Iowa AEYC Farm to Early Care and Education

YEAR 4 EVALUATION
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Introduction
The Iowa Agency for the Education of Young Children (Iowa AEYC) received funding from the WK Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) in 2016 to expand farm to early care and education (F2ECE) in Iowa. Initial funding was set to expire in March 2020, but they received a no-cost extension through August 2020. The work continues with supplemental funding for one more year. This report summarizes evaluation conducted in year 4, from March 2019 through August 2020.

Methods
The Iowa F2ECE Survey
In early 2019, the Iowa Farm to Early Care Coalition discussed how to create a shared measurement system to evaluate the work of the coalition. After exploring data that each organization collects as well as data available from other sources, they agreed the one measure they most wanted to know is the percent of early care providers in the state who are implementing F2ECE. While a figure is available from the 2018 National F2ECE Survey, the response rate in Iowa was low. Therefore, they agreed to focus evaluation efforts on conducting a survey in Iowa.

The Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Coalition conducted the survey from March 2 to April 26, 2020. Surveys were conducted electronically using Qualtrics™. Invitations to participate in the survey were sent via email by Iowa AEYC, Iowa Child Care Resource and Referral, and Iowa’s Office of Head Start. Response was voluntary and respondents who completed the survey had the opportunity to enter a drawing for a chance to win a grocery gift card. A total of 985 people responded to the survey and 834 were included in the analysis because they completed at least half of the questions.

Participant observation
The evaluator participated in coalition meetings and regular meetings between WKKF-funded partners.

Go NAPSACC
Participants in the pilot F2ECE training completed the Go NAPSCC farm to ECE self-assessment in November 2019. This was to establish a baseline regarding their implementation of F2ECE. Following the training, 11 pilot program participants applied to receive a mini-grant to implement F2ECE in 2020, one of which was awarded after the original 10 due to COVID-19. One program was forced to split into two, to keep school-age children and younger children in separate pods, and they asked for a mini-grant for each age group. The mini-grant has been extended through summer of 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They will complete the Go NAPSACC farm to ECE self-assessment again after completing their mini-grant, to measure change in F2ECE implementation.

Results
Objective 1: Increase access to nutritious food and exercise and early care and education settings
The 2020 Iowa F2ECE Survey showed that 70 percent of respondents at the statewide level implemented at least one type of F2ECE activity in the last year. Forty-four percent of respondents had implemented three or more types of F2ECE activities in the last year. This may be a better estimate of the proportion of respondents who have a comprehensive F2ECE strategy, because they are implementing more than one or two activities.
The most-implemented F2ECE activities were gardening, local food education, and serving locally grown food in meals, snacks, or taste tests. Thirty-two percent of respondents have an edible garden at their site and 28 percent have container gardens. When these are combined, 45 percent of respondents have some sort of garden (15 percent have both a container garden and traditional garden). Forty-two percent of respondents have educated children about locally grown food, how food grows, and/or where it comes from. Nearly as many (41 percent) have served locally grown food in meals, snacks, or taste tests.

Interestingly, 21 percent of respondents indicated they had implemented at least one F2ECE activity in the last year, but were unfamiliar with the F2ECE concept. Many respondents indicated they would like to know more about F2ECE and to receive the coalition’s electronic newsletter. Hence, there is much opportunity to expand F2ECE in Iowa by building upon what respondents are already doing and introducing them to the larger F2ECE concept, the network, and resources available to them.

Participants in the pilot F2ECE professional development training also demonstrated a desire to increase access to nutritious food and especially to garden. Of the 16 who completed a F2ECE action plan using the Go NAPSACC online platform, nine selected a goal related to gardening. The most popular gardening related goal was, “Children do a variety of activities to help plan, plant, care for, harvest, and learn from the garden,” selected by seven programs.

Childcare centers participating in Iowa AEYC’s pilot F2ECE professional development program also created goals related to serving local food. Seven of 16 made it a goal to serve local food three times per week during the growing season and/or once per week all year round.

Centers which participated in the Iowa AEYC F2ECE pilot program are very well suited to reach children of color and low-income children with healthy food and physical activity. Seventy-three percent of children who received care and education at the centers during the 2020 fiscal year received Child Care Assistance, which is a program available to help families with low income pay for childcare. Fifty-one percent of children enrolled in the centers were children of color and 13 percent were English language learners.

**Objective 2: Deliver professional development**

Iowa AEYC piloted a three-part professional development series with 16 early care sites. One of these sites has since closed. Ten sites are moving forward with a mini-grant to implement their F2ECE action plan, although delayed by COVID-19.

Of the 27 members of the Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Coalition, 13 of them are members of the coalition’s food education strategy team. This team is focused on identifying and creating educational materials which early childhood and school professionals can use in early care and K-12 settings. This demonstrates the coalition’s commitment to ensuring farm to school and early care is integrated in professional development opportunities and that education and early care professionals have access to the professional development and classroom materials they need to successfully implement F2ECE.
Objective 3: Coalition development

In February 2020, members of the Iowa Farm to School Coalition and the Iowa Farm to Early Care and Education Coalition met in Des Moines for a two-day strategic planning session. As a result, they decided to merge, forming the Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Coalition. The meeting was facilitated by Lacy Stephens from the National Farm to School Network. The meeting had four goals:

1. Unite attendees around a shared vision and agreed-upon goals, objectives, and strategies to advance that vision.
2. Create a strong organizational structure and foundation.
3. Strengthen collaborative relationships across members and member organizations.
4. Center the work in equity.

