



ALIGNING FARM TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION WITH QUALITY RATING AND IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS (QRIS)

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National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing, school gardens and food and agriculture education into school and early care and education settings.

What Are QRIS and Farm to ECE?

[Quality rating and improvement systems](#) (QRIS) are developed by states and localities to organize quality initiatives into one framework to define, assess, and communicate high quality early care and education (ECE) that supports positive outcomes for children. These systems are designed to be used by all types of ECEs including child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start programs, and school-based preschool programs. States and localities have varying levels of participation requirements for different types of programs. You can learn about your and other states' systems, standards, and participation through the BUILD Initiative's [Quality Compendium](#).

Farm to ECE promotes child health and well-being and increases access to healthy foods through three core elements: gardening, food and agriculture education, and serving local food. This collection of strategies is centered in experiential learning and can support family and community engagement.

Farm to ECE Alignment in QRIS

Farm to ECE strategies can help ECEs meet QRIS standards and be recognized in a variety of QRIS domains, such as professional development, family engagement and community partnerships, and learning environment. For states and localities that want to promote farm to ECE through their QRISs, there are several approaches to consider:

- Awarding QRIS points for engaging in components of farm to ECE such as gardening or serving local foods;
- Naming farm to ECE itself as an approach to fulfill standards and/or earn "bonus points" within QRIS documents;
- Including and prioritizing farm to ECE related QRIS standards such as nutrition and family engagement;
- Aligning QRIS standards with national best practices for infant feeding and nutrition in ECE settings such as the High Impact Obesity Prevention Standards and showing how farm to ECE can support implementation of these best practices;
- Awarding points for quality improvement initiatives that include farm to ECE, such as completing NFSN and ASPHN's farm to ECE self assessment or Go NAPSACC's farm to ECE self assessment;
- Awarding points for participating in USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and/or following CACFP meal patterns and showing how farm to ECE can support CACFP meal patterns and best practices; and
- If your state's quality improvement system transitions from a points-based model to an observational or strengths-based model, including language and resources for ECE programs and QRIS coaches describing how farm to ECE strategies support quality.

States are working within QRIS to promote farm to ECE by:

- Developing materials, or crosswalks, that highlight farm to ECE activities that fulfill QRIS standards;
- Providing technical assistance for farm to ECE quality improvement initiatives that have been included in QRIS language; and
- Training QRIS coaches on farm to ECE and how it can be used to reach standards.

Farm to ECE Alignment in Action

Direct Integration of Farm to ECE into QRIS Standards and Implementation Support

Pennsylvania has incorporated farm to ECE into its QRIS by awarding points for farm to ECE participation. A collection of partners working to advance farm to ECE in Pennsylvania took advantage of the [updates made to their state's QRIS](#) in 2020 to incentivize farm to ECE and provide ECE programs the opportunity to be highlighted and celebrated for their farm to ECE efforts. Programs who participate in quality initiatives such as farm to ECE can earn up to 2 bonus points towards the "Partnerships with Families and Communities" performance standard category. Programs can also earn bonus points for participating in Go NAPSACC, which contains a farm to ECE module.

In 2021 18, or 2.8%, of Pennsylvania ECE programs that participated in QRIS received bonus points in the "Partnerships with Families and Communities" category. The system does not separate which initiative the program participated in, but the majority of these 18 programs are engaged in Pennsylvania's farm to ECE initiatives. Pennsylvania's farm to ECE team is hoping that number will increase in the coming years as their state's farm to ECE work continues to grow. To support implementation of farm to ECE, Pennsylvania's farm to ECE team is training QRIS coaches on farm to ECE through a required online training. The training has spread awareness of farm to ECE so coaches can teach ECE programs about farm to ECE and how it can help achieve QRIS standards. Pennsylvania Department of Health also supports free access to Go NAPSACC and use of the farm to ECE module to any interested ECE program in the state through funding from federal grants.

Strengths-Based Requirements Increase Equity and Reduce Barriers to Farm to ECE Participation

The COVID-19 pandemic created unexpected opportunities to redesign Washington State's QRIS system to make it more equitable, accessible, and customizable to the specific ECE's setting and needs. In the previous system, some programs chose not to participate due to educational and credential requirements, and rating criteria that did not take into account the priorities and cultures of the families and children served. Previous attempts to connect farm to ECE with QRIS necessitated linking farm to ECE with the sub-criteria within categories. This ultimately made alignment confusing for providers. In the new system, programs have more flexibility to showcase their strengths with multiple pathways to reach higher levels. The new standards are broad and allow ECEs to address categories such as nutrition and wellness, learning environments, family engagement in a variety of ways including farm to ECE.

"Instead of trying to get programs interested through a small component of farm to ECE and plugging them into narrow subcategories, we can say 'here's how farm to ECE can improve quality of ECE programs, and now you can develop a comprehensive farm to ECE program and check all of these requirement boxes with it.'" Chris Mornick, Nutrition Coordinator, Washington State Health Department.

QRIS coaches are an important resource to educate programs on the utility of farm to ECE and its potential to fulfill standards. Washington's farm to ECE coalition plans to leverage the [new QRIS guidelines](#) to promote farm to ECE by collaboratively developing materials for coaches and providers that illustrate farm to ECE's alignment with QRIS and how it can improve the quality of ECE programs. They also plan on developing trainings for coaches to spread awareness of farm to ECE and its ability to help programs achieve QRIS standards.

