



# READY SET GROW

Emerging Strategies to Support  
**Farm to Early Care and Education**  
in Pennsylvania



# Introduction

Across the country, 8 million children spend their days at preschools, daycare centers and HeadStart programs. In Pennsylvania alone, over 230,000 kids under age 5 are in childcare.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, **19% of children experience food insecurity in urban communities, rural areas and small towns across the commonwealth.**<sup>2</sup>

The benefits of good nutrition during early childhood are well documented: A healthy diet supports healthy growth and brain development, helping to ensure children are ready for success in school and at home.<sup>3</sup> It is no surprise, then, that early childhood experts, pediatricians, dieticians, nutritionists, public health professionals and child development specialists have been leading conversations about what makes for a quality early care and education (ECE) program—including the food our children are eating.

When that food is produced locally, it's not just children who benefit: In Pennsylvania, 97% of farms are family-owned, and foods like fruits, vegetables, meats, eggs and dairy bring in nearly \$440 million for the commonwealth each year.<sup>4,5</sup> Our agricultural diversity defines our local food system, and has played a key role in the farm to school and farm to ECE movements. Indeed, **children across the commonwealth are being introduced to more locally grown foods in school settings than they have in decades.** Meanwhile, urban farms in Pennsylvania's cities have taken root, playing an increasingly critical role in providing food access and food/farming education for young children and their families.



# Farm to ECE 101

“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 in K–12 settings. 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.

One size does not fit all—farm to ECE in rural Jefferson County can and should look vastly different than programming taking place in Pittsburgh, for example—but by building systemic opportunities to connect children, providers, families and farmers, we can support these core beliefs:

- **Every child deserves equitable access to high-quality early learning environments** with nutrition programs that are culturally responsive, nourishing and age-appropriate.
- Pennsylvania farmers need access to new and diversified markets that include connections to ECE providers. **Strong local and regional food systems lift up those that feed us from farm to fork** and support strong local economies.
- Children of color represent a growing share of the Pennsylvania’s population and, in many instances, experience worse outcomes across a spectrum of health and educational indicators. **The opportunity to support more just and equitable ECE and food systems in Pennsylvania is great:** The commonwealth’s success as a thriving and prosperous place for all its residents depends on its ability to break down barriers to racial equity.

Expanding farm to ECE practices across the commonwealth has the potential to positively impact families with young children, ECE educators and staff, rural and urban farmers, local food economies in general and communities at large.



# The Opportunity

## Bolstering Farm to ECE Practices in Pennsylvania

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 Pennsylvania. The following strategies are informed by the input of over 50 task force members whose sectors represent nutrition, public health, public policy, government, early care and education, farmers and other food suppliers, and nonprofit organizations.

### EMERGING STRATEGIES

**1**

Integrate farm to ECE concepts and activities into Keystone STARS, Pennsylvania's quality rating system for early care and education providers.

1

**2**

Create a pilot incentive program for ECE providers to purchase locally and regionally grown foods for use in the federally funded Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

2

**3**

Establish a Pennsylvania mini-grant program to provide start-up or scale-up funds to ECE providers interested in making farm to ECE part of their program.

3

## Strategy 1: Integrate farm to ECE concepts and activities into Keystone STARS, Pennsylvania's quality rating system for early care and education providers.

Keystone STARS, the statewide quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) program, provides early care and education settings with a systemic approach to assessing and improving quality of programming. In order to integrate farm to ECE benefits with existing ECE practices, we must increase public awareness that access to healthy, local foods, gardening opportunities, and food/farming education are crucial components to a quality educational experience.

Through our collective exploration of data, collaborative conversations and brainstorming, the task force has identified the need to integrate farm to ECE concepts into Keystone STARS and training opportunities.

An important first step: Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) recently introduced "bonus points" that can be earned in Keystone STARS by implementing farm to ECE practices.<sup>6</sup>

Pennsylvania can create ECE quality indicators within Keystone STARS, and support ECE providers as they seek quality ratings, by:

- **Developing professional development opportunities** for ECE educators and administrators specifically for farm to ECE, including in-person training, online training modules, and integration of concepts into existing learning opportunities.
- **Utilizing existing tools**, like the Pennsylvania Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (PA NAP-SACC), to integrate farm to ECE concepts into quality early care assessments.
- **Collaborating with existing statewide technical assistance networks** to provide support to farm to ECE practitioners (e.g. Master Gardeners with Penn State Extension, or the newly developed state-coordinated regional Early Learning Resource Centers).
- **Exploring how SNAP-Ed and farm to ECE strategies can be integrated**, as well as how SNAP-Ed providers can support quality ECE programs and those providers eager to connect young children and their families with locally grown, culturally appropriate foods.



