



Alabama Farm to ECE Coalition

Strategic Plan 2019-2021

Made in partnership with



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DEFINITION & BACKGROUND

Definition

Farm to early care and education (Farm to ECE) encompasses efforts that bring locally or regionally produced foods into ECE programs using three core strategies: local food sourcing, gardening and food and agriculture education. The goal is to enhance the quality of the educational experience in all types of ECE settings (e.g., preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start, programs in K-12 school districts).

**Definition is based on the National Farm to School Network and USDA definitions*

ECE in Alabama

The ECE landscape in Alabama encompasses a wide variety of home-based and center-based early learning providers. Each setting offers unique opportunities to build Farm to ECE into the program environment, curriculum and menu. The goals and objectives outlined in this Strategic Plan are intended to enhance Farm to ECE participation across all ECE settings in the state. The Alabama Farm to ECE Coalition will take the particular needs and assets of all ECE settings into account as it pursues the goals and objectives described throughout this plan. Appendix 1 includes additional information about each type of ECE program available in Alabama.

The Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) leads and manages all Child Nutrition Programs in the state, including the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). CACFP is a federally funded program that reimburses child care programs at free, reduced-price, or paid rates for eligible meals and snacks served to enrolled children, targeting benefits to those children most in need. Through CACFP, child care providers prepare nutritious snacks and meals for the children in their program. ALSDE administers this program and strives to engage providers in Farm to Preschool activities.

History of Alabama Farm to ECE Coalition

From 2015 through 2018, the Alabama Partnership for Children (APC) served as an implementation partner for the National Early Care and Education Learning Collaborative (ECELC) program, a project managed by Nemours and funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). With the launch of the ECELC, APC formed an Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Stakeholder Group (Stakeholder Group) with more than 70 members to collaborate around a common goal. Members included representatives from state agencies, organizations that provide resources and trainings to ECE providers, child advocacy organizations, ECE providers and others. Through this opportunity, the Stakeholder Group convened quarterly and utilized the CDC's Spectrum of Opportunities to identify potential areas of improvement to build support and collaboration for systemic program and policy change.

In 2015, APC was selected for the two-year Healthy Child Care, Healthy Communities (HCCHC) Project, a technical assistance program led by Child Care Aware® of America (CCAoA) to emphasize health, nutrition and obesity prevention in state ECE systems. As part of this program, APC focused on engaging an advisory team from the Stakeholder Group partners, including Childcare Resources,

Child Development Resources and VOICES for Alabama's Children (VOICES), to work on health in ECE settings. Among other ECE health-focused activities, the advisory team convened a Farm to ECE Coalition to provide technical assistance and support to ECE providers interested in Farm to ECE activities.

In 2018, the Farm to ECE Coalition was awarded an additional technical assistance opportunity through CCAoA's HCCHC Project to further Alabama's Farm to ECE efforts. Partners involved in this opportunity include Alabama Partnership for Children, Childcare Resources, the Food Bank of North Alabama, REV Birmingham, the Alabama State Department of Agriculture and Industries, and the Jefferson County Department of Health. In Alabama, this effort is important because agriculture is one of the largest industries in the state and, given the high rates of poverty, food deserts, obesity and food insecurity, partners in Alabama view it as an opportunity to both provide fresh produce to ECE providers in areas where there is low access and to support the local economy by engaging small and minority farmers.



VISION, MISSION & VALUES

Vision

All of Alabama's ECE programs are empowered to successfully source healthy local food, build gardens and offer food and agriculture activities that enrich the quality of early learning experiences for children and support the Alabama food economy.

Mission

The Alabama Farm to ECE Coalition strives to create more equitable access to healthy foods for children, families and ECE providers while building new markets for small farmers to sell their produce. We cultivate and activate community-informed solutions that build local and statewide capacity and infrastructure to support local food sourcing, gardening and food and agriculture education in all ECE programs, regardless of geographic location, program type or socioeconomic status of families served.

Core Values

1. *Collaboration*: engaging different sectors to work together to solve problems
2. *Community voice*: seeking input and guidance from the individuals and groups directly affected by our work
3. *Strengths-based approach*: keeping the needs and assets of community members top of mind when making recommendations and thinking through solutions
4. *Equity*: focusing first on how our work will affect those most at risk of poor health or with least access to support
5. *Openness, accountability and clear communication*

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Strategic Objective 1:

Build knowledge of Farm to ECE in Alabama's farming and ECE communities through trainings and information sharing.

