]</sup>

## TIPS FOR STARTING OR EXPANDING FARM TO ECE PROGRAMMING

### *Education:*

For teachers and programs that are just starting out with F2ECE, Cindy recommends starting small, like reading books about fruits and vegetables or talking about the food that is on their lunch plate.

*“Farm to ECE does not have to be an extravagant garden. Sometimes we get caught up and forget what kids really need. The important part is getting children involved in something that uses all of their senses and using their large and small muscle groups.”*

### *On-site Gardening:*

Gardens can also come in many forms, whether a small indoor garden to show the lifecycle of the seed, planting in a tub or tires outside, or having a raised bed garden. There are many simple ways to incorporate F2ECE practices, all with the goal of involving kids to use all their senses, as well as their large and small muscle groups. When teachers see the joy and engagement from kids, they get more involved and excited about F2ECE, too.

### *Support for F2ECE and Local Food Procurement:*

Professional development opportunities are a key strategy for expanding F2ECE in the state. Existing opportunities include Go NAPSACC and the Louisiana State University Ag Center (LSU Ag). Go NAPSACC offers training to ECE providers and technical assistance providers to “improve the health of young children through practices, policies, and environments that instill habits supporting lifelong health and well-being.”<sup>[1]</sup> LSU Ag is host to a variety of resources, though primarily related to school gardens and farm to school.<sup>[2]</sup> In the future, CACFP trainings related to the use of funds for local procurement and F2ECE activities would be helpful for ECE programs and others.

## MOVING FORWARD

The opportunities to continue expanding F2ECE are bountiful.

While teachers are generally enthusiastic about F2ECE, additional training and engagement could help with an increase in F2ECE participation. To engage more parents in F2ECE, there are plans to distribute a monthly newsletter during site visits for children to take home. This newsletter would also encourage children to talk about their experience with F2ECE, such as the foods they tasted that day or the activities they did in the garden.

- ✓ PROVIDE F2ECE TRAINING
- ✓ ENGAGE PARENTS
- ✓ INCREASE FUNDING
- ✓ BUILD CONNECTIONS
- ✓ ENHANCE LOCAL FOOD PROCUREMENT

With additional funding, the Coalition would be able to expand F2ECE to other centers and provide indoor activities that can be used year-round, such as a farm stand to grow produce or setting up a sensory table that can incorporate the harvest of the month. Funds could also help ECE programs develop their libraries, offering a monthly food and F2ECE-related book to each classroom.

As the Coalition continues their work on F2ECE, they are looking to create more connections between programs and farmers to enhance local food procurement. They also want to expand the utilization of CACFP to purchase local foods and garden supplies and engage more teachers and parents.

Ultimately, they intend to share the fun and healthy impacts of F2ECE with more programs—and more children—across Northeast Louisiana.

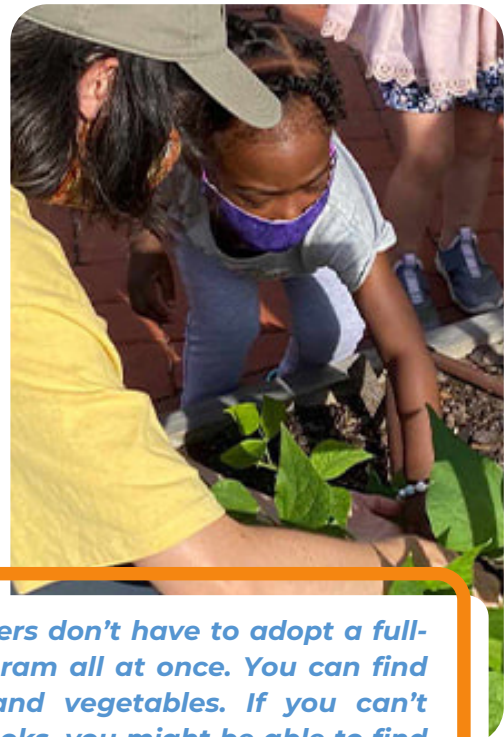


Photo 5: A child helps place a plant in a garden bed.<sup>[4]</sup>

*Start small. Teachers don't have to adopt a full-blown F2ECE program all at once. You can find books on fruits and vegetables. If you can't purchase those books, you might be able to find them in the library. If you need something small, you could start with an indoor garden, planting just a few seeds to show kids the lifecycle. If you want to plant outdoors but don't have the space for a large outdoor garden, you can plant in a tub or a tire.*



