

The State of Farm to Early Childcare Education in Mississippi

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Author: LeBroderick Woods
Programs Coordinator: Farm to Early Childcare Education Specialist
Mississippi Farm to School Network



Introduction:

The Mississippi Farm to School Network (MSF2SN) is a non-profit organization devoted to connecting farmers with schools in order to bring Mississippi products to school cafeterias. We seek to strengthen the local agricultural economy and educate Mississippians on the importance of eating locally-grown, nutritionally-dense foods. By gathering a diverse community of farm to school advocates, the network strives to reach all students and their families. Due to the growth in success with implementing farm to school in K-12 settings since establishing the organization in 2015, there was room for expansion. There has also been an increased interest in farm to early childcare in Mississippi. The MSF2SN Advisory Board and Directors therefore made the decision in 2018 to move forward with plans to include early childcare centers in our scope. To transition to incorporating early childcare centers (ECEs) into our work, we had to expand our knowledge of a whole new set of regulations and regulatory bodies. In an effort to effectively add to Early Childcare sector to our organizations network, Programs Coordinator LeBroderick Woods was hired as the Programs Coordinator: ECE specialist in the Spring of 2019. This report will serve not only as a informative piece of literature designed to bring awareness to these new efforts by our network but also as an invitation to join the network. Through increased awareness and education of farm to ECE we hope to be able to strengthen the network's reach, support centers to procure locally, engage in family involvement, and introduce the youth to healthy fresh food so they can cultivate healthier lifestyles.

History of Farm to School and ECE:

"Farm to School" is defined as a group of activities and strategies that include the use of locally and regionally grown foods in meals, snacks and taste tests, as well as gardening opportunities and nutrition and agriculture education. These activities are designed to enhance the quality of educational experience while supporting local and regional food producers and the local economy. The National Farm to School Network sprouted in 1996-1997 from the desire to support community-based food systems, strengthen family farms, and improve student health by reducing childhood obesity. In 2004 the National Farm to School Program was officially authorized, and included 400 programs in 22 states.

In December of 2012 Mississippi passed House Bill No. 718. This bill was an act to create an interagency farm to school council to facilitate the procurement and use of locally grown and locally raised agricultural products in school meals in order to improve the quality of food served in schools and to support the state economy by generating new income for Mississippi

Farmers; to describe the membership of the council; to set forth the duties and purposes of the council; and for related purposes ([Interagency Council, M. F. to S. 2014, December](#)). This council would go on to construct what we know as Mississippi Farm to School program today. The Farm to Early Childcare (ECE) is was then built out of the Mississippi Farm to School Movement.

Farm to ECE, formerly known as “Farm to Preschool,” describes food-based activities and strategies that support healthy development and learning goals in all types of early care and education (ECE) settings (e.g., preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start and programs in K-12 school districts).

Farm to school activities are a natural fit for the 0-5 age group and offer extensive benefits in these young years. Students are exposed to healthy, local foods through meals and snacks, taste tests, lessons, cooking activities, gardening, field trips, and farmer visits.

Farm to ECE activities not only integrate seamlessly with the learning style of young children, but are also an evidenced-based approach to meeting educational standards and improving the quality of early care and education environments. In addition to promoting health, wellness and high quality learning, farm to ECE expands healthy food access for our most vulnerable children, encourages family engagement, provides additional market opportunities for farmers and supports thriving communities.

The overall purpose of Farm to ECE is to:

- Promote and enhance family and parent engagement
 - Increase access to locally-grown healthy foods
- Create a culture and model of health and wellness in ECE settings
 - Enhance the quality of the ECE experience
 - Provide gardening opportunities

Croom, E., & Organics, G. (2016, August)

Overview of Early Childcare in Mississippi:

In Mississippi, Early Childcare Centers come in all shapes and sizes. Mississippi has 1,502 licensed programs of those 1,466 of them are center based and 36 of are home based. According to the [2015 USDA Farm to School Census](#) 36 percent of preschools/early childcare centers are engaging in farm to school activities. There are a number of technical assistance

providers and state agencies working to get early childcare centers involved in farm to ECE. The Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi has been instrumental in informing early childcare centers of farm to ECE practices. The Partnership coupled with the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to introduce and recruit the Go Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care program (GoNAPSACC) to ECE centers in Mississippi. GoNAPSACC is a system that offers free resources for early childcare providers to better include physical activity, health and nutrition in their programs. There are many early childcare centers over the state that have interest in farm to early childcare, it is just a matter of reaching those schools and getting them connected to the network.



