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# Farm to Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: A Promising Start with Room for Growth

*By offering students increased access to healthy, local food and providing them with gardening opportunities and food-based learning activities, farm to school programs are proven to enhance the quality of the K-12 educational experience.*

**Extending these practices to early care and education (ECE) settings** — including preschools, child care centers, home-based care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start programs and other school district initiatives — **is a natural next step that goes beyond helping children learn lifelong healthy eating habits.** These activities engage parents and caregivers around nutritious local food and food access; support the local and regional agriculture communities; and provide ECE providers with new strategies to teach young children and professionally develop their staff. The purpose of this report is to provide information on early successes of farm to ECE activities in Pennsylvania, and to summarize expertise, ideas and thoughts on how to move farm to ECE forward, as relayed to The Food Trust by a diverse group of stakeholders.

**Farm to early care and education programs and practices are poised to make a positive impact on Pennsylvania farmers, food producers, children and their families, and support quality early care environments across the commonwealth.**

## Background

In Pennsylvania, 97% of farms are family-owned and generate \$67 billion for the commonwealth.<sup>1</sup> Of that revenue, \$439 million can be attributed to edible foods, with the top foods including dairy, poultry and eggs, meats, fruits and vegetables.<sup>2</sup> The commonwealth's agricultural diversity and abundance of edible foods, specialty crops in particular, bolstered the local food movement and has played a key role in the farm to school movement. Indeed, **children across the commonwealth are experiencing more locally grown foods in school-based settings than they have in decades.** Meanwhile, urban farms in Pennsylvania's cities have taken root and play an increasingly critical role in providing food access and food/farming education outlets for young children and their families.

Meanwhile, across the country, 8 million children are spending at least 33 hours per week in a child care setting. When mothers work full-time, that figure climbs to nearly 51% of children in care at least 35 hours per week.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, **19% of children experience food insecurity in urban communities, rural areas and small towns across Pennsylvania.**<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is no surprise that early childhood experts, pediatricians, dieticians, nutritionists, public health professionals and child development specialists have been leading conversations about the

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<sup>1</sup> Reichart, Lela (2013, Feb 25). "Keep Pennsylvania Growing." Retrieved from <https://www.usda.gov/oce/forum/presentations/reichart.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Agriculture (2012). "Census of Agriculture, 2012." Retrieved from [https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full\\_Report/Census\\_by\\_State/Pennsylvania/](https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Census_by_State/Pennsylvania/)

<sup>3</sup> Laughlin, L. (2013 April). "Who's minding the kids? Child care arrangements: 2011." United States Census Bureau, p70-135.

<sup>4</sup> Governor Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania's Administration (2016). "Setting the Table: A Blueprint for a Hunger-Free PA." Harrisburg, PA.

characteristics of “quality” early childhood programs, which includes the food our children are eating.

“Farm to school” is defined as a group of activities and strategies that include the use of locally and regionally grown foods in meals, snacks and taste tests, as well as gardening opportunities and nutrition and agriculture education. These activities are designed to enhance the quality of the educational experience while supporting local and regional food producers and the local economy.

**“Farm to early care and education” (farm to ECE), also known as “farm to early childhood,” is the extension of these activities to children ages 0-5.**

According to the USDA Farm to School Census, **farm to school activities (K-12 schools) have contributed over \$18 million to the Pennsylvania agricultural economy** through local food procurement tactics for school meals, with over 75% of that spending focused on fruits and vegetables. While 44% of school districts in Pennsylvania reported farm to school activities, only 12% of those school-based preschools reported the same.<sup>5</sup> A national early care and education survey conducted by the National Farm to School Network indicates that farm to ECE practices take place across all types of ECE programs including Head Start and Early Head Start, private and public centers, and in some home-based care settings.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Benefits of Farm to ECE Programs**

- Support of local agriculture
- Enhanced early learning opportunities
- Increased willingness of children to try new foods
- Community connections
- Opportunities for young children to learn how food grows, who grows it and its nutritional benefits
- New family engagement strategies
- Professional development for ECE staff, farmers and supportive facilitators

Today, **48 states and Washington, D.C. report farm to ECE activities taking place**, up from 29 in 2012, which is indicative of a growing movement. For example, at Gankosky Family Daycare in Brockway, PA (Jefferson County), young children are taught how foods grow with its on-site garden and get to taste the vegetables harvested. The center also tends chickens and engages families in garden tending as well as other food and agricultural events. In York, PA, at York Day Nursery, staff organize an annual “Healthy Eating Day” for families featuring a locally sourced meal, cooking demonstrations and other activities designed to **connect children and their families to their nearby farming community.**

## **Growing Farm to ECE in Pennsylvania**

**Farm to ECE programs represent an economic and community-building opportunity for Pennsylvania farmers and a means to build stronger, more resilient food systems.**

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<sup>5</sup> United States Department of Agriculture (2015). “USDA Farm to School Census.” Retrieved from <https://farmtoschoolcensus.fns.usda.gov/find-your-school-district/pennsylvania>.