Using the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) in QRIS to Encourage Farm to ECE

Studies suggest that CACFP participation improves the health of meals served.^{1,2} CACFP and farm to ECE have many opportunities for alignment, including:

- Using farm to ECE activities to meet CACFP meal patterns and best practices;
- Using CACFP funds to purchase local foods and reimburse garden grown foods and gardening supplies; and
- Supporting CACFP-participating programs in farm to ECE related grant opportunities, promotional events, and technical assistance.

Many states award QRIS points for participating in CACFP if eligible, and/or following CACFP meal patterns. States that have language in their QRIS about participating in or following CACFP meal patterns can use this opportunity to demonstrate linkages between farm to ECE and meeting CACFP meal patterns while earning QRIS points. For states that do not have existing language about participating in CACFP or following CACFP meal patterns, this could be something to consider exploring during an upcoming QRIS revision. Examples of how states have integrated CACFP into QRIS include:

- Idaho: If an ECE program is eligible for the CACFP program, participation in CACFP earns ECEs points towards fulfilling standards.
- New York: Programs can earn points, even if they are not eligible for the CACFP program by promoting “the service or consumption of meals and snacks that meet CACFP meal pattern standards for the ages served.”
- South Carolina: Regardless of participation, programs can earn points if their nutrition policy includes “plans to ensure that children receive healthy and well-balanced meals that meet nutritional requirements by following the USDA CACFP meal pattern requirements for all meals/snacks.”

Examples of Farm to ECE Language in QRIS

A handful of states have specifically included farm to ECE language in their QRIS standards. Below are several examples of states’ QRIS standards that align with farm to ECE.

Pennsylvania allows ECE programs engaging in Farm to ECE to earn up to 2 Bonus Points in the “Partnerships with Families and Communities” Performance Standard category.

- “Partnerships with Families and Communities: Program participates in an organized effort to promote nutritional health for children. (example: Farm to ECE, obesity prevention activities, PA NAPSACC, food security initiatives)”*

*[Keystone STARS 2020 Performance Standards](#)

Colorado supports farm to ECE in their QRIS by including gardening and taste testing in their child health nutrition criteria for both centers and family homes. The language used offers guidance and detail around common farm to ECE practices.

- For centers: “The program promotes positive nutritional practices such as: Program is observed to have a garden with fruits and vegetables or has access to a garden for those that participate in community gardening activities. Program has fresh fruits/vegetables for children to taste.”*
- For family child care homes: “The program promotes positive nutritional practices for children. Program is observed to have a garden with fruits and vegetables or access to a community garden. The family child care provider serves fresh fruits/vegetables to taste.”*

*[Colorado Shines QRIS Point Structure Guide](#)

Nebraska, who has developed their own [technical assistance program](#) based on GO NAPSACC best practices, currently awards QRIS points to those who have completed the Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding Policy and Practices self assessments. States using GO NAPSACC can implement a similar strategy with the farm to ECE module. States not using GO NAPSACC can use their own training system and/or another self assessment tool such as National Farm to School Network (NFSN) and Association of State Public Health Nutritionist’s (ASPHN) [Farm to ECE Self Assessment](#).

- “Go NAP SACC Post Self-Assessment Results: Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding Policy and Practices
 - 30-49.9% of Total Best Practices 1 point
 - 50-69.9% of Total Best Practices 2 points
 - 70-100% of Total Best Practices 3 points”*

*[Step Up to Quality Program Guide](#)

Resources

- [Quality Compendium](#) Developed by the BUILD initiative, find data on quality initiative trends, state profiles, and other information to learn about your and other states' systems, standards, and participation.
- [Keystone STARS](#) Pennsylvania's QRIS webpage with their [2020 Performance Standards](#), [2020 Program Manual](#), and [farm to ECE bonus points resource](#).
- [Colorado Shines](#) QRIS webpage with their [2021 Program Guide](#) and [2021 Points Guide](#).
- [Early Achievers](#) Washington State's Department of Children, Youth and Families QRIS webpage and [QRIS updates](#) webpage.
- [Wisconsin Farm to Early Care and Education: Considerations for Programs in YoungStar](#) This crosswalk offers specific ways to integrate farm to ECE into ECE programs that can target relevant sections of the YoungStar Evaluation Criteria.
- [North Carolina Reach for the Stars](#) North Carolina Farm to Preschool Network's crosswalk of farm to ECE with the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Revised Edition (ITERS-R)
- [NFSN and ASPHN Farm to ECE Self Assessment](#) This self assessment is designed to help ECE providers and those who work with ECE providers assess their current farm to ECE practices and develop goals and action plans to grow farm to ECE at their site. This assessment is available in both English and Spanish.
- [GO NAPSACC farm to ECE self assessment](#) Find GO NAPSACC's publicly accessible self assessments for centers and family child care homes

References

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2. Chriqui JF, Leider J, Schermbeck RM, Sanghera A, Pugach O. Changes in Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Practices at Participating Childcare and Education Centers in the United States Following Updated National Standards, 2017–2019. *Nutrients*. 2020; 12(9):2818. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu12092818>

NFSN appreciates the technical assistance and financial support provided to us by ASPHN, as a part of the ASPHN Farm to ECE Implementation Grant (FIG). The FIG is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of cooperative agreement number NU38OT000279 (total of \$1,435,000). Fifty percent of this resource is funded by the FIG and therefore the Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity/National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion/CDC/HHS. The contents of this resource are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by DNPAO/NCCDPPH/CDC/HHS, or the U.S. government.

Additional support for NFSN's farm to early care and education work is generously provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.