1. Add Farm to ECE content to at least two existing ECE trainings per year from January 2019 through December 2021.
 - Create a slide deck about Farm to ECE that can be incorporated into existing trainings.
 - Build Farm to ECE content into APC's learning collaborative trainings in 2019 and 2020.
 - Review state/local ECE training calendars to identify existing training opportunities where Farm to ECE content could be added.
2. Present about Farm to ECE at a minimum of three regional or statewide conferences by December 2021.
 - Identify ECE or agriculture conferences where presentations can be given.
 - Create a Farm to ECE presentation slide deck that can be delivered at conferences.
 - If presentations are not accepted, apply to staff a table at conferences and hand out Farm to ECE educational materials.
3. By December 2019, develop a statewide communications plan that includes materials to be developed, distribution methods and targets for the reach of print and digital communications.
 - Develop a logo and branding for Alabama Farm to ECE Coalition



Strategic Objective 2:

Facilitate relationship-building between farmers, ECE providers, and food hubs/food distributors.

1. Host at least three “meet and greet” events per year from January 2019 to December 2021 in different parts of the state to bring farmers, ECE providers and other interested parties together to network.
2. Expand Food Bank of North Alabama’s Farm to ECE Pilot to at least one new community by December 2020.
 - Identify local partners to support implementation in the new community.
 - Conduct outcome and process evaluations of the current pilot community and the expansion community.
3. By December 2021, use findings from evaluations of Food Bank of North Alabama’s Farm to ECE Pilot and expansion to develop a plan for expansion to additional rural and urban communities.
4. By December 2021, explore other organizations and networks that support Farm to Institution projects (school, colleges, hospitals, etc.) and assess whether ECE can fit into their current or future work.

Strategic Objective 3:

Reduce the financial barriers to local food sourcing for both farmers and ECE providers.

1. Partner with at least two CACFP sponsor organizations and the state CACFP office to promote Farm to ECE among CACFP participants by December 2020.
 - Develop tip sheets or one-pagers that clearly describe what Farm to ECE activities are allowable under CACFP, including steps ECE providers must take to ensure CACFP reimbursement for local fresh produce purchases and foods grown on-site.
2. By December 2021, explore what other states have done to make local food sourcing more feasible for ECE providers and farmers in terms of cost, order size and access/delivery logistics.

Strategic Objective 4:

Increase the number of ECE providers who grow food in on-site gardens.

1. By December 2020, reach out to and build relationships with Alabama Cooperative Extension, 4H and Auburn University to facilitate future coordination in bringing master gardeners into ECE programs to support on-site garden development and maintenance.
2. Work with state Department of Human Resources to ensure ECE providers have clarity around licensing rules regarding outdoor play space and on-site gardens by December 2019.
 - Develop a fact sheet for ECE providers and distribute through channels identified in statewide communication plan (see Strategic Objective 1, goal 3).

Strategic Objective 5:

Enhance the role of Alabama-grown products in food education activities.

1. Develop a classroom food education curriculum based on fresh Alabama foods and test in the Food Bank of North Alabama's Farm to ECE pilot sites by December 2021.
 - Adapt Farm Food Collaborative's activities and classroom materials to ensure alignment with ECE curriculum standards.
 - Evaluate curriculum implementation and outcomes



APPENDICES

Appendix 1. ECE in Alabama

The Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR) is the state agency that leads efforts to administer many different social welfare programs that support children and families across the state. In Alabama, DHR is the administrator of the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) and is responsible for the implementation of quality initiatives and the child care subsidy program. In addition, DHR manages and monitors the child care licensing rules and process.

The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE) supports children and families through a wide range of programs to improve the quality of care provided to young children by parents and other caregivers. DECE leads efforts to implement Alabama's voluntary First Class Pre-K Program, Head Start Collaboration and a range of home visiting programs.

