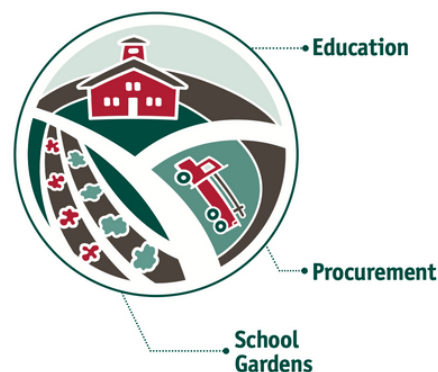


Racial Equity in Farm to School and Early Care Education

Positioning Farm to School as a Way Forward

WHAT IS FARM TO SCHOOL AND EARLY CARE EDUCATION?

Farm to school enriches the connections communities have with locally grown foods by working to change food purchasing and education practices at schools and early care education (ECE) settings. The National Farm to School Network (NFSN) describes the benefits of farm to school as the “triple win” for children and youth, farmers, and broader communities.



Farm to school and ECE provides opportunities to address racial and social disparities in the food system through **collaboration** and **building power** across players in the food system—starting with local farmers all the way to those who distribute our food.

SETTING THE STAGE: FOOD INSECURITY AND HEALTH DISPARITIES.

While there is tremendous momentum around food justice movements and farm to school programs, inequities continue to persist. During the COVID-19 pandemic, free school meal sites were not easily [accessible nor conveniently located in Black communities](#), further worsening food insecurity conditions at a time of a public health crisis. Students who would benefit from participating in school food programs were not reached due to administrative barriers. Black and Hispanic families have been found to experience “crisis-level rates of poverty and food insecurity when compared with White counterparts.” Compared to 1 in 9 Americans, [about 1 in 4 Native Americans](#) were reported to experience food insecurity.



44.2 million people lived in food insecure households in 2022.



Prevalence of **chronic health conditions** such as diabetes and childhood obesity are higher in BIPOC communities—particularly in non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic youth.

WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?

The **Healthy People 2030** defines food insecurity as “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”

Farm to School and ECE as Strategy for Change

Racial Disparities in Farm to School Programs		
Race/Ethnicity	% of Students Participating in Farm to School	Public School Population
Asian	1.79%	2.7 million
Black/African American	7.5%	7.4 million
Hispanic	13.6%	14.1 million
Native American	2.04%	0.5 million
Pacific Islander	0.129%	182,000

An [analysis of the 2013 and 2015 USDA Farm to School Census Data](#) illustrated that the student demographic of districts participating in farm to school programs were **71% White** on average.

Students of color have disproportionately less opportunities to participate in farm to school programs. However, as more federal and local initiatives continue to come out with resources and unique funding opportunities, these disparities continue to be addressed.

SO, WHY IS RACIAL EQUITY IMPORTANT IN FARM TO SCHOOL AND ECE? NFSN envisions all students, farmers, and communities having the opportunity to participate in farm to school and ECE programs. Research shows that a comprehensive approach that implements the three pillars of farm to school is effective—local procurement, school gardens, and agricultural education. Together, they have the power to create opportunities for children and their families to make sustainable healthy eating choices and increase access to local foods. Because implementation of farm to school and ECE programs may vary by community, particularly in terms of program intensity, sustainability, and [number of activities](#), it is crucial to consider historical and social inequities in the food system when adopting. **Centering equity in farm to school and ECE programs may pave way for justice and strengthen food justice movements.** Equity in farm to school programs can work to dismantle disparities that prevent *racially minoritized* communities from achieving wealth, nourishment, education, and other opportunities necessary to thrive.

Racial equity in farm to school and ECE is also important because the benefits of farm to school programs are not equitably felt. For example, pairing school gardens with food education is a farm to school programming strategy that is implemented widely across U.S. campuses. A study that [measured the prevalence of gardens](#) across elementary schools in the United States showed that although the number of school gardens (as part of farm to school programs) have increased over time, the school gardens were found to be less prevalent in schools serving lower-income students. Sustaining farm to school participation also leans on policy that governs funding and capacity for school districts to implement the program, which require the need to **embed Systems Change work with an equity lens.**

Addressing racial and social disparities through farm to school

WHAT IS RACIAL EQUITY? **Race Forward** defines this as the “process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone. It is the intentional and continual practice of changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color.”

COMMUNITIES OF COLOR STAND TO BENEFIT MOST FROM FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS.

Decisions on whether to participate in farm to school may rely on a number of factors—including existing partnerships with local farms in the area, funding, stakeholder buy-in, and community involvement. The funding for meal programs in school and ECE settings is reliant on local taxes or a family's ability to pay for childcare costs, which can lead to a cycle of underfunded meal and education programs. **Without explicit attention on racial and economic equity, the additional capacity required for farm to school can lead to these programs competing with urgent priorities.** Yet, communities of color stand to benefit the most from farm to school programming.



INCREASING FINANCIAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR FARMERS OF COLOR. Colonialism and dispossession of land is linked to racial and ethnic disparities that exist within our built environment—the external and physical conditions that provide spaces for people to live, work, and play. Structural racism, including policies such as [redlining](#) and [historical dispossession](#) of agricultural lands, contribute to the ongoing cycle of poverty for historically marginalized groups. A [sharp decline](#) of Black farmers occurred in the U.S. between 1900 to 2017 while a 96% increase was seen among White farmers. Moreover, 92% of U.S. producers and farmers are White with 74% of whom live on farm-operated property.

Farm to school programming can address this disparity by actively providing markets for farmers of color and inspiring the next generation of diverse agricultural producers.

ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY THROUGH FARM TO SCHOOL. Food serves a connector and has the power to promote culture, safety, and belonging. Embedding a racial equity lens in farm to school and ECE means acknowledging the complex intersectionality of race, class, gender, and other social constructs with the way we grow, distribute, and nourish our bodies. Centering racial equity in farm to school and ECE honors those that grow and harvest foods and elevates notions of economic and environmental justice frameworks.