### A Mother's Touch Child Development Center, Farm to Early Care and Education Champion Awardee

Cheryl Moss will explain to you that she was not always such a proficient gardener. You wouldn't know that, though, given the multiple raised beds, fruit trees, grape vines and potted plants that stretch across the outdoor space at A Mother's Touch Child Development Center in Sharon, PA. Tomatoes, kale, spinach, beans, squashes, mustard greens and a wide variety of herbs are in various stages of growth, all tended to by children ages 1 and up at this family group childcare development center. Sharon is located about 75 miles northwest of Pittsburgh and is adjacent to Youngstown, Ohio. Young working families take advantage of A Mother's Touch because Cheryl and her staff provide an experience for young children in which learning about food production and the science, math and art behind it encourages young minds to expand and palates to develop. Cheryl and her team are committed to offering nutritious, whole foods to children whenever possible.

Roasted broccoli is a favorite among these young eaters. As one parent described, "Because of Cheryl, I now make this at home. And when I do, I need to eat mine up before she (her daughter) can take it off my plate!" A Mother's Touch believes that gardening with young children encourages children to try new foods, supports social-emotional development, gives them confidence and provides a wealth of teachable moments unique to children getting their hands dirty and nurturing plants from seed to harvest. As Cheryl noted, "you never know who the next horticulturalist will be—this gives them all a chance to find out."

A Mother's Touch is a quality-rated learning center in Pennsylvania. Cheryl's intentional food- and gardening-based lessons (farm to ECE activities) and the strong emphasis on a strong nutrition program for the young children she nurtures and educates could count toward her Keystone STARS rating, if those types of indicators were to be integrated into the commonwealth's QRIS.

ABOVE: A Mother's Touch integrates gardening into all aspects of its program, including using food for meals and snacks, family engagement and classroom lessons.

## STORIES FROM THE FIELD

### STEP Head Start and Early Head Start's Farm to ECE Program

STEP Head Start and Early Head Start, located in Williamsport, PA offer several program options that range from home-based services to center-based preschool classrooms. STEP's Early Learning Pathway Programs fully support the integration of farm to early care and education (ECE) into all classroom settings—from meal time to circle time.

STEP Head Start uses a "Harvest of the Month" curriculum, which features a Pennsylvania-grown fruit or vegetable each month with associated activities to engage young children around seasonal foods, how they grow, and their nutritional benefits. This year-round workbook of activities, ranging from themed books and songs to cooking and snack ideas, plus a monthly newsletter, is sent out to give teachers ideas and inspiration.

Beyond the classroom, STEP reaches home-based family programs by providing a hands-on cooking workshop once a month for each group. The snacks are based on USDA's CACFP guidelines and are designed to promote cooking together as a family, where local food is often featured. STEP Head Start goes the extra mile to bring fresh, nutritious, locally grown foods into their meal and snack program. Extra funds to purchase these Pennsylvania-grown foods would not only support new food experiences for children, but also lift up Pennsylvania farmers.

### Strategy 2: Create a pilot incentive program for ECE providers to purchase locally and regionally grown foods for use in the federally funded Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a federally subsidized meal and snack program designed to provide nutritious meals to children whose families qualify for free or reduced-priced meals based on income level. The federal reimbursement rates of \$3.23 for lunch and supper, \$1.75 for breakfast and \$.88 for snack are frequently found to be insufficient in supporting local food procurement. Those reimbursement rates are intended to cover expenses far beyond food—including labor, equipment, non-food items, and other overhead expenses.

Some cities and states have launched local food procurement incentive programs that provide extra reimbursement dollars (on the local or state level) to support the purchase of locally grown foods in USDA nutrition programs like CACFP and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). For example, over the past two years, Michigan has rolled out a pilot to increase reimbursement for locally grown foods that appear in the NSLP; in its first year, \$250,000 was set aside to provide an extra 10 cents for each locally grown item offered to children in a meal. As providers are faced with new mandatory meal patterns for CACFP, which include serving children more fruits and vegetables, farm to ECE may be an opportunity to support success with new nutrition standards for meals.

To pilot a local food purchasing incentive for CACFP, we must consider:

- **Funding to support food purchasing incentives**, which could range from state budgets within the Departments of Agriculture or Education, via the Child Care Development Block Grant, or through private foundation or other grant dollars.
- **The need for CACFP sponsor buy-in** as a key lever for pilot project success, including the need for a model that takes into account economies of scale and a variety of local food purchasing options (e.g. direct from farmer, food hub or distributor, retail or wholesale stores, or other arrangements), buying power and regional differences.
- **Thoughtful roll-out** to build long-term program sustainability and to prove scalability, including exploration of shared services models which could result in increased purchasing power and, thus, a wider variety of food purchasing options.



### Strategy 3: Establish a Pennsylvania mini-grant program to provide start-up or scale-up funds to ECE providers interested in making farm to ECE part of their program.

Mini-grant programs can serve as catalysts for ECE providers eager to adopt farm to ECE activities, supporting the development of new relationships between farmers, providers and farm to ECE support organizations. Small infusions of capital have the potential to jump start initiatives like gardening with young children; the establishment of farm to ECE concepts into classroom activities; and recurring activities like seasonal farm field trips or farmers market outings. Grant funds can also support professional development and caregiver and family engagement, while providing the means by which providers can seek higher quality ratings in Keystone STARS through the adoption of the above farm to ECE practices.