The following types of early care and education programs are found in Alabama:

Center-Based Programs - Center-based programs care for thirteen or more children in Alabama and legally operate in one of three ways: Licensed, license exempt, or excepted. DHR does not regulate child care centers that operate for less than four hours per day.

Licensed - All centers that require a license must be licensed by the DHR and have their license renewed every two years. DHR prescribes and enforces minimum standards for licensing approval. It also provides consultation to assist providers and parents. Every licensed center must be in compliance with licensing regulations as set forth by DHR.

License Exempt - Center-based programs which are part of a local church ministry or a religious nonprofit elementary school are not required to be licensed by DHR. These programs must register through DHR as a faith-based program and provide necessary documentation in order to legally operate in Alabama.

Excepted Centers - Any center-based programs that are overseen by another state agency, including programs that function as part of a higher education or military system, are not licensed by DHR.

Home-Based Programs - All providers that care for children that are not related to them in their own homes must be licensed by DHR.

Family Child Care Homes - One caregiver cares for no more than six children.

Group Homes - Two or more caregivers care for no more than twelve children.

Alabama First Class Pre-K Classrooms - Alabama's Voluntary First Class Pre-K Program is part of the DECE's Office of School Readiness. First Class Pre-K provides effective, high-quality early childhood experiences that prepare Alabama's children for school success and lifelong learning. These programs are found in K-12 school systems or center-based child care programs.

Alabama Head Start/Early Head Start Classrooms - The Alabama Head Start State Collaboration Office (AHSSCO) is located within DECE and is administratively placed to help ensure a unified early care and education system that supports low-income families. AHSSCO is a federally funded office that represents Head Start children and families in Alabama's policy and decision-making process. The Office facilitates coordination of services and development of partnerships with other state and local agencies in ten priority areas.



Appendix 2. Alabama Farm to ECE Focus Group Findings

Methods

The Alabama Farm to ECE Coalition hosted four focus groups across the state to better understand the knowledge, interest, barriers, and facilitators to Farm to ECE participation.

- Montgomery- July 30, 2018, ECE providers and farmers
- Birmingham- August 2, 2018, ECE providers only
- Tuscaloosa- August 23, 2018, ECE providers only
- Huntsville- September 19, 2018, ECE providers and farmers

Key Themes

- There is a lot of enthusiasm on the part of both ECE providers and farmers to work together, but ***they need help negotiating that relationship.***
- Farm to ECE was seen as a way to create cross-generational memories and/or habits. All groups had people with very fond memories of fresh produce and/or farms and wanted to pass that on. When done successfully, and kids try new things at the ECE program, they take it home with them, and start asking for it at home, potentially changing habits in the family.

“When children try a fruit or vegetable and they’re excited about it and they like it, they’ll go to their parents and tell them. I had a mom come in on Monday and say “will you please tell me what he’s saying?” He kept saying “kiwi, kiwi” and his mother didn’t know what a kiwi was...She said she’d seen them at the store but didn’t know what they were- it just looked fuzzy and didn’t look right.”

- Birmingham

- Farm to ECE is a way to ***tie the community together.*** Neighbors, parents, and other community members can get involved in gardening. Purchasing local foods is a way to support local jobs and farmers, which they viewed as important to community building.

“My neighbor, he has a garden, he’ll come over and bring the kids vegetables and watermelon.”

-ECE Provider, Tuscaloosa

- **Adults are gatekeepers:** if they are invested in preparing fresh, local produce, they're more successful in encouraging kids to try new things. If all the adults in the program aren't invested, programs see less success.
- Having a **farmer's market nearby** increased the likelihood of provider using local produce.

What are they excited about?

- Enthusiasm about helping kids build a personal connection to food and agriculture through farmer visits, field trips, and opportunities to learn more about how food is grown.
- Farm to ECE activities get kids excited about food, learning, growing, and trying new things.

"For me it was the excitement of the children. They would check the garden before their moms would bring them in the building. They were so proud."

- ECE Provider, Birmingham

- Emphasized Farm to ECE as a learning experience, more so than as a nutrition program.
- Fresh, local produce tastes better than produce you get in the store.

What are they concerned about?

ECE providers:

- Cost of local produce compared to prepared/canned/boxed meals

"Also you have to think about the budget. Sometimes the local produce food is more expensive than a can of green beans that you can get three for a dollar...Even though the produce might taste a little better, we have to stay within our budget because there's only so much money that we have per week."

