



MINNESOTA
Farm to Early Care

FARM TO EARLY CARE IN MINNESOTA

Connecting our
Littlest Eaters with
Fresh Local Foods

**2023 SURVEY OF MINNESOTA
EARLY CARE PROVIDERS**



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Minnesota early care providers for their support of our evaluation efforts, including responding to our statewide survey and participating in focus group conversations to share deeper insights. Your perspective is essential to understanding the landscape of Farm to Early Care in our state and planning for the best ways to support you.

Thank you to our partners from the MN Farm to Early Care Network and Farm to School Leadership Team for their ongoing collaboration and partnership. We are grateful and proud to be part of this community of dedicated partners working to support and grow Farm to Early Care and Farm to School throughout Minnesota. This evaluation work was conducted through funding from the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Office of Statewide Health Improvement Initiatives (OSHI) under its CDC State Physical Activity and Nutrition Program (SPAN) grant.

For more information about Farm to Early Care in Minnesota, including resources for early care providers, please see MN's Farm to Early Care website (maintained by IATP): <https://farmtoearlycaremn.org>

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IATP works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems and envisions agriculture, trade and food systems that are good for people, farmers and food system workers, ecosystems and social justice globally. With our partners, we advocate for policy in the public interest at the state, federal and international level. The Community Food System Program's long-term goal is to build vibrant community-based food systems that give all people access to sufficient, safe, culturally appropriate and nutritious food while also developing local food supply chains that will allow small- to mid-scale farmers to access a variety of new markets. We envision decentralized, local food systems that are accountable to, and largely controlled by, the community members who depend on them, where food is produced and distributed in a manner that builds equity, justice, and resiliency in policy and practice.



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2023 SURVEY OF MINNESOTA EARLY CARE PROVIDERS

BACKGROUND:

Farm to Early Care initiatives connect young children with nutritious, locally grown foods and support farmers in their communities through:

- Gardening, including indoor, outdoor and container gardening.
- Food and farming education, including cooking and agriculture education, field trips to farms or farmers markets, imaginary play, food and farm-related books, and more.
- Serving local food in meals, snacks or taste tests.

The Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network has existed in some form since 2014. Some of the key goals of the group have included coordination of statewide partners and promotion of Farm to Early Care resources and support. The Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network was selected to participate in the 2019 Association of State Public Health Nutritionists (ASPHN) Farm to Early Care “Mini Collin” cohort and then to be part of ASPHN’s Farm to Early Care and Education Implementation Grant (FIG) from 2020-2023, with the goal of advancing Farm to Early Care in Minnesota. This funding allowed the Network to administer a small number of mini grants and create and promote a website and newsletter, among other efforts. Complementary to these efforts, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) identified a priority of data collection to better understand the level of

Farm to Early Care activities, barriers and opportunities in Minnesota, leading to MDH’s support of the development, administration and analysis of the first statewide Farm to Early Care survey.

ABOUT THIS SURVEY

In the summer of 2023, the Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network conducted the first-ever statewide survey of early care providers to better understand Farm to Early Care activities in Minnesota, as well as the benefits and challenges related to this work, to help inform future efforts.

This survey was created in collaboration with state agency staff and administered by the University of Minnesota Extension and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP). The survey was promoted through the Farm to Early Care listserv and Facebook group, through state departments, including the Minnesota Department of Education’s (MDE) newsletters, sponsoring organizations and other partners. The survey data was collected in the summer of 2023. Further conversations were conducted in August 2023 with engaged early care providers to collect additional detail and feedback regarding survey results and provider experiences.

This report provides a summary of findings, as well as key takeaways and opportunities for further support and expansion of Farm to Early Care efforts in Minnesota. Throughout the report,



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figures are based on the number of respondents to each question.

