

Supporting the Quality of Early Care and Education Providers in Pennsylvania through Improved Access to Farm to Early Care and Education

The historic increase in Child Care and Development Block Grant funding and the revision of Pennsylvania's child care plan provide unique opportunities to ensure that early care and education providers have expanded access to resources, training and technical assistance to support child nutrition and the local sourcing of food--key aspects of high quality child care programs.

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.¹ At the same time, **19% of children experience food insecurity in urban communities, rural areas and small towns across Pennsylvania.**² At the same time, the benefits of good nutrition during early childhood are well documented and set the foundation for future health and school success. A healthy diet supports healthy growth and brain development, helping to ensure children are ready for kindergarten. (National Center on Health, (2014). *Making the Link Between Health and School Readiness*: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/link-health-and-school-readiness.pdf>) Therefore, it is no surprise that early childhood experts, pediatricians, dietitians, nutritionists, public health professionals and child development specialists have been leading conversations about the characteristics of "quality" early childhood programs, which includes the food our children are eating.

In Pennsylvania, 97% of farms are family-owned and generate \$67 billion for the commonwealth.³ Of that revenue, \$439 million can be attributed to edible foods, with the top foods including dairy, poultry and eggs, meats, fruits and vegetables.⁴ 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. Pennsylvania-grown nutritious food delivers a triple bottom line: children benefit from eating healthier, less processed food; local farmers benefit from the opening of new markets for their product; and communities benefit from the increased revenue and job creation.

"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.**



The Opportunity: Bolstering farm to ECE Practices in Pennsylvania In Support of Quality ECE Programs

In 2016, The Food Trust, in partnership with the Pennsylvania Head Start Association, convened a farm to ECE task force in order to identify common goals and priorities for advancing farm to ECE practices while advancing racial equity in PA. The following strategies are informed by the input of over 50 task force members, whose sectors represented nutrition, public health, public policy, government, early care and education, agriculture, and non-profit.

1. Strengthening Professional Development and Technical Assistance for Administrators, Teachers and Staff

Quality early care and education environments should be inclusive and provide ample opportunity for teachers, administrators and other staff to take part in professional development. While some technical assistance is currently being offered in the area of healthy eating through the PA Regional Keys, there is a need to develop a more systemic and equitable approach for training and technical assistance, particularly around the use of farm to ECE strategies as a foundation for high-quality early care and education settings.

CCDBG funds could be harnessed to strengthen professional development through the state's early learning centers, expanding training and TA opportunities to help ECE programs better understand and implement farm to ECE practices. These trainings would be broad-based in scope and accessible to foodservice workers, teachers, and support staff at ECE sites. For example, farm to ECE professional development for ECE providers would tackle topics like aligning farm to ECE with early learning standards, integration of farm to ECE concepts into curricula, family engagement strategies, culturally-relevant practices, and supporting equitable access to healthy foods for both families and staff.

The soon to be launching Early Learning Resource Centers (ELRC) and eventually the statewide training and TA network should become the infrastructure for supporting Ready, Set Grow and farm to ECE in PA. Child care providers rely on quality coaching provided by Pennsylvania's network of Early Learning Resource Centers. These agencies offer expertise in program quality and support child care programs so they can provide the best possible care for children, including in the areas of child health and nutrition. ELRC staff also help programs that are working toward a higher rating in Keystone STARS, which recognizes farm to early care and education activities as part of its point structure. CCDF quality funding could be used to provide training on farm to ECE to ELRC staff, thereby extending the capacity of quality coaches to provide TA to child care providers on nutrition and healthy ECE environments.

2. Improve Child Nutrition by Investing in Pennsylvania Agriculture through a CACFP Incentive Pilot

CACFP is a federally-funded nutrition program that provides a per-child reimbursement for breakfast, snack, and lunch, which is determined based on family income. Early care and education providers are eligible to participate in CACFP, either independently or by being fiscally sponsored by another eligible organization. Providers must serve meals and snacks that meet federal nutrition guidelines and are then reimbursed with federal funding based on specific

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

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

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

4. 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/

criteria, such as the percent of children who receive free and reduced-price meals (below 185% federal poverty level). In Pennsylvania, approximately 160,000 children participate in CACFP daily. This translates to over 74 million meals annually and \$115 million in cash payments from the USDA.

Pennsylvania-grown fruits, vegetables and other foods can support successful implementation of CACFP. Block grant funds could be used to catalyze new procurement tactics by ECE providers participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program. A survey of 70 ECE providers revealed that the greatest barrier to purchasing healthy locally grown foods is cost. A pilot program that incentivizes, through state-matched funds, the purchase of locally grown fruits and vegetables, would support healthy meals, the local economy, and would provide food education opportunities to providers.