- ECE Provider, Tuscaloosa

- **Time and skills** needed to prepare fresh produce, compared to frozen or canned
- Size of orders and **avoiding waste/spoilage**
- **Space** for food storage and garden

“If we can’t grow it in a flower pot, we can’t do it. We can’t dig up the playground area.”

- ECE Provider, Tuscaloosa

- Regulations/**understanding regulations** (outdoor play space, CACFP, food permits, health and safety certifications from farmers)
- **Creating menus ahead that are compliant but flexible** enough to change based on what is fresh
- **Access to local foods**- knowing who farmers are, what foods are local, and where to get them

Farmers/Food Distributors:

- Food processing **costs**
- **Size of orders**- need them to be large enough to offset costs of labor, delivery
- **Pricing** in a way that ECE providers can afford and farmer still makes money

What do they need to make Farm to ECE a reality?

- **System that coordinates** demand for small volume orders from ECE and farmers’ need for higher volume orders

“Probably the quantity – we’re probably only feeding 20 for lunch. Maybe more for snacks, but if you’re looking at a half-bushel of cucumbers, that’s a lot, but I think it was the smallest I could order. So, we got creative with them, and gave some of them to the staff, but then hearing people talking, I thought, oh! Maybe we can just split [between nearby ECE programs].”

- ECE Provider, Huntsville

- More accessible local foods- closer farmers markets, delivery
- Training on how to prepare local foods and where to find them
- Support in starting gardens
- Resources and easy-to-use tools:
 - List of local farmers and contact info, locations of farmers markets
 - Lesson plans involving local foods and agriculture
 - Sample seasonal menus
 - Information on what is in season when
 - Multiple recipes for how to prepare each type of produce so kids don’t get bored
 - Clear information about regulations

Appendix 3. Needs Assessment Findings

Methods

A digital survey was sent to over 500 early care and education providers to gather information about their equipment, training, staff, and resource needs related to implementing Farm to ECE activities. A total of 71 ECE providers completed the survey.

Results

More than half of respondents (51 percent) came from licensed child care centers, while roughly one in four respondents (23 percent) represented family child care homes (Figure 1). More than 80 percent of respondents participated in CACFP. Respondents sourced their food from an average of 2.4 different locations (grocery stores, wholesale retailers, farmer's markets, etc.), while one-third (24 respondents) said that they currently grow fresh fruits/vegetables for their program.

Figure 1.

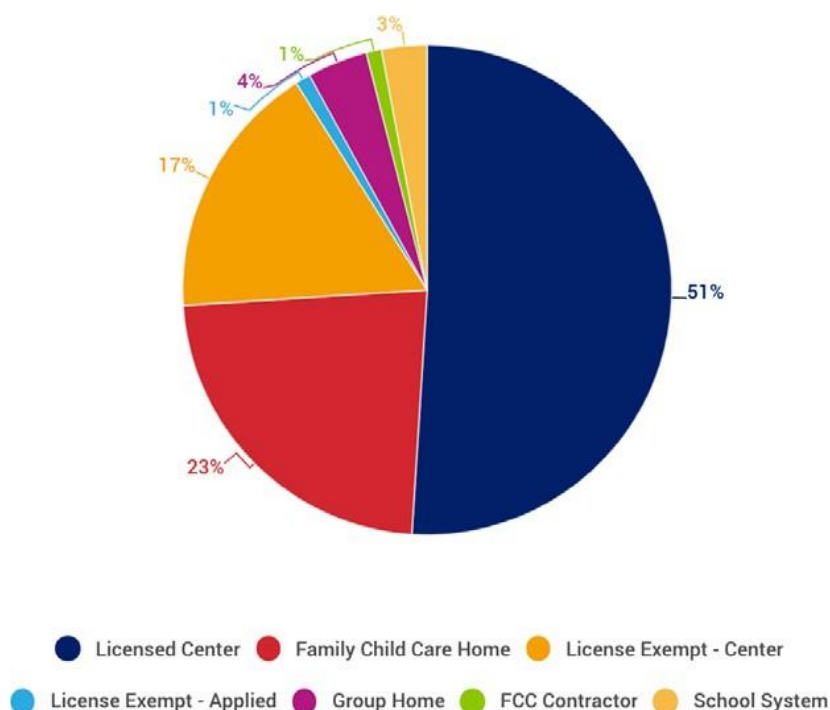


Table 1.