We encouraged early care providers from all settings to respond to our survey and received responses from 301 early cares, including licensed and unlicensed home-based early care providers, childcare centers, preschools and Head Starts. Eighty three percent of respondents identified as home-based early care providers, 13% as centers, 2.2% as Head Starts and 1.8% as unlicensed early care providers. Respondents care for nearly 7,500 children, ranging in age from newborn to school-age children.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- Respondents implemented activities reflecting all three components of Farm to Early Care, with the most popular activities being gardening, serving locally grown food, and educating children about food and farming.
- The biggest benefits early care providers see from implementing the Farm to Early Care model are teaching children about where food comes from and how it is grown, giving hands-on learning opportunities and encouraging children to try a variety of foods.
- The largest barriers to providers implementing Farm to Early Care are lack of funding, lack of time and lack of gardening space/materials.
- The majority (87%) of respondents have served local foods from a variety of sources, including purchased from farmers markets, grocery stores and direct from farmers or grown in their own gardens. Nearly half (43%) of respondents reported serving local items once or twice per week during Minnesota's growing season, with vegetables and fruits as the most popular local items. Respondents' definitions of "local" varied: 34% looked within a certain distance of their own community, 29% looked for local products grown or raised in their immediate community and 33% looked for items grown in Minnesota.
- The most popular methods of engaging kids were reading books about food and farming, involving children in cooking and food preparation, and planting activities.
- 70% of respondents have gardened in the past two years. Most sites reported growing seasonal items outdoors, but some sites also reported indoor growing and growing fruit trees and other perennials.
- Garden produce was served primarily in meals and snacks, but many sites also used garden produce in taste tests and/or sent it home with children to share with families.
- The top type of support early care providers requested was more funding and opportunities for grants. Other support desired included educational activities, food preparation resources/recipes and gardening information.

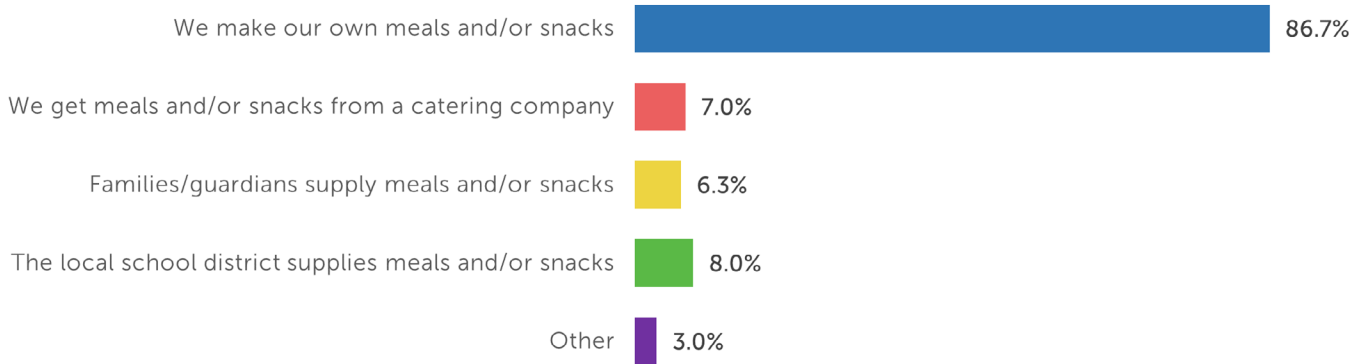


SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

MEAL AND SNACK SERVICE

Most respondents prepare their own meals and snacks for children in their care.

- **What type of meal and snack service do you use?**
(Respondents could check all that apply.)



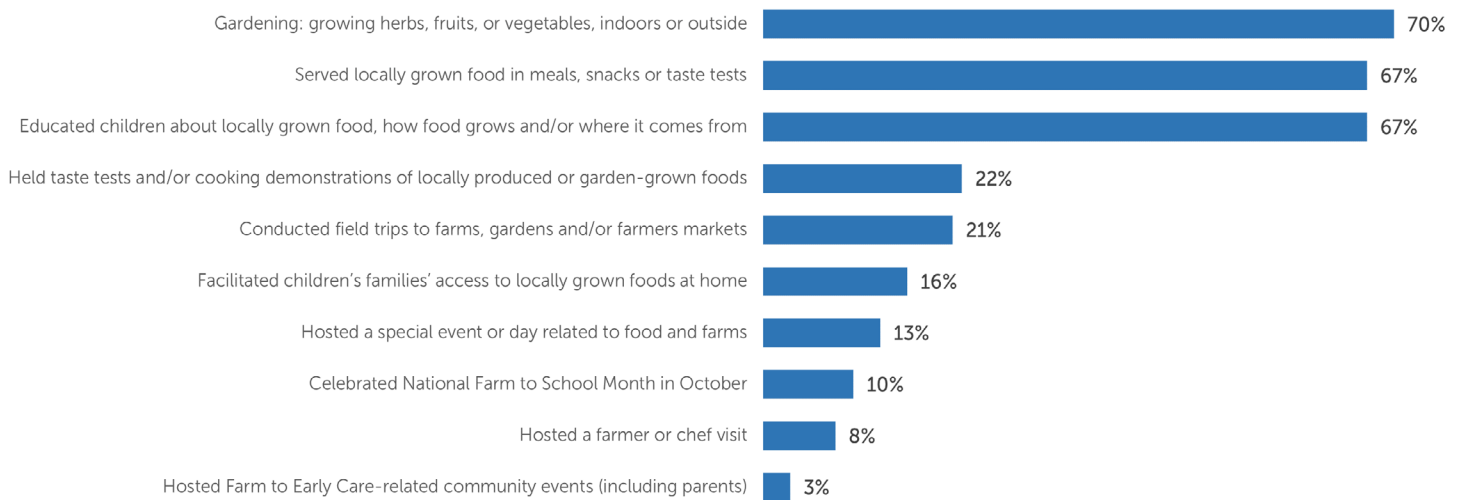
- Eighty one percent of respondents participate in the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which provides a set amount of reimbursement for each meal served. CACFP reimbursable meals must follow [federal meal pattern guidelines](#) on required meal components, portion sizes and limits on sugar, salt, fat, etc. Serving local products is an [official best practice](#) for CACFP meals, though not a requirement. Eighty seven percent of respondents have served a local product before.