Each goal was evaluated by Lacy Stephens using a survey after the session. Figure 1 shows that respondents largely agreed that the strategic planning session met each of its goals, especially the goal to unite attendees around a shared vision and strategies to advance that vision.

**Fig. 1: The Iowa F2SEC Coalition strategic planning meeting largely achieved its goals.**

The strategic planning meeting also showed that the meeting was facilitated well. Figure 2 shows all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the meeting structure was effective in accomplishing the objectives, was engaging, prepared the coalition for the future, and was a good use of time.
The evaluation showed that respondents agreed to a lesser degree that the strategic planning process centered the work in equity. In July 2020, the three co-chairs of the Iowa F2SEC coalition conducted an informal survey with members to determine the extent to which they believe their work in farm to school and early care is connected to equity. Figure 3 shows a variety of opinions regarding whether there is a connection between their work in farm to school and early care and racial equity. The coalition later discussed the results and concurred that respondents may have interpreted the question in a variety of ways. Following the discussion, the coalition decided to form an equity committee.

**Fig. 2: The Iowa F2SEC Coalition strategic planning meeting was engaging and effective.**

- The meeting structure was effective in accomplishing the objectives.
- I was engaged with the meeting activities.
- The activities in this meeting will help the coalition in the future.
- This meeting was a good use of my time.
- This meeting increased my commitment to the Coalition.

**Fig. 3: Coalition members perceive varying degrees of connection between their work in farm to school and early care and racial equity.**
Objective 4: Address systems barriers to program goals and early care and education settings

Kania and Kramer (2011) describe a collective impact initiative as, “long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Their actions are supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization.” Collective Impact initiatives are one strategy to create systems change.

The newly formed Iowa F2SEC Coalition is well positioned to create collective impact. First, it is made up of individuals representing many sectors. The coalition has 27 members representing nine nonprofit organizations, five state agencies, two colleges/universities, one community group, and one public school. Second, the coalition is implementing most of the five elements of collective impact:

1. Common agenda: during the strategic planning session, members identified their core values, goals, and objectives and have continued to review these to ensure they are guiding the work.
2. Shared measurement system: the coalition was integrally involved in conducting the 2020 Iowa F2ECE Survey. The results were used extensively in the coalition’s 2020 evaluation report, which reports the latest data on several measures which they identified as their indicators of success (Krist, 2020).
3. Mutually reinforcing activities: the coalition has identified three priority areas in which they want to make progress: local food procurement, farm to school and farm to early care curricula, and network development. They formed a committee for each of these areas and the members are working together to align their own organizational activities as well as implement shared programs and projects.
4. Ongoing communication: the coalition holds regular meetings during which partners share updates and committees meet. Committees hold additional meetings as needed. The coalition co-chairs also created a list serve so members can communicate with the group.
5. Independent backbone organization: Of the five elements of collective impact, forming an independent backbone organization has proved to be one of the most challenging. The coalition agreed on an organizational structure led by three co-chairs. They agreed that for the first year, Iowa AEYC, FoodCorps Iowa, and ISU Extension and Outreach would serve as co-chairs. Committee members agreed to select co-chairs on a yearly basis, recognizing that the co-chairs are not paid and that their ability to serve as co-chairs may change with time.

Objective 5: Advance policy change

The Iowa Farmers Union has taken a lead on creating policy recommendations to advanced F2ECE in Iowa, especially regarding local food procurement. Through a process of engaging stakeholders from all over the state, they have developed 40 policy recommendations (State Public Policy Group, 2020). They are currently in the process of communicating these recommendations to Iowa elected officials and agency heads.

A review of Go NAPSACC data showed that 119 early care sites in Iowa have completed the Farm to ECE self-assessment. Eight of these respondents have at least one written policy related to F2ECE, demonstrating there is room to advance “little p” policies at early childhood care and education sites.
Conclusions and Recommendations

In year 4 of Iowa AEYC’s WKKF funding, great progress was made in the areas of coalition development (objective 3) and policy development (objective 5). In addition, they have a better grasp of the extent to which F2ECE is being implemented in the state through the completion of the 2020 Iowa F2ECE Survey (objective 1). Iowa AEYC successfully delivered a three-part professional development series with 16 early care sites. While roll-out to additional sites has been delayed because of COVID-19, the training is developed (objective 2). Progress on objective 4, systems change, has been slow, as can be expected with any type of systems change initiative. However, the newly formed Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Coalition is well-poised to impact systems, as they have many of the elements of collective impact in place.

In the final year of WKKF funding, we recommend the following, based on these evaluation results:

- Ensure that the pilot sites complete Go NAPSCC farm to ECE self-assessment after completing their action plans. In this way, the professional development program can be evaluated to see if it leads to on-the-ground changes.
- Consider options for integrating the farm to ECE professional development into existing professional development systems, such as Head Start in-service, Area Education Agency in-service, community college early childhood programs, etc.

References


State Public Policy Group (2020). Analysis of Iowa’s Food System. West Des Moines, Iowa: State Public Policy Group. Retrieved from https://05f9dc24-75c9-4ef1-976a-80d3c189b555.filesusr.com/ugd/1b1b6d_b2bcd88bfc0c482fa6380ce382cd9538.pdf?index=true