

Adapting Vermont FEED's Farm to School Institute Model for the Early Childhood Audience

Farm to Early Childhood Institute Core Components Considerations for Early Childhood Institute Adaptation
Prepared by Tomas Delgado, Program Manager at the National Farm to School Network

Farm to Early Childhood Institutes

Hosting an Institute for Farm to School and Early Childhood Education (ECE) practitioners effectively supports the sustainability and far-reaching impact of Farm to School/ECE resources for schools, food service, and educators. Through an approach that engages participants in action planning, year-long coaching, and connection to a community of peer learners, Institutes that incorporate and serve Farm to ECE aim to build the knowledge, skills, and culture of providers who are advancing the Farm to ECE movement. As the Farm to ECE movement motivates early childhood education providers to engage in Farm to ECE activities, it is crucial to strengthen this effort through investments in their professional development. This complements state-based initiatives, which are backed by both state agencies and nonprofit organizations. This guide was developed to support states in adapting Vermont FEED's successful Farm to School Institute model to include the Farm to ECE community or determine the need for a Farm to ECE specific Institute.

Farm to Early Childhood Institute Core Components

When determining the format for adapting your Institute, be sure to take into account the foundational elements to successful Institutes, as identified by Vermont FEED:

Whole-School Teams

Strong teams bring together people in a variety of roles from across the school/site community to create lasting change.

Coaching

Teams are paired with an experienced coach from their state's farm to school or ECE network that supports them in developing and implementing their action plans.

Peer Networking:

Participants share innovations and challenges, join in dialogue, and share with others throughout the Institute experience.

Farm to School/ECE Action Planning:

During the Institute, each team develops a values-based, schoolwide farm to school/ECE action plan that integrates curriculum, local procurement, and family and community connections.

Skill Building

Teams engage in hands-on learning designed around school/site specific roles to build capacity and confidence to implement their action plans.

As with all Farm to School/ECE programming efforts, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to implementing a successful institute. Adapting a Farm to ECE Institute will naturally involve assessing the unique needs of your state, ECE sites, and aligning them with the suggested strategies found in this guide.





Considerations for Farm to Early Childhood Institute Adaptation

Building Your Institute Facilitator Team

- Ensure your facilitator team is dynamic and diverse, comprising individuals with diverse backgrounds and roles, from Farm to ECE food procurement experts to curriculum design specialists. Each member of the facilitator team will contribute to the design and implementation of a successful Farm to ECE Institute.

Needs Assessment

- Survey ECE providers in your state to assess their current knowledge and level of engagement with Farm to ECE. This will help you tailor the structure of your Institute to meet the needs of your state's ECE audience. You are welcome to adapt this [Statewide Farm to ECE Survey](#) for your needs, produced by the [Washington State Department of Health](#).

Logistics Consideration

- **Funding**
 - Consider the limited funding and resources available to ECE providers. Many providers may have to hire substitute teachers, give up their weekends, or temporarily close their programs to attend the immersion portion of the Institute. Consider what is most inclusive and accessible for your broader ECE audience.
- **Seasonality**
 - Take note of the yearly schedules of ECE and how they differ from K-12 settings. Some ECEs have year-long programming; others model their years after the K-12 calendar. These schedule dynamics will impact your institute's engagement level.
 - Farm to School Institutes are traditionally a year long to achieve all core components successfully. Consider the timing of the in-person immersion as it's relevant to your ECE site schedules.
- **State Geography**
 - Your state's geographical characteristics (population, size, and transportation) will inform your institute's design format and delivery.

Procurement and Food Access Needs:

- Procuring local food for ECEs can vary between purchasing food directly from agricultural producers to sourcing food from local farmers' markets or grocers. Some ECEs also participate in federal nutrition programs like CACFP, SNAP-ED, and WIC; in those cases, participating sites need to align with federal procurement guidelines. Stay mindful of the procurement scale and frequency for ECE when designing your Institute's curriculum.
- Consider inviting agricultural producers as team members, compensated panelists, speakers, or workshop facilitators. Organizing an ECE provider and agricultural producer connector event can be a beneficial way of building partnerships.

Equity, Accessibility, and Other Consideration

- **Cohort Diversity**
 - It is important to ensure that the Institute's cohort is diverse along the spectrum of race, gender, experience level, and state geography. A successful cohort convenes ECE providers, Farm to ECE advocates, family members of ECE-age youth, and other community partners.
- **Language Access**
 - Explore bilingual support services. Base these accommodations on the needs assessment results. If an attendee has a translator, consider allowing the translator to attend free of cost.
- **Childcare**
 - Consider allowing attendees to bring children. After conducting your needs assessment, family-friendly accommodations like childcare, nursing sites, or other family activities can be considered.



Farm to Early Childhood Institute Strategies

The following are suggestions for three routes that the Institute model can serve your state's ECE community.

Institute Strategy Option 1: Farm to ECE Track Within Existing Farm to School Institute

- **Description**
 - Integrate Farm to ECE programs into an existing Farm to School Institute to support attendees with ECE content and resources.
- **Considerations**
 - Farm to School Institute facilitators must be familiar with the unique dynamics and needs of ECEs
 - This option may suit states that have yet to convene statewide ECE partnerships.
 - This option facilitates cross-pollination and idea generation between K-12 and ECE practitioners, enhancing the alignment of ECE with K-12 culture and building a bridge for children and families, as reported by Vermont FEED.

Institute Strategy Option 2: Stand Alone Farm to Early Childcare Institute

- **Description**
 - The Institute is organized separately from your state's Farm to School Institute. Although separate, this dynamic can be implemented in partnership with your state's existing Farm to School Institute facilitators.
- **Considerations**
 - Your state must ensure sufficient interest from Farm to ECE providers to warrant a separate institute. Decide the minimum number of attendees needed to implement the Institute.
 - Ensure there is adequate funding to implement a stand-alone institute
 - Consider the partnership impacts of an independent Institute within a state with an existing Farm to School Institute. Would a separate Institute potentially create confusion among K-12 and ECE practitioners?
 - ECE seasonality does not always align with K-12, making a separate ECE Institute ideal for your state.

Institute Strategy Option 3: ECE attendees join 1-2 days of the Institute

- **Description**
 - ECE Attendees participate in the existing Farm to School Institute through a hybrid approach, attending the Institute part-time and in-person on select days that work for them, allowing for networking engagement without the total time commitment of the Institute.
- **Considerations**
 - This hybrid option offers the benefits of peer connections provided by attending the institute without the associated time commitment, potentially reducing the time cost for ECE practitioners to participate.
 - ECE attendees can benefit from connecting with K-12 practitioners and vice versa, fostering cross-pollination and networking outcomes.
 - Consider the placement of ECE content to accommodate the preferences of ECE attendees. Schedule it for Friday and Saturday to ensure the entire weekend is available to them.

This report was funded in partnership with the US Department of Agriculture and [Shelburne Farms Institute for Sustainable Schools](#). Special thanks are extended to Betsy Rosenbluth, Cynthia Greene, the Washington State Department of Public Health, and the Vermont Agency of Education, as well as other experts and supporters.