EXPERIENCE WITH FARM TO EARLY CARE

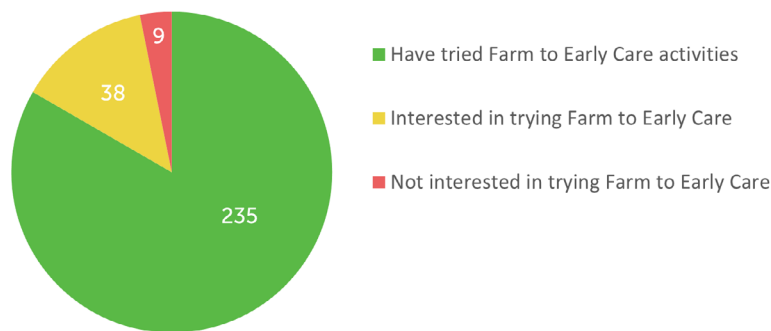
We found that respondents were implementing all three components of Farm to Early Care, with the most popular activities reported being gardening, serving locally grown food, and educating children about food and farming.



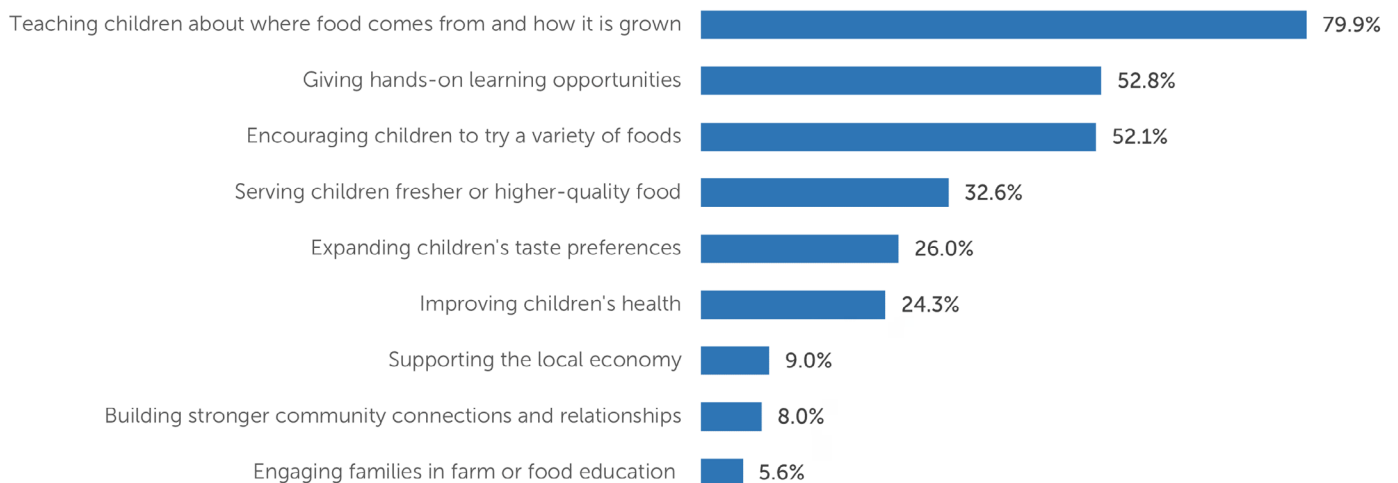
■ **Which of these activities has your program done in the past two years?**
(Respondents could select all that apply.)



■ Sixteen percent of all respondents had not yet tried any Farm to Early Care activities. Of those, 81% (38 respondents, 13% of the total) are interested in starting Farm to Early Care in the future, while 19% (9 respondents, 3% of the total) are not interested in starting Farm to Early Care in the future.



■ **What do you see as the most important benefits of doing Farm to Early Care activities?**
(Respondents could select up to three.)