Building on past state-led grant programs like the Healthy Farms, Healthy Schools Act, mini-grant programs would need to address the following known challenges for grantees:

- **Accessibility of mini-grant process:** Application and reporting processes should be not administratively burdensome for grantees. Given the many functions that ECE providers and educators perform on a daily basis, making any mini-grant process highly accessible to all provider types and communities across the commonwealth would be a key to its success.
- **Program sustainability:** Once mini-grant funds have been expended, grantees will continue to need periodic support for their farm to ECE endeavors. Development of a mini-grant program should explore how to integrate existing support systems, like cooperative extension and the Early Learning Resource Center and Keystone Kids Go! collaborative, into grantee planning and partnerships.



#### Mt. Washington Children's Center, Pittsburgh

Mt. Washington Children's Center (MWCC) is perched near the top of Southern Avenue in Pittsburgh's Mount Washington neighborhood. A center that focuses on children staying safe, having fun and eating nutritious food throughout the day, MWCC serves children and their families from the immediate neighborhood and beyond. Rose Marie Smith has been the director of the center for 40 years. Her interest in gardening with young children took root during the urban farming and gardening movement of the 1970s in Pittsburgh when community members began to make use of vacant lots to grow food for those in the neighborhood. Since that time, MWCC has involved children and their families in planting ornamental and edible plants around the building's property. Sunflowers, pumpkins and squash line the sidewalk in front of the facility, a tepee acts as an arbor for pole beans, peas and other climbing plants, and rows of onions and Swiss chard swing from the fences. Rose Marie and her staff have used gardening as a means to educate children about health and nutrition, math and responsibility. Fresh foods from the garden are utilized in center meals—basil in homemade spaghetti sauce is a favorite—and produce items not used for meals are taste-tested by children and their families and given to community members.

A partnership with the local food bank gives the center the opportunity to support community food security by setting up a "farmers market" so that children and their caregivers can take fresh, wholesome produce home with them. The long-term vision of MWCC's program is to transform even more of the existing outdoor space into food production; they want to "plant more, harvest more, cook more and share more" in the years to come. Mt. Washington Children's Center was able to kick off and expand their farm to ECE activities through two different one-time mini-grant opportunities. Even small grants can catalyze longer-term initiatives and move ECE programs in new and exciting directions.

LEFT: STEP Head Start's farm to ECE program features regular taste tests of local food. Here, children sample locally grown asparagus.  
ABOVE: Children at Mt. Washington Children's Center interact with the site's edible garden.

# Moving Forward

While farm to ECE continues to take root in the commonwealth, The Food Trust, the Pennsylvania Head Start Association and many other partners will continue to push the movement into its next phase. The Ready, Set, Grow task force will continue to further strategies that support expansion across the commonwealth and build champions among state-level decision makers. Simultaneously, a ground-up process will be built through the creation of regional farm to ECE learning hubs. These ground-up hubs will bring together ECE providers, farmers and supportive partners; pilot new farm to ECE practices; further ground-truth the work and the need; and build capacity among all stakeholders and individuals to engage in the advocacy process.

Early childhood is a crucial phase of physical, social and emotional development, and good nutrition is critical to brain development and learning. Farm to ECE strategies can support young children's development during these formative years, while building community and empowering those most affected by health and education inequities. Every child deserves a strong start, including access to good food and high-quality learning environments, and farm to ECE can help every child in Pennsylvania succeed.

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For more information and to get involved:  
[www.pareadyssetgrow.org](http://www.pareadyssetgrow.org)



## Task Force Members

The Food Trust extends its gratitude to the nearly 200 individuals who contributed to this report through participation in the task force, farm to ECE committees, phone calls and meetings:

A Mother's Touch  
All for All  
Better Kid Care, Penn State University  
Cambria County Child Development Corp.  
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Child Care Action Team  
Clearfield County League on Social Services  
Clinton Lycoming County STEP Headstart  
Common Market Philadelphia  
Community Action Partnership Child Care  
Early Head Start at Children's Hospital  
of Philadelphia  
Easter Seals  
Freedom Valley YMCA  
Grow Pittsburgh  
HACE  
Healthy Bodies Project, Penn State University  
Lancaster General Health Penn Medicine  
Lehigh Valley Children's Centers  
Let's Move Pittsburgh  
Londonderry School  
Maternity Care Coalition  
Mayor's Office of Education Philadelphia  
Pre-K Program  
Moms Rising  
National Black Child Development Institute  
Norris Square Community Alliance  
Northwest Regional Key  
PennAEYC  
Pennsylvania Child Care Association (PACCA)  
Pennsylvania Dairymen's Association  
Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture  
Pennsylvania Department of Education  
Pennsylvania Department of Health  
Pennsylvania Farm Bureau  
Pennsylvania Head Start Association  
Pennsylvania Home Based Child Care  
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South Philadelphia Early Head Start  
Spiral Path Farm  
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## ENDNOTES

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