



OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD: NORTHWEST COLORADO

Focus on Early Childhood Opportunities

In partnership with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) and the home day care sponsors for the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), WPM Consulting (www.wpmconsulting.net) and Healthy Community Food Systems (www.hcfs.org) traveled the state to meet with providers and discuss how we can make it easier for early child care providers to access and provide fresh, healthy foods to their children.¹

Providing healthy meals to children at preschools and day care is essential for instilling positive food behaviors that will impact individuals throughout their lifetimes. Providing access to and knowledge about fresh, healthy food at a young age can also make a significant impact on the food system.

The farm to preschool movement, led by National Farm to Preschool (www.farmtopreschool.org), is growing rapidly around the country in an effort to provide healthy food to young children, to reduce the childhood obesity epidemic, and to open up new markets for local agriculture. Farm to preschool programs are diverse and include farm visits, onsite gardens, local products served in meals and snacks, and cooking classes with local foods.

In order to identify and understand the interest, potential, challenges, and opportunities for farm to preschool in Colorado, the WPM team conducted 53 interviews with child care providers across the state. In the Northwest region², four interviews were conducted with providers at child care centers and four interviews were conducted with providers at home-based day cares. Additionally, 28 food systems stakeholders, six of whom work in the Northwest region, completed a survey to identify opportunities and challenges present in their region's food system and to assist our team in building a database of regional resources.

¹ This project was generously funded by The Colorado Health Foundation.

² Regions were delineated and identified by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. To view a list of counties included in each region, see the *Appendices and Supporting Documents* referred to in the *CDPHE Food Access Scan of Child Care Centers in Colorado*.

Below is a short brief to highlight our findings in your region. We have identified current farm to preschool activities in your region, challenges to such efforts as perceived by both child care providers and food systems stakeholders, and the potential for additional connections to be made. We hope that this will begin a conversation and potentially lead to new relationships, helping to move the work of farm to preschool forward in Colorado.

Current Efforts to Connect Colorado Products to Early Childhood

There are many organizations in the Northwest region that are working to connect local foods to local consumers including schools, and there are some exciting activities already taking place to facilitate farm to preschool connections. The most commonly reported activities in this region are:

- Onsite gardens at child care facilities
- Taking children to a farm, garden, or farmers market
- Inviting a farmer to visit the children

In general, food systems stakeholders from the Northwest region reported a high level of potential for child care providers to purchase locally produced fruits, vegetables, grains, meats, and processed fruits and vegetables. They expressed a significant level of interest in developing connections with child care institutions.

Similarly, child care providers in the Northwest region report a significant level of interest in integrating more locally grown products into meals and snacks for the children. As mentioned above, many are already integrating farm to preschool activities and care about providing high quality foods to their children.

Regional Food Systems Assets & Resources

Northwest Colorado has a number of food systems resources available to implement farm to preschool efforts– most notable, all of the current efforts as discussed above. Additional assets listed by stakeholders in the region include:

- Producers who grow and sell locally and regionally
- Numerous farmers markets and CSAs
- Local and regional food and food policy coalitions

Primary Roadblocks for Early Childhood Providers

Though these assets exist, there is a need for additional resources across the board. The biggest gaps in terms of infrastructure identified by stakeholders in this region include:

- Farm to school or farm to institution
- Food hubs
- Local distribution channels

Additionally, food systems stakeholders and child care providers reported several concerns about the feasibility of working more together. Some commonly reported concerns from food systems stakeholders included:

- Seasonality of production
- Lack of funding for programs
- Lack of knowledge about selling to child care institutions

Providers' concerns with introducing more local foods into their homes and centers included:

- Higher costs of food items
- Lack of familiarity with and difficulties in connecting with growers
- Challenges with distribution

These barriers present challenges specific to the farm to preschool movement. In order to further develop the relationship between early childhood education and regional food systems, below we present several short and long term possibilities for advancing the farm to preschool movement.

Primary Opportunities

Farm to preschool offers significant, untapped potential for expanding farm to institution programs in Colorado. Steps that can be taken to move this work forward are discussed below.

Start the Conversation

The first step in moving forward with farm to preschool in Colorado is to get the conversation started.

- Facilitate meet and greets and other connections between child care and producers.
- Develop workshops on farm to preschool
 - Educate child care providers about what is possible by clarifying regulations and using national and state level case studies
 - Educate food systems stakeholders on how to work with child care institutions.

Tap into Existing Resources

Perhaps the greatest resources for building farm to preschool in Colorado are the well-established farm to school programs found in many regions across the state. These programs can provide important infrastructure as well as connections to producers, requiring limited additional investment.

- Establish relationships with existing farm to school stakeholders and identify infrastructure (storage, processing, and distribution) that is available for use.
- Connect producers already participating in farm to school in your region to interested preschools and day cares.

Expand Local Distribution and Processing Infrastructure

In the long term, further developing the region's capacity to grow and sell local foods will be essential for building established, widespread farm to preschool programs.

- Integrate local products into places where child care providers already shop. Most providers report they will buy local products if they are available at the places they already shop.
- Develop payment and reimbursement procedures that make it possible and encourage providers to buy from farmers markets, local food hubs, CSAs, etc.
- Develop regional distribution systems and processing facilities that could provide child care centers and homes with food delivery or CACFP-reimbursable pre-processed foods.
- Models for the type of distribution infrastructure that child care providers benefit from are Allison's Pantry (<http://www.alisonspantry.com>) and Bountiful Baskets (<http://bountifulbaskets.org>).
 - Allison's Pantry, based in Utah, distributes bulk food items to sales managers in rural communities who store and process orders for the products at their homes which act as local distribution points.
 - Bountiful Baskets, which is similar to a CSA, requires only weekly commitments and delivers produce and bread items to local pick up sites (note that they do not focus on local products, but represent a potential model for doing so).

Resources

Below are a number of resources from Colorado and around the country that can provide further information on the challenges and opportunities for farm to preschool in your region. If you have any questions, would like to receive full copies of the child care food access scans referenced, or if you would like to discuss the issues in this brief further, please contact Wendy at wendy@wpmconsulting.net.

Colorado CACFP Sponsors United for Health, *Food Access Scan of Home Care Providers in Colorado: Identifying Challenges and Opportunities for Improving Healthy Food Access*

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, *Food Access Scan of Child Care Centers in Colorado: Identifying Challenges and Opportunities for Improving Healthy Food Access*

The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), *Child Care Wellness Tool Kit: Child and Adult Care Food Program*, <http://frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/child-and-adult-care-program/child-care-wellness-plans-and-policies/>

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, *Farm to Child Care: Opportunities and challenges for connecting young children with local foods and farmers*, <http://www.iatp.org/documents/farm-to-child-care-opportunities-and-challenges-for-connecting-young-children-with-local-f>

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, *Farm to Child Care Program Expands to 62 Sites Across Minnesota*,
[http://www.iatp.org/documents/farm-to-child care-program-expands-to-62-sites-across-minnesota](http://www.iatp.org/documents/farm-to-child-care-program-expands-to-62-sites-across-minnesota)

National Farm to School Network, *National Farm to Preschool*, farmtopreschool.org

USDA Food and Nutrition Services, *Grow it, Try it, Like it!*,
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/growit.html>