Currently, not all of Pennsylvania's ECE providers who could receive federal CACFP benefits are enrolled in the program, leaving federal resources on the table. CCDF funds could be used to launch a pilot program to offer an additional 10 cents per meal in state reimbursement to ECE providers that use locally grown foods in their CACFP compliant meals and snacks. For example, Michigan's "10 Cents A Meal For School Kids and Farms" pilot program is providing schools with match incentive funding up to 10 cents per meal to purchase and serve Michigan-grown produce to an estimated 95,000 students in 32 grant-winning school districts. A similar reimbursement offered in Pennsylvania would benefit young children, ECE providers, and make a significant investment in the local agricultural economy. For example, a \$250,000 pilot program could help ECE providers offer over 2 million locally sourced meals.

3. Improving Access to Healthy Food through Shared Services and Network Building

Most early care and education providers are small businesses that rely on parent fees to fund program operations. The reliance on parent fees impacts the quality of food and education that that can be provided in programs—particularly those serving low-income families who cannot afford higher costs of care. Since the majority of Pennsylvania's early care and education providers operate as small businesses in this market-based environment, they may not have the staff capacity, expertise, or proper scale to manage the logistics of efficiently purchasing healthy local food to serve their children.

We believe a shared services model could benefit Pennsylvania's ECE providers in their effort to provide healthy fruits, vegetables, dairy, grains, and proteins that are locally sourced to the children and the families they serve. A shared services model could develop strategic public-private partnerships to allow providers to share costs and streamline the business side of running an ECE program. The goal of the shared services model is to lower costs, reduce administrative burden, and allow ECE providers to focus more of their time on educating young children.

Pennsylvania CCDBG funds could be used to build a pilot shared services program for eligible ECE providers to streamline their access to locally sourced, sustainably grown food. For example, established food distributor organizations (e.g. Common Market, Kegel's Produce, Lancaster Farm Fresh, etc.) could develop a system specifically tailored to ECE settings that identifies local vendors and manages the logistics of their food procurement and distribution. This strategy would provide an economic boost to Pennsylvania farmers by encouraging healthy local food consumption in ECE settings. Participating providers would also be able to access the training and technical assistance provided by The Food Trust. This combined strategy would

help build ECE program capacity and expertise around food procurement while promoting the long-term sustainability of Farm-to-ECE practices across the commonwealth.

4. Adopting a Racial Equity Framework to Inform Child Care Policy

The 2017 Annie E. Casey Foundation's Race for Results report showed that PA ranks nearly last in the nation for well-being of Black and Latino children. PA must do more to ensure that race is not a predictor of outcomes for young children. The state must collect, report, and make publicly available data related to racial disparities. While the state's CCDF plan describes what is necessary to support the healthy development of children and outlines a universal implementation approach, it does not address the impact that structural racism has on child outcomes.

Pennsylvania should adopt a racial equity framework to inform the data collection, metrics, and reports that will ultimately impact policy and funding decisions impacting young children. The purpose of an equity framework is to analyze, influence, and improve decision-making that supports equity and empowerment. With such a framework, agencies like OCDEL can aim for more equitable program implementation, state-level policies, and ultimately child and community-level outcomes through the intentional removal of the systemic barriers keeping children of color from opportunity.

A few ways that the CCDF plan could better reflect racial equity include the following:

- Disaggregated data by race can point to disparities in access to quality child care across the state and provide policymakers with a more complete picture of where quality child care services and funds are most needed. The CCDF plan could emphasize this type of data collection and reporting to better inform Pennsylvania's continuous quality improvement (CQI) process for child care services (Section 7 of plan).
- Section 4.4 of the draft CCDF plan asks the state to describe how the lead agency's payment practices support equal access to a range of providers. The state's current definition of equal access does not take into account the inequities faced by Pennsylvania families as a result of structural racism - "Pennsylvania defines equal access as eligible subsidy children having access to comparable child care services that are provided to children whose parents are not eligible to receive assistance under this program or under any other federal or state child care assistance program." Equal access must not be defined just in terms of whether a child receives a subsidy or not, but whether there is equal access to the subsidy by race and that the subsidy helps Black and Latino children access the same quality of care as their white peers.

5. Expanding Funding for the Child Care Subsidy Program to Increase Access to High-Quality Child Care

A growing body of research connects experiences in early childhood to health and well-being throughout life. We know that the greatest returns come from investing in early childhood. While all children benefit from high-quality child care, children living poverty as well as those facing racial bias can benefit the most. Given the wait-list of eligible children, it is imperative that PA increase the number child care subsidies available for lower-income families. Moreover, in order for programs to prepare children for kindergarten and set them up for long-term health and well-being, ECE providers must have the capacity and financial stability to serve children and provide a high-quality experience. As is well documented, reimbursement rates for programs

serving low-income children in PA are below-market rate and in an effort to support quality and advance equity, these rates must be raised. Increased reimbursement for subsidies must translate into higher compensation for ECE staff, whose important work shapes the lives of the commonwealth's children.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide comment on Pennsylvania's Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) Grant Draft State Plan.