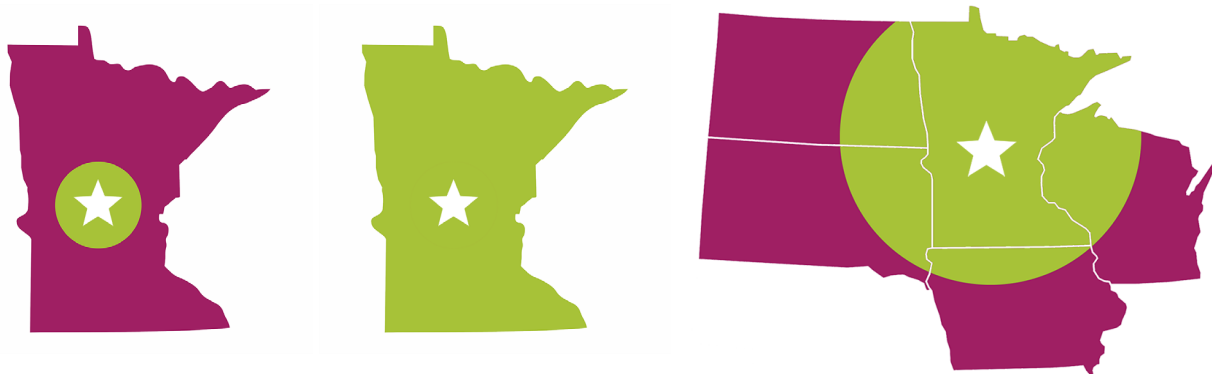


■ **What are the top barriers your program has faced in doing Farm to Early Care activities?**
(Respondents could select up to three.)



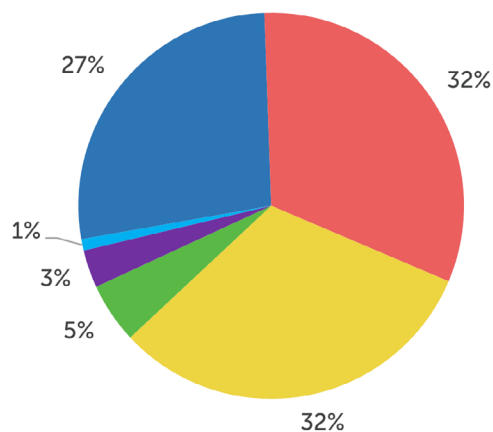
SERVING LOCALLY GROWN FOODS

We asked specifically about serving locally grown foods in meals and snacks through connecting with farmers, local food purchasing and using garden-grown produce. “Local” may be defined as grown or raised within a certain distance of an early care provider’s site, within their region, within the state, etc. Providers responded to questions based on their own understanding or definition of local.