## References

- [1] Every Child Thrives. (2023). The Promise of Farm to Early Care and Education. *W.K. Kellogg Foundation*. <https://everychildthrives.com/the-promise-of-farm-to-early-care-and-education/>.
- [2] Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs) work to connect families to early care and education settings that will serve their child's needs, while also providing information about financial assistance for child care, state licensing requirements, services for children with special needs, and more.
- [3] Ready Start provides resources to local areas to improve access to quality early care and education. Early Head Start serves income-eligible infants, toddlers, children with disabilities, and their families by providing child development and family support services.
- [4] Children's Coalition of Northeast Louisiana. (2023). <https://www.childrenscoalition.org/family-garden.html>.
- [5] Louisiana State University Ag Center. (2023). Louisiana Harvest of the Month. [https://www.lsuagcenter.com/topics/food\\_health/farm%20to%20school/harvest%20of%20the%20month](https://www.lsuagcenter.com/topics/food_health/farm%20to%20school/harvest%20of%20the%20month).
- [6] Children's Coalition of Northeast Louisiana. (2023). Super Saturday. <https://www.childrenscoalition.org/super-saturday.html>
- [7] Every Child Thrives. (2023). The Promise of Farm to Early Care and Education. *W.K. Kellogg Foundation*. <https://everychildthrives.com/the-promise-of-farm-to-early-care-and-education/>.
- [8] De Cosmi, V., Scaglioni, S., & Agostoni, C. (2017). Early Taste Experiences and Later Food Choices. *Nutrients*, 9(2), 107. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5331538/>.
- [9] Food and Nutrition Service, United States Department of Agriculture. (2023). Child and Adult Care Food Program. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp>.
- [10] Food Research and Action Center, Policy Equity Group, ASPHN, National Farm to School Network. (2022). Enhancing Young Children's Access to Local Foods and Farm to ECE: Federal Funding Opportunities. [https://www.cacfp.org/assets/pdf/622122fa9b0423224bba02c9\\_Farm+to+Early+Childhood+Federal+Funding+Guide\\_2022\\_Final/#:~:text=CACFP%20funds%20can%20also%20be,meals%20or%20nutrition%20education%20activities](https://www.cacfp.org/assets/pdf/622122fa9b0423224bba02c9_Farm+to+Early+Childhood+Federal+Funding+Guide_2022_Final/#:~:text=CACFP%20funds%20can%20also%20be,meals%20or%20nutrition%20education%20activities).
- [11] Go NAPSACC. (2023). What We Do. <https://gonapsacc.org/our-purpose>.
- [12] Louisiana State University. (2023). Additional Resources. [https://www.lsuagcenter.com/topics/food\\_health/farm%20to%20school/additional-resources](https://www.lsuagcenter.com/topics/food_health/farm%20to%20school/additional-resources).



# Michigan Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) Profile: YWCA Of Kalamazoo



## BACKGROUND

The YWCA of Kalamazoo, Michigan operates two successful sites actively participating in Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE): The Dreamery at Edison and the Dreamery at Downtown. The Dreamery at Edison serves 25 children birth-3 along with serving up to 12 children children birth to age 12 in the 24/7 drop-in center. The Edison location has a full kitchen for meal preparation managed by two full time and one part-time staff members. The Dreamery at Downtown serves children from birth through age 5 and has 70 full-time students. The Downtown location has a larger commercial kitchen, with three full

time staff that help support the meal preparation and Farm to ECE programming. This site also partners with the local college and their service-learning program to have custom garden beds built on-site.

## FUNDING

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Michigan-based program, 10 Cents A Meal, provide some reimbursement for food purchasing, but are unable to cover the full cost.<sup>1</sup> Both Dreamery locations also receive some extra support from the community-based program the site is housed in.

## PROCUREMENT & PREPARATION

The exceptional success of Farm to ECE at the Dreamery can be attributed to the implementation of successful procurement practices and a decision to hire full-time kitchen staff. Both locations hired staff with prior knowledge and experience prepping local food. This way, if and when novel produce is delivered, child-friendly meals can be seamlessly integrated into the program. Food is purchased from a Kalamazoo Valley Community College food hub, which makes it possible for the programs to

purchase exact quantities from multiple local participating farms. By building relationships within the community, the YWCA partners with local farms unaffiliated with the food hub, including a local apple farmer that makes it possible to purchase apples at a discount. Children then engage in taste tests and recipe experimentation. In addition to local purchasing, a small amount of produce is successfully grown on site, and providers can harvest seeds for the future growing season.

***“Building an equitable food system is building that solid foundation of who’s growing our food, who’s preparing out food, our food comes from right outside our door, or it comes from down the street. Or I can do this at my own house! So, building that rich connection to place is a big piece that is hard to measure, but it pretty real.”***

### Farm-to-ECE Activities

- ✓ Local food procurement
- ✓ On-site gardening
- ✓ Family engagement
- ✓ Nutrition Education

<sup>1</sup>Michigan 10-Cent-Per Meal is a state funded program that matches up to 10 cents for early childhood programs and schools to purchase Michigan grown produce. The program currently serves over 585,000 children across the state. *10 Cents a Meal for Michigan's Kids and Farms. (n.d) About.* <https://www.tencentsmichigan.org/about>

*Special thanks to YWCA of Kalamazoo and the Dreamery for sharing their story and photos.*

This document was created with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.



## CHALLENGES

While CACFP and 10 Cents a Meal assist with covering about 70% of the cost of local food purchasing, financing the last 30% usually leaves the sites scrambling. Additionally, securing funding for the kitchen staff is always more difficult, and one employee position is currently a volunteer role. While future plans include expanding and renting garden space, outdoor space is limited at both sites and harvests from gardening are restricted by limited space.

---

***"The more connections we have in the community the better our community will be."***

---

## ACHIEVEMENTS

The Farm to ECE program at the Dreamery has fostered strong community connections between children, families, providers, and farmers. It has allowed children and providers to experience and learn about new foods through gardening, harvesting, and tasting. Much of the success is credited to the strong procurement model that allows educators to focus on gardening and educating the children, while the full-time kitchen staff can create local healthy meals.

---

***"The benefits of being excited to pick thing, eat things... touch the soil. Emotive benefits that we can chronicle because of the joy we see on the faces of children."***

---



## Endnotes

- 1 The Farm to ECE Community of Practice (CoP) was a collaborative network of organizations and practitioners dedicated to advancing the integration of Farm to ECE initiatives across the nation. Formed in 2016 with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the CoP brought together ECE providers, community-based organizations, and policymakers to share knowledge, overcome challenges, and influence policy change. Together, they worked to build and expand the Farm to ECE movement through local, state, and national efforts.
- 2 Hand, Heart, + Soul Project. (2025). Who we are. <https://www.handheartsoulproject.org/who-we-are>