CACFP Reimbursed Programs	
Non-CACFP	14
CACFP	57
Grow Fresh Fruits/Vegetables	
No	47
Yes	24
Fruit/Vegetables Growing by CACFP Participation	
Non-CACFP	14
No	10
Yes	4
CACFP	57
No	37
Yes	20
Meal Budget by CACFP Participation	
Non-CACFP	14
No Budget	2
Budget	11
Unsure	1
CACFP	57
No Budget	32
Budget	15
Unsure	10

Providers were asked how comfortable they felt implementing different types of Farm to ECE activities, ranking their responses from 1 (not comfortable) to 5 (very comfortable). On average, they were most comfortable serving (4.5 out of 5), purchasing (4.4), and preparing (4.3) locally-grown fresh produce. They were slightly less comfortable planning (4.3), leading (4.1) and training staff (4.1) to facilitate nutrition education activities. Similarly, respondents were somewhat comfortable planting (4.1) and maintaining (4.1) a program garden.

Supports

Providers were also asked how likely they would be to implement certain Farm to ECE activities if they had particular types of support. More than four out of five respondents said they would be likely or very likely to implement Farm to ECE activities if: preparing fresh fruits and vegetables fit into their budget (87 percent); they had menu planning assistance (85 percent) or gardening assistance (85 percent); and their cooks had additional training opportunities (82 percent). (Table 2)

Table 2.

Program Likelihood to Prepare Fruits/Veggies if:

It fit in Budget	
Very Likely	53
Likely	9
Grand Total	62
Provided with Menu Planning Assistance	
Very Likely	44
Likely	16
Grand Total	60
Training Opportunities for Cook(s)	
Very Likely	49
Likely	9
Grand Total	58
Provided with Gardening Assistance	
Very Likely	48
Likely	12
Grand Total	60

Challenges

Staff availability to support nutrition education and gardening activities was a concern for 17 percent of center-based programs and 26 percent of home-based programs. Providers were also asked to consider how a number of factors affected their ability to implement Farm to ECE activities and rank them on a scale from 1 (not challenging) to 4 (very challenging). The responses looked different for providers participating in CACFP compared to those that did not participate in CACFP (Table 3).

Table 3. Challenges to Implementing Farm to ECE by CACFP Participation

Time		
Non-CACFP	14	
Not Challenging	10	71%
Challenging	4	29%
CACFP	57	
Not Challenging	27	47%
Challenging	30	53%
Budget		
Non-CACFP	14	
Not Challenging	5	36%
Challenging	9	64%
CACFP	57	
Not Challenging	26	46%
Challenging	31	54%
Kitchen Size		
Non-CACFP	14	
Not Challenging	11	79%
Challenging	3	21%
CACFP	57	
Not Challenging	37	65%
Challenging	20	35%
Kitchen Equipment		
Non-CACFP	14	
Not Challenging	11	79%
Challenging	3	21%
CACFP	57	
Not Challenging	38	67%
Challenging	19	33%

Table 3 continued.

Meal Planning Skills		
Non-CACFP	14	
Not Challenging	10	71%
Challenging	4	29%
CACFP	57	
Not Challenging	40	70%
Challenging	17	30%
Meal Prep Skills		
Non-CACFP	14	
Not Challenging	9	64%
Challenging	5	36%
CACFP	57	
Not Challenging	45	79%
Challenging	12	21%
Food Storage Space		
Non-CACFP	14	
Not Challenging	7	50%
Challenging	7	50%
CACFP	57	
Not Challenging	33	58%
Challenging	24	42%
Gardening Skills		
Non-CACFP	14	
Not Challenging	6	43%
Challenging	8	57%
CACFP	57	
Not Challenging	15	26%
Challenging	42	74%
Time for Harvesting		
Non-CACFP	14	
Not Challenging	5	36%
Challenging	9	64%
CACFP	57	
Not Challenging	15	26%
Challenging	42	74%