

Farm to Early Care and Education (F2ECE) Supports Child Nutrition and Health Across Iowa



What is F2ECE?

Strategies used by early care and education (ECE) providers to introduce children under 5, whose taste preferences are developing, to healthy foods from local farms.

Strategies include:

- Procuring food from local farms for ECE sites;
- Professional development for ECE providers;
- Child education about food, farming, gardening, and nutrition;
- Parental or family engagement; and
- Gardening at ECE sites.

What are the benefits of F2ECE?

Helps children develop healthy eating habits at a young age, supports local food and farm businesses, and contributes to a more equitable food system.

How do we know F2ECE is used widely across Iowa?

From March 2 to April 26, 2020, the Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Coalition conducted a statewide survey of ECE programs.

834 people working in early care and education settings responded to the survey, representing 95 of Iowa's 99 counties.



70% Implemented at least one element of F2ECE

45% Have traditional or container gardens

42% Educate children about local food, how food grows, and/or where food comes from

41% Serve locally grown food in meals, snacks, or taste tests



90% agreed F2ECE teaches children where food comes from and how it is grown

82% believe F2ECE improves children's health



40% lack funding to implement new activities

39% lack space for gardens or activities

37% lack staff time or capacity

36% did not know F2ECE activities are an option

Policy Recommendations

- **Provide funding to ECE providers to support and incentivize F2ECE:** ECE providers lack adequate food budgets to purchase locally grown products at a fair price or to start gardens. The state can explore purchasing incentives that have been successful in other states, including the 10 Cents a Meal for Michigan's Kids and Farms program, a purchasing incentive.
- **Support the network of local food coordinators:** Lack of staff time and capacity was a common barrier identified by ECE providers. Fund Iowa's network of local food coordinators, FoodCorps members, and partners who can help ECE sites procure local food, arrange farm field trips or farmer visits, and support classroom lessons.
- **Incorporate F2ECE into state's existing technical assistance and training infrastructure:** Some ECE providers surveyed noted that they needed more information on F2ECE strategies, while others were completely unaware of F2ECE. To equip ECE staff to implement F2ECE, the state can infuse training and technical assistance on local food purchasing, gardening, and local food education into Iowa's existing training infrastructure (e.g., CACFP trainings, licensing consultants, community college EC degree programs).
- **Develop a statewide communication plan:** To address lack of awareness around the benefits of F2ECE, Iowa can launch a statewide education initiative and marketing plan to teach communities about the importance of buying and consuming locally grown products, perhaps building upon the Choose Iowa program.

F2ECE Strategies, Benefits, and Barriers Vary by ECE Provider Type



In Home Child Care Providers

76% implement at least one type of F2ECE activity

Local food education is the most common F2ECE activity

Low/no funding to implement new activities is the biggest barrier



Public Preschool Programs

66% implement at least one type of F2ECE activity

Field trips and gardens are the most common F2ECE activity

Lack of knowledge about F2ECE is the biggest barrier



Licensed Centers

72% implement at least one type of F2ECE activity

Gardens are the most common F2ECE activity

Low/no funding to implement new activities is the biggest barrier



Head Start and Early Head Start

62% implement at least one type of F2ECE activity

Field trips are the most common F2ECE activity

No/limited space for gardens or activities is the biggest barrier

Implications for F2ECE

The survey revealed a high interest in F2ECE across Iowa's ECE providers. This was exemplified by the fact that 21 percent of respondents were already implementing at least one type of F2ECE activity without an awareness of the larger F2ECE concept. In addition, approximately half of the respondents requested more information about F2ECE.

Despite this high level of interest, several systemic barriers were cited by providers as making it difficult to implement F2ECE in their program. The most common barriers identified by providers were the lack of funding, space, and staff time. These systemic barriers can be addressed through policy change and additional resources.

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Provider Perspectives on F2ECE

“The hardest thing for me was buying local foods. I thought the only place to purchase local foods was at the Farmers Market. I took classes to learn more about it and it gave me more options.”

—Child Development Home (registered) provider

“We want parents to be empowered to make healthy choices and know where to get healthy foods.”

—Jada Bahls Kagalskiy, Northeast Iowa Head Start Health and Development Specialist

“What I liked is the excitement you see with these activities. The kids never saw anything like this before.”

—Ihsan Yaseen, director of AlRazi Academy Early Childhood Center

“I try to use the food of the month in all curricular areas. Whatever food we study for the month I tie into math, literacy, science, and so on.”

—Sara Converse, Turkey Valley Preschool teacher

“We also are required to promote healthy eating and food choices, so this checks all the boxes for what we need for Head Start’s health and development standards .”

—Jada Bahls Kagalskiy, Northeast Iowa Head Start Health and Development Specialist