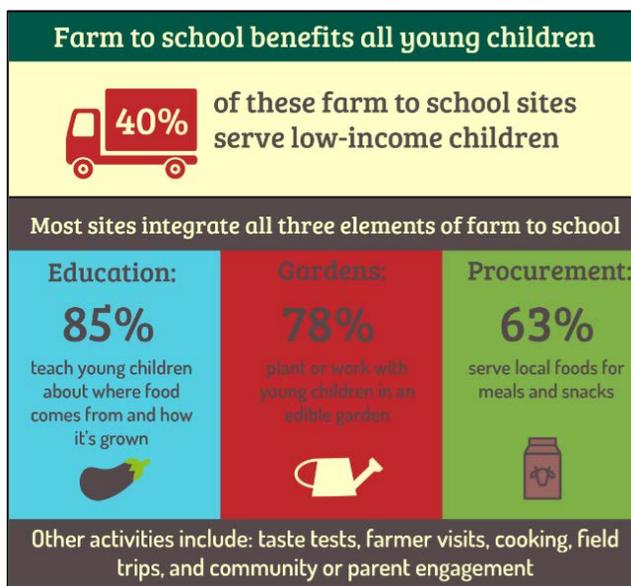
<sup>6</sup> Stephens, L. and Oberholtzer, L. (2016). “Results from the 2015 National Survey of Early Care and Education Providers: Local Procurement, Gardening, and Food and Farming Education.” National Farm to School Network, Chicago, IL.

The Food Trust is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food and information to make healthy decisions. With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The Food Trust has begun exploring opportunities for the expansion of farm to ECE practices across the state.

## Methodology

Through a series of 40 interviews with over 50 cross-sector experts across the commonwealth, The Food Trust’s project team assessed the interest and knowledge of farm to ECE and gathered ideas, challenges and successes related to local food purchasing, education, gardening, and family and staff engagement. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted by a staff person from The Food Trust. Those interviewed included stakeholders representing early care and education, agriculture, food industry, public health, primary education, philanthropy, government and the nonprofit sector. These individuals were farmers, parents, teachers, administrators, food distributors and processors, children/students, local, state and federal government agency staff, dietitians, food and nutrition services professionals, migrant farmworkers and their families, ECE trainers and quality early care advocates. Interviewees were asked to comment upon how they defined “farm to early care and education”; how their work crossed sectors with education and agriculture; and what opportunities and challenges existed to broader implementation of farm to ECE programs and practices across the commonwealth.

In addition to interviewing a diverse group of stakeholders, The Food Trust awarded five mini-grants to early childhood programs with exemplary farm to ECE practices. A request for proposals for these awards was issued in August 2016, and five ECE centers were notified of their award status in early November. Awardee activities, ECE type and location were wide-ranging.



## Early Findings

The stories and practices relayed to The Food Trust for this project underscored the early findings below — that **engagement of children, families, ECE staff and farmers are means to support good nutrition for children; build community; and support local economies.** Several key themes emerged from stakeholder interviews:

**1. There is shared interest in supporting farm to ECE across diverse stakeholder groups, driven by common goals.** While individual responses may have varied, by and large, stakeholders across a wide cross-sector of

industries and expertise areas agreed that support for farm to ECE practices and programs is needed and would result in positive outcomes.

Common goals as identified by stakeholders included:

- The need for children and their families to learn how food grows
- Expanded access to healthy local foods to children in all settings

- Connections for children, families and ECE staff to their farming community
- Economic support for local farms and other local food businesses
- New business opportunities for urban and rural farmers
- Enhanced support for families and home-based ECE providers

**2. Implementation challenges exist, and state-level support can help to seed new farm to ECE activities.** In planning and implementing farm to ECE practices and programs, farmers, ECE experts, state agencies, parent advocates and others identified a number of challenges. Specifically, challenges included a need for funds to support additional grant programs, training for ECE providers and technical assistance and information for farmers and distributors. In particular, those interviewed expressed the importance of weaving farm to ECE concepts and practices into existing frameworks, curricula and purchasing practices for early care and education practitioners to make implementation efficient, seamless and approachable for all types of early care providers. Similarly, those in the food industry — farmers and food distributors/food hubs — expressed the need to better understand the purchasing wishes and constraints of early care and education providers with respect to economies of scale, pricing and products desired. While many singled out challenges and potential barriers to moving farm to ECE forward in Pennsylvania, just as many easily identified opportunities to use existing local and state-supported programs to advance farm to ECE throughout the commonwealth.

**3. Opportunities for expanded farm to ECE exist through existing programs, training series, curricula and funding.** According to experts from across the state, there exist a multitude of opportunities by which farm to early care and education can be promoted, supported and expanded in Pennsylvania. Opportunities identified by stakeholders included, but were not limited to, these major groupings of existing programs/frameworks:

- Integration of farm to ECE concepts into existing, approved curricula and lessons and early learning standards.
- Use of existing information dissemination tools (e-newsletters, websites, social media) to promote and provide key information to support farm to ECE best practices and sharing of success stories.
- Utilization of farm to ECE activities and events within parent/family engagement strategies
- Examination of current procurement practices and policies and integration of training and incentives into child nutrition programs.
- Integration of farm to ECE concepts into professional development training frameworks for early care and education providers (e.g., through Regional Keys, Penn State University Extension, Child and Adult Care Food Program and other training modules).
- Engagement of agriculture extension and the Department of Agriculture to support farmer-to-farmer (urban or rural) and vendor-to-vendor exchange of best practices.
- Collaboration of state agencies to streamline communications and to create common collaborative farm to ECE goals.

## Next Steps

**These findings represent a preliminary scan of farm to early care and education barriers, opportunities and stakeholder identification for Pennsylvania.** As a next step, The Food Trust will convene a group of a diverse group of stakeholders to explore these findings and continue the conversation to identify additional needs, challenges and opportunities to expand farm to early care and education

practices and programs through state-led mechanisms in Pennsylvania. **Organized as a task force, this group will work together to identify key strategies to advance farm to ECE in order to create more equitable access to healthy foods for children; market shares for farmers and food suppliers; professional development opportunities for ECE teachers and administrators; and the means by which to engage and support families.** At the conclusion of these task force gatherings, a final report with recommendations detailing how state agencies and others can support farm to early care and education practices will be published and widely distributed.



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