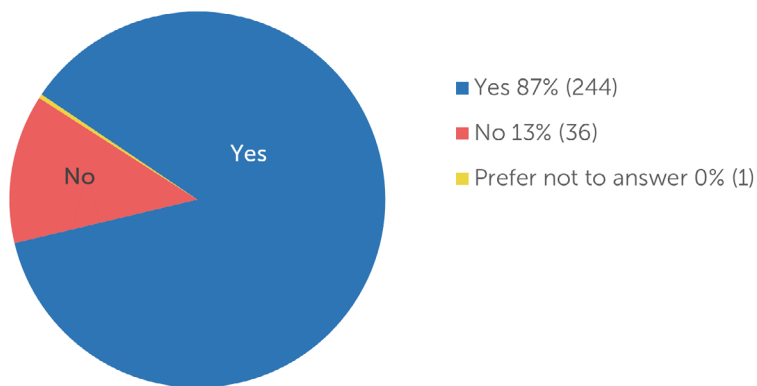


■ **How do you define “local” food?**

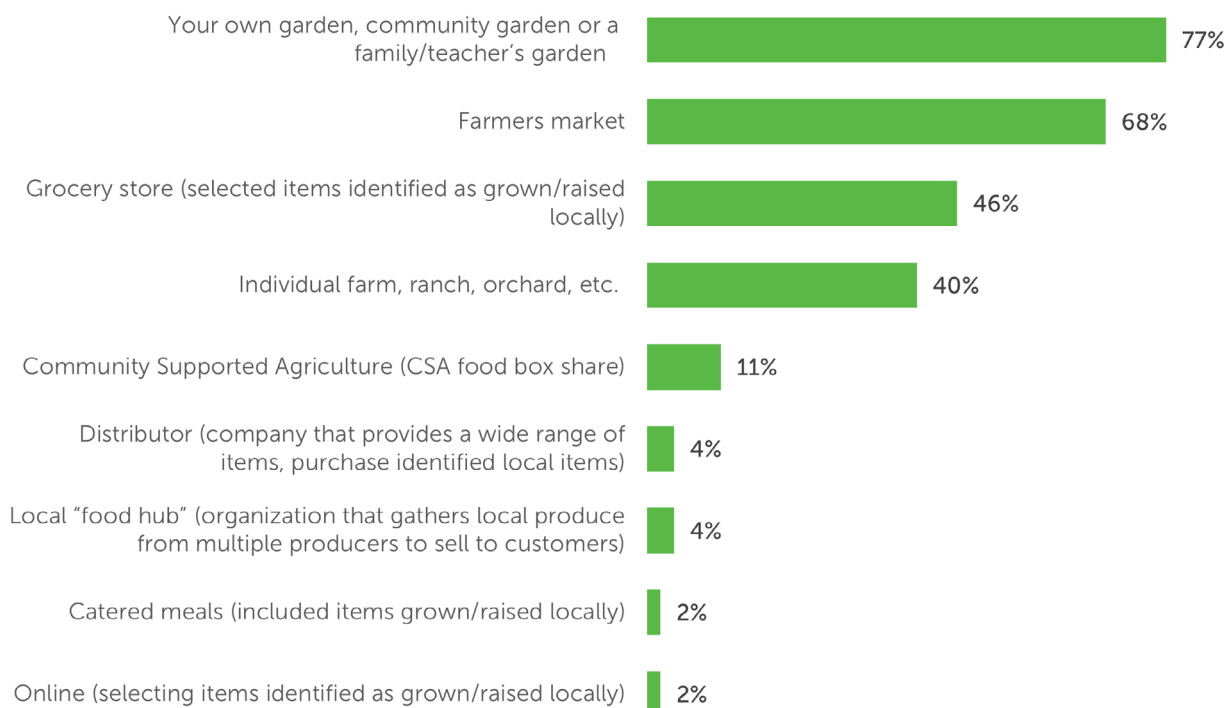
- Grown/raised in my immediate community: 27% (86)
- Grown/raised within a certain distance radius: 32% (101)
- Grown/raised in Minnesota: 32% (100)
- Grown/raised in Minnesota or neighboring states: 5% (16)
- I don't know/I don't have a definition: 3% (10)
- Other: 1% (3)



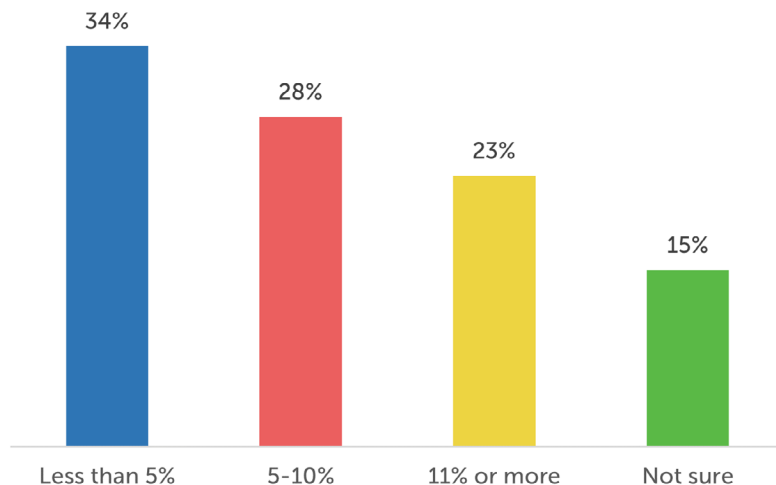
■ **Have you ever served locally produced or garden-grown products at your site?**



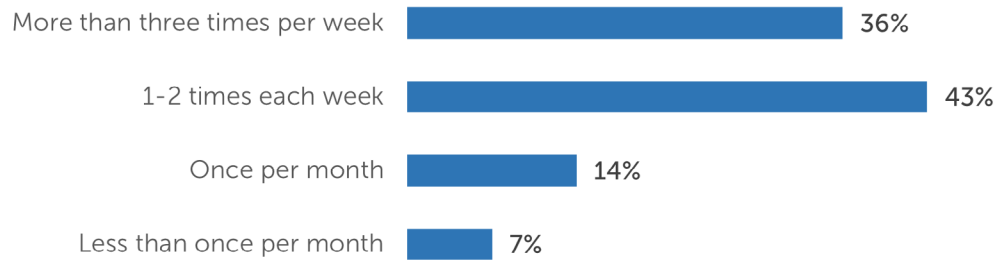
■ **Where have you sourced locally grown or raised food? (Respondents could select all that apply.)**



