

Alabama Farm to ECE Focus Group Findings

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