



# FARM TO PRESCHOOL

## Local Food and Learning in Early Child Care and Education Settings



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**FARM TO SCHOOL** isn't just for K-12 institutions; an increasing number of early child care and education providers are engaging in farm to preschool activities. The term "farm to preschool" encompasses efforts to serve local or regionally produced foods in early child care and education settings; provide hands-on learning activities such as gardening, farm visits, and culinary activities; and integrate food-related education into the curriculum.

### Why Farm to Preschool?

Serving local foods and offering related hands-on activities can increase children's willingness to try new foods. In fact, farm to preschool is recognized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as an opportunity to increase access to healthy environments for improved early eating habits and obesity prevention in early care and education. With daily opportunities to serve local products through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), farm to preschool benefits local and regional farmers, ranchers, and fisherman, as well as food processors, manufacturers, and distributors by providing another market for their products. Incorporating seasonal and locally produced foods is included as a best practice in the CACFP meal pattern final rule.

### Buying Local in the Child and Adult Care Food Program

#### Institution versus facility

When buying food for CACFP, the federal procurement rules differ for "institutions" versus "facilities." "Institutions" must follow federal procurement rules; whereas "facilities" do not enter into a direct agreement with a state agency and thus are not required to follow federal procurement regulations. If unsure whether your program operates as an institution or a facility, check with your administering state agency.

**What is the Child and Adult Care Food Program?**  
The Child and Adult Care Food Program is a federally-funded program that provides aid to child care institutions and facilities for the provision of nutritious meals and snacks that contribute to the wellness, healthy growth, and development of young children.

#### Sourcing local foods

Local foods span the entire meal tray, from produce to dairy, grains, meat, eggs, and beans. CACFP providers can define "local" however they choose. Definitions vary widely depending on the unique geography and climate, as well as the abundance of local food producers, in the region. CACFP operators can find local products through the same sources that K-12 schools use to source locally: directly from producers, or through food hubs, distributors or a food service management company. In many preschool settings, purchasing volumes are small, opening the door to purchasing seasonally from farmers' markets, community supported agriculture programs, or local producers that may not have the volume to meet the needs of a typical school district. Preschools may also be able to grow enough in a garden to meet some of their food needs.



## Tips for Growing Your Program

### Start small

Special events are a great way to start serving local foods. Consider starting with one local item each month and grow from there. Create a monthly newsletter to celebrate the harvest and share with children, parents, and caregivers.

### Tap into parents

With robust parental involvement during the early child care years, tap into parents to help model healthy eating at meal time, lead an activity, or organize a garden to enhance your farm to preschool program.

### Invest in an edible garden

CACFP funds can be used to purchase items for gardens such as seeds, fertilizer, watering cans, rakes, and more as long as the produce grown in the garden will be used as part of the reimbursable meal and for nutrition education activities. Centers using garden produce in their CACFP reimbursable meals should document the weight and/or volume of the produce.

### Dig into menu planning

Find out what grows in your region and allow flexibility in the regular menu cycle to spotlight seasonal items and incorporate them into healthy recipes. When you serve local foods, be sure to highlight them on your menu for parents to see! Reach out to your local cooperative extension agency or department of agriculture for help with synching your menu with seasonal availability.

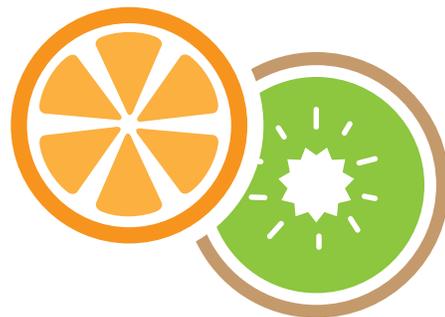
## Learn More

We're here to help! Visit USDA's Office of Community Food System's **Farm to Preschool page** to learn more about farm to preschool policies and FNS and partner resources that will help you bring the farm to preschool.

The National Farm to School Network (NFSN) supports the work of local farm to preschool programs all over the country by providing free training and technical assistance, information services, networking, and support for policy, media and marketing activities. NFSN's **Farm to Early Care and Education page** features facts sheets and links to farm to preschool e-news and archives.

For federal procurement regulations and guidance on local purchasing and allowable costs in CACFP, check out the following resources:

- **CACFP Financial Management Instruction**
- **Local Foods in the Child and Adult Care Food Program with Questions and Answers** [CACFP 11-2015]
- **Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs**



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For more information, and to sign up for the bi-weekly e-letter from the Food and Nutrition Service's Office of Community Food Systems, please visit [www.usda.gov/farmtoschool](http://www.usda.gov/farmtoschool).

Questions? Email us at [farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov](mailto:farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov).

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