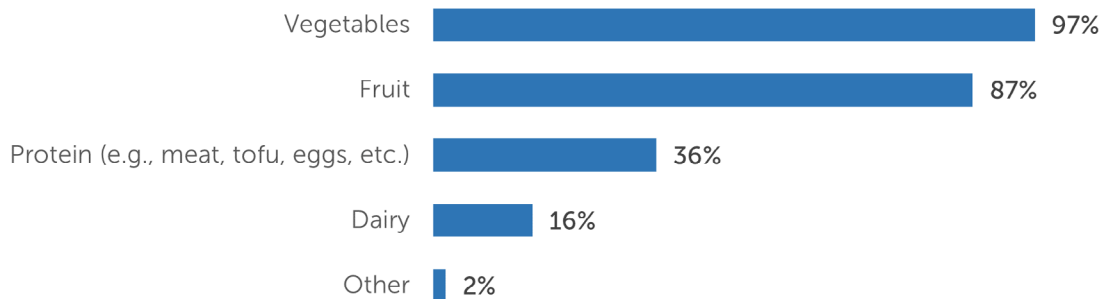
■ **What estimated percentage of your overall food budget is spent on local foods?**



■ During Minnesota’s growing season (approximately May-October), how often do your program’s meals and/or snacks include at least one locally grown food item?



■ What locally grown items do you get and use most? (Respondents ranked from most used to least used.)

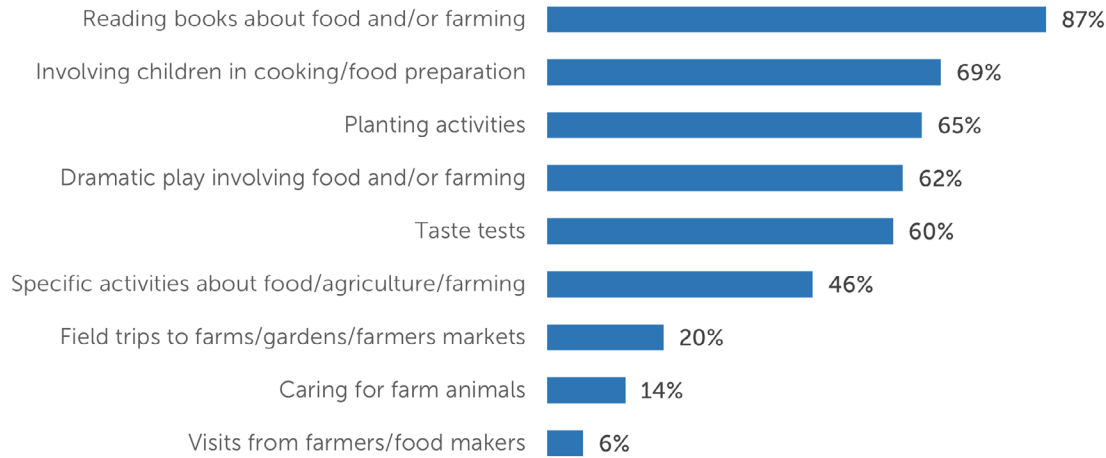


Produce from a local CSA box.

FOOD AND FARMING EDUCATION

Food and farming education includes many kinds of activities dedicated to learning about food or farming, such as: reading books, creative play, cooking/food preparation, taste tests, field trips to farms/gardens/farmers markets, visits from farmers/food makers, food/agriculture/farming curriculum, planting activities, caring for farm animals, or other activities related to how food is grown/raised and harvested.

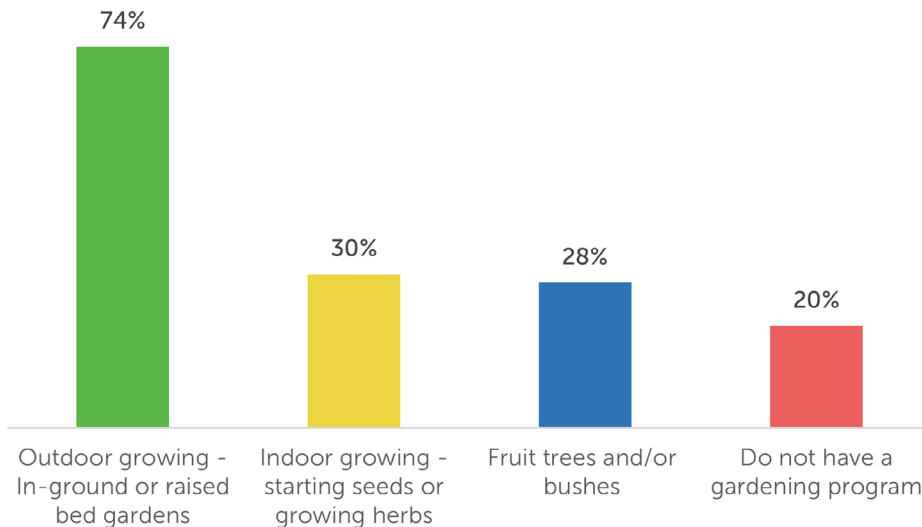
- Which food and farming education activities has your program done? (Respondents could select all that apply.)