Current Farm to ECE Technical Assistance Providers and Programs for Mississippi:

Components of Farm to ECE Implementation at State Level	Potential Partner Organizations in Mississippi
Local Food Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mississippi Farm to School Network http://www.mississippifarmtoschool.org/ • Common Market: Birmingham facility https://www.thecommonmarket.org/ • Mississippi Association of Cooperatives http://www.mississippiassociation.coop/
Gardens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mississippi State University Extension Service https://extension.msstate.edu
Classroom Education/Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The OrganWise Guys https://organwiseguys.com/ • Go NAPSACC self-assessment tool https://gonapsacc.org/
Family Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative (MLICCI) http://www.mschildcare.org/ • Mississippi Farm to School Network http://www.mississippifarmtoschool.org/ • Excel by Five, Inc. http://excelby5.com/

Types of Early Childcare Centers in Mississippi:

ECE Centers	#of ECE Centers	Food Regulations, Educational Requirements & Safety Requirements
Licensed Centers	1,502	Mississippi State Department of Health Office of Child Care Licensure
Center Based	1,466	Mississippi State Department of Health Office of Child Care Licensure
Home Based	36	Mississippi State Department of Health Office of Child Care Licensure

Examples of Farm to ECE Nationally:

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 the 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 the plan. 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. *ECE Coalition, A. F. to, & America, C. C. A. of. (2019)* Further information can be found at [Alabama Partnership for Children: Alabama Farm to ECE Strategic Plan](#).

Georgia:

Farm to ECE offers increased access to local food sourcing, school gardens, and food and agriculture education to enhance the quality of the educational experience in ECE settings. The 2016 USDA Farm to School Census found that 63% of Georgia school districts participating in farm to school are also reaching pre-K students, and Georgia ranks 2nd in the nation of school districts reaching pre-K. In 2014, Georgia hosted the first "Farm to Preschool Summit" in the nation with over 200 participants. *Croom, E., & Organics, G. (2016, August)* Further information can be found at [Georgia Organics: Georgia Farm to ECE Strategic Plan](#).

Pennsylvania:

Pennsylvania has a statewide farm to ECE recognition program, The Food Trust's Farm to ECE Recognition and Awards. The Food Trust seeks to recognize five early care and education providers (child care centers, licensed family child care, private preschools, Head Start and/or Early Head Start programs, Pre-K Counts, preschool or childcare centers through K-12 school districts, and others) in Pennsylvania that are engaged in farm to ECE. This refers to early care center programs with established activities representative of Pennsylvania's three pillars of

farm to ECE: food and agriculture education, hands-on gardening opportunities and use of local food for meals, snacks or taste tests. As part of this recognition, centers will be awarded \$1,000 from the Pennsylvania Food Trust. Trust, T. F. (2018).

Further information can be found at [The Food Trust: Farm to ECE in Brief](#).



Next Steps for Farm to ECE in Mississippi:

There are a number of champion ECE centers in the state already, such as Global Connection Learning Center in Jackson and Moore Community House on the Mississippi Coast, but there is much room for growth. MSF2SN's goal is to introduce it more ECE centers to the resources of the network. Our next steps to increase the practice of farm to ECE in Mississippi are: increasing awareness, more networking opportunities among centers, and more collaboration among technical assistance providers to better aid centers. Continuous networking between a diverse

group of stakeholders to explore new findings is great way to see that this goal is completed. The Office of Preventative Health in the Mississippi State Department of Health hosts partnership meetings in an effort to identify additional needs, challenges and opportunities to expand farm to ECE practices and programs. These meetings design strategies to provide professional development for teachers and administrators at ECE centers and find ways in order to engage and support the family. The MSF2SN hosts an annual Mississippi Farm to School Institute for k-12 school districts in the state. Starting in summer 2020, we will invite ECE centers to apply as participants and begin exploring adding a second Institute specifically designed for ECE centers. Our Programs Coordinator: Farm to ECE Specialist has been tasked with providing one-on-one technical assistance and support to the early childcare centers that are interested in procuring locally grown food. Starting in February 2020, our annual Mississippi Farm to Cafeteria Conference will expand to include the early childcare sector by dedicating an entire track to farm to ECE. Through the expansion of networking and partnering with entities such as Mississippi Department of Health: Office of Preventative Health, Partnership for a healthy Mississippi, Mississippi State Extension, and a host of others we hope to better aid centers. Our hope is also to document farm to ECE participation around the state so that efforts can be both celebrated and highlighted. This highlighting and celebrating can be used as a vehicle to promote and inform non participating centers around the state. We will also continue to be a source for centers and to create resources for ECE sites looking to practice farm to ECE on our website. Our efforts to reach out to the ECE community are constantly growing. Now that we have added a Programs Coordinator: Farm to ECE Specialist to our team, we can continue to devote time and energy to reaching out and getting new ECE centers involved. We hope to work with state partners to develop a strategic plan by next year 2021.

For more information, visit us at MississippiFarmtoSchool.org

Contact Programs Coordinator LeBroderick Woods at lwoodsmsf2sn@gmail.com



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