WHAT IS “FARM TO HEAD START”?

Farm to Head Start is a Farm to Early Care initiative. Farm to Early Care initiatives connect young children with healthy, locally grown foods and support farmers in their communities. Farm to Early Care’s three core components are serving locally grown foods in Early Care meals and snacks, offering food and farming-related educational activities for children and organizing food and farming-related family engagement activities.

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. Farm to Early Care initiatives are flexible, and early care providers can choose unique activities based on the goals and needs of their community. Farm to Early Care activities can also promote systems-level change by engaging families and community members, strengthen local economies by investing in local growers and other food-related businesses, and support farmers by facilitating access to new markets. Farm to Early Care initiatives are a triple win: children, farmers and communities all benefit!

Children are, by design, the primary beneficiaries of Farm to Early Care activities. By exposing young children to a wide variety of locally grown and raised foods, they show an increased willingness to try new foods and actually eat more servings of fruits and vegetables compared to children who do not participate in Farm to Early Care. Through hands-on classroom activities,
they 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.

Farm to Early Care initiatives are advantageous for farmers, ranchers and fishermen by creating access to new markets. Institutions like early care settings provide a stable and predictable source of income for local food producers, helping to diversify their businesses and grow their bottom line. Other sectors of the local food economy, such as processors and caterers, also benefit; investing dollars in the community 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. Purchasing food from area growers and producers can jump start community revitalization.

Farm to Early Care activities align particularly well with the standards and priorities of Head Start organizations. Head Start is a federal school-readiness program that supports children and families experience poverty in a comprehensive manner. Farm to Early Care activities can help meet Head Start performance standards, as well as learning and developmental goals as outlined in the Head Start early learning framework. On a macro level, Farm to Early Care initiatives also promote health and wellness for families by increasing availability and accessibility of fresh, healthy foods.

Recognizing the natural connection between Farm to Early Care and Head Start, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) began a pilot Farm to Head Start project in 2013 with the Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties (CAPRW) Head Start. Since then, IATP has partnered with nine of Minnesota’s 34 Head Start programs, helping them feature local foods on their menus, coordinate food and farming-related classroom activities, and plan family engagement activities that create continuity between school and home.

Incorporating produce from local farms into meals and snacks is a core component of IATP’s Farm to Head Start model. One local fruit or vegetable is highlighted on the menu twice a week for a two-week period, using a variety of cooking techniques to showcase each item. During that time, teachers lead complementary food and farming-related activities with children in the classroom. These non-mealtime interactions are key to increasing young children’s willingness to try new foods and reducing food waste. Classroom activities are designed to be easily integrated into a teacher’s day. The goal is to make it as simple as possible to incorporate hands-on, age-appropriate curriculum components. Because each Head Start program serves a diverse and unique population, IATP works closely with each partner to incorporate foods and classroom activities that reflect the cultural background of the children and families in their communities. Family engagement activities such as farm tours, newsletters and open houses bridge the school and home environments, and provide caregivers an opportunity to learn more about their local food system.

Each of IATP’s Head Start partners adapted the Farm to Head Start model to fit their own individual goals, needs and community contexts. Whether located in a rural or urban setting, cooking from scratch or serving catered meals, each partner was able to incorporate elements of local purchasing, food and farming classroom activities and family engagement events. Their stories illustrate how Farm to Early Care initiatives can be successful and sustainable for children, farmers and communities.

Authors: Katie Costello and Erin McKee

Funding for this project is provided in part by the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

March 2019