- Providers were most likely to have read books about food and farming, involved children in cooking and food preparation, and done planting activities.

GARDENING

- Which types of gardens does your program have?



- Growing seasonal items outdoors was by far the most popular type of gardening, but some sites reported indoor growing and growing fruit trees and other perennials as well. (Sites could indicate more than one type of growing setting.)

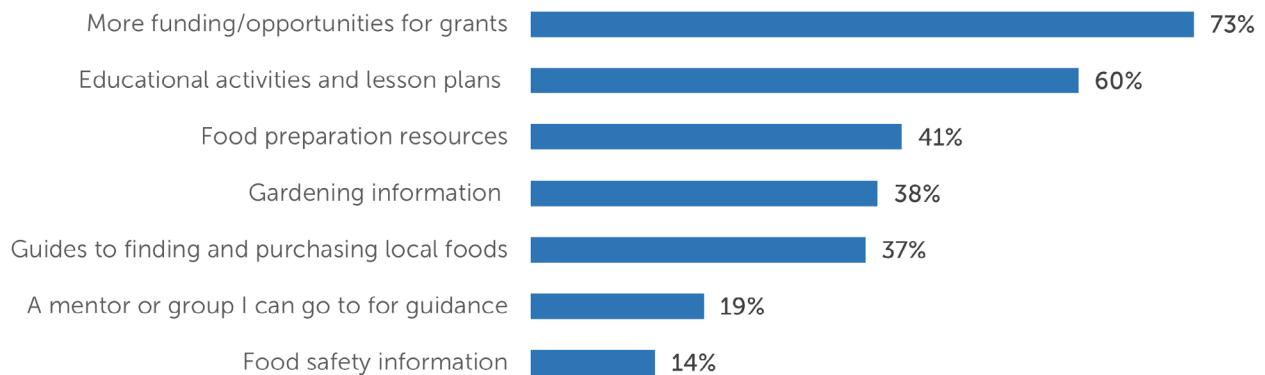
■ **What do you do with produce grown in the garden?**



■ Most sites indicated using garden produce in meals and snacks, but many sites also used garden produce in taste tests and/or sent it home with children to share with families.

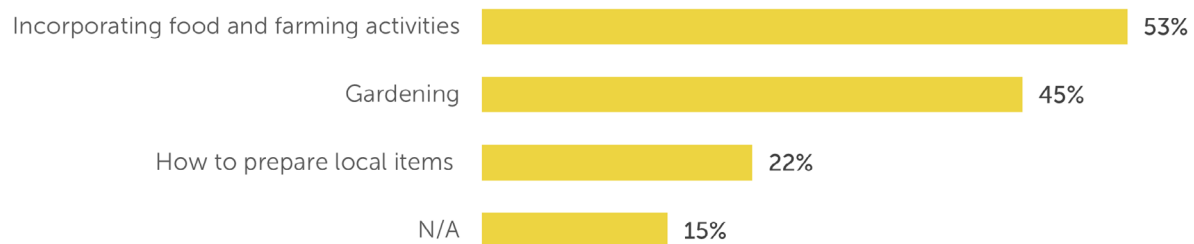
FARM TO EARLY CARE SUPPORT

■ **What type of Farm to Early Care resources would be helpful?** (Respondents could select all that apply.)



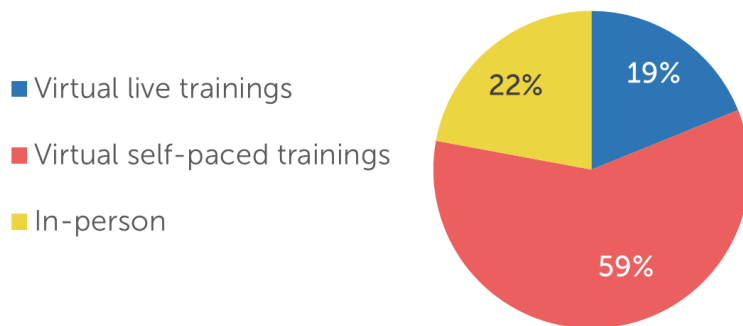
■ The most helpful resource indicated by providers was more funding and opportunities for grants, followed by educational activities, food preparation resources/recipes and gardening information.

■ **What trainings would be most helpful in expanding Farm to Early Care activities at your program?** (Respondents could select all that apply.)



■ Support for doing Farm to Early Care activities on food and farming was the most desired topic, followed by gardening. Several respondents indicated all of these would be helpful.

■ What types of trainings would you be most interested in?



- Survey respondents were most interested in virtual self-paced Farm to Early Care trainings. This points to an opportunity for support organizations to consider opportunities to provide self-paced trainings, as most trainings currently offered are live trainings, either in person or online. However, in follow-up conversations, several providers indicated a preference for in-person or virtual live trainings. Live trainings allow providers to get ideas and learn directly from other providers, which can be a richer experience. These differing responses highlight the need for training in a variety of formats.

KEY SUPPORTS NEEDED:

Provider conversations reiterated the desire for educational activities about food and farming, as well as gardening information. Providers noted the benefit of simple-to-use activities and trainings that give them a “take home” idea that is simple to execute with minimal additional resources after the training. Survey responses and provider conversations both indicate the need to further support training efforts in Farm to Early Care, ideally through a variety of methods.

Providers in follow-up conversations also highlighted the fragmented nature of information and the desire for a one-stop shop to find activities, gardening resources, recipes, etc. (Provider conversation, August 16, 2023.) A desire for facilitated connections regarding Farm to Early Care concepts was also noted, particularly for gardening. One respondent noted a desire for “a mentoring program or a connection program” to connect with other providers on these topics one on one.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [Minnesota’s Farm to Early Care website](#)

Includes overview information, highlights of MN Farm to Early Care examples, recorded webinars, links to other resources from Minnesota and beyond, signups for MN’s Farm to Early Care newsletter, monthly Lunch and Learns and more.

- [2021 National Farm to Early Care and Education Survey Report: Farm to Early Care and Education Continues to Foster Bright Futures for Children and Communities](#)

From the National Farm to School Network and Michigan State University, includes national-level overview plus practice and policy recommendations.

- [USDA Food and Nutrition Services Resources on Local Foods and Related Activities in CACFP](#)

This page includes links to basic fact sheets about using local ingredients in CACFP meals, a resource for purchasing local foods for child nutrition programs and the “Grow it! Try it! Like it! Garden” nutrition education kit and more.

APPENDIX

Farm to Early Care is good for kids!

Children who participate in Farm to Early Care initiatives encounter a wide variety of locally grown and raised foods, show increased willingness to try new foods, and eat more servings and more diverse kinds of fruits and vegetables compared to children who do not participate in Farm to Early Care. These healthy habits are developed during a key window of childhood when taste preferences are being set that will carry forward for the rest of their lives, making it an effective prevention strategy for obesity and diet-related disease. Through hands-on classroom activities, children also develop a sense of “food literacy” and deepen their understanding of agriculture, healthy eating, local foods and seasonality. Additionally, introducing local foods to very young children lays the groundwork for Farm to School activities in K-12 settings. Through Farm to Early Care activities, children can act as agents of change for families and teachers, inspiring healthier eating habits outside the classroom.



Janssen Hang delivers a HAFA CSA box to an in-home early care provider in June 2022.

Farm to Early Care is good for farmers!

Farm to Early Care initiatives open up new markets for farmers to sell their products. Institutions like early care settings can provide a stable and predictable source of income for local food producers, and farmers who sell to early care settings can potentially plan ahead and sell larger amounts at once than they can at a farmers market. Experience selling to early care settings builds skills that support selling to additional wholesale markets, helping to diversify farmers’ businesses and grow their bottom line.

Farm to Early Care is good for communities!

In addition to farmers, other sectors of the local food economy, such as processors and caterers, also can increase their businesses. Investing dollars locally creates a multiplier effect — in fact, a study from Oregon found that every dollar spent on Farm to School and Early Care generates an additional \$2.16 in local economic activity.

Farm to Early Care initiatives are taking off across the spectrum of child care settings, from family child care providers, to Head Start Programs, to center-based care. They naturally align with child development best practices by engaging children in experiential learning and are a complementary strategy to meet already existing requirements from licensing, child nutrition programs and quality improvement standards. These initiatives are flexible, and early care providers can choose unique activities based on the goals and needs of their community. Ultimately, Farm to Early Care activities can transform systems to be more resilient by engaging families and community members, strengthening local economies by investing in local growers and other food-related businesses and supporting farmers by facilitating access to new markets.

