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A young boy with short dark hair, wearing a green polo shirt under a blue zip-up jacket, is looking down at a small green leaf he is holding in his right hand. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a tree and a building.

Investing in Farm to Early Care and Education

A FUNDERS' GUIDE TO NOURISHING CHILDREN,
FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

OCTOBER 2021

About This Guide

This guide is for funders and all who seek to support farm to early care and education programs that nourish children, families and communities. It overviews farm to early care and education and its benefits, describes challenges within our food and learning systems that farm to early care and education seeks to solve, spotlights community-based initiatives, and outlines how funders can play a role in supporting communities by expanding farm to early care and education.

By investing in farm to early care and education, funders will spread the program's positive impact more broadly, reconnecting children with local food systems and promoting long-term health and wellness for families, early care and education providers, local farmers and entire communities.



“Farm to early care and education is more than just having a garden outside. It’s weaving it into day-to-day education as far as teaching children about their ABCs and 123s. When you really get into it, it’s about racial equity. ... It’s about growing the community. We want families to be able to grow and share food and these areas that were food insecure to not be anymore.”

SHIRONDA BROWN,
*CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL FARMING
SYSTEMS IN NORTH CAROLINA*

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Foreword

For more than 90 years, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) has advocated for and invested in equitable food and learning systems. Here's what this rich experience has taught us: Racial equity is essential to the health and success of children, families and our society, and communities are the ones who must lead the way.

Farm to early care and education is an incredibly promising community-based solution. By leveraging early care and education to connect families and farms, the program nurtures young children's physical, intellectual and social-emotional development; improves community nutrition; and expands market access for small and midsize local farmers and farmers of color. Farm to early care and education initiatives work across systems, linking health, education and agriculture.

Under the leadership of Program Officer Linda Jo Doctor, the Kellogg Foundation has doubled down, investing more than \$18 million over five years to support national and state partners in building a vibrant network of farm to early care and education programs.

Community partners in early care and education, public health and food systems have

come together to make farm to early care and education a reality. Even in the face of immense challenges, these partners have innovated and persevered to deliver high-quality early learning and ensure healthy food access for hundreds of thousands of the country's youngest learners and their families.

Now is the time to grow farm to early care and education nationwide.

To support community leaders and their transformative work, nourish the youngest learners' minds and growing bodies, and help local sustainable agriculture flourish, we invite funders at every level to invest in expanding farm to early care and education programs across the country.

Our collective future – especially that of our children – depends on it.

Sincerely,

CARLA D. THOMPSON PAYTON,
VICE PRESIDENT FOR PROGRAM STRATEGY,
W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION



The Promise of Farm to Early Care and Education

Farm to early care and education is a program and a movement that supports young children's well-being through **growing, eating and learning** about nourishing, locally grown foods in early care and education settings. It improves the quality of early learning and connects local farmers, providers and families to create a more just food system. By restoring the links between food producers and food consumers, farm to early care and education promotes lifelong health and wellness for children, families and communities.

Philanthropy has an important role to play in seeding and catalyzing farm to early care and education – helping improve access to healthy foods for young children and their families, enhancing the quality of early care and education settings and building sustainable local food systems. Spreading farm to early care and education so every child has the opportunity to thrive is possible within our generation – **if we have the will and commitment to do it.**

“With farm to early care, at first I wasn't into it and didn't really know about it – the healthy eating, where your food comes from. Then, we started doing more research on it, and turned a swimming pool into a garden. I would be out there every day with the kids, ‘Come on, we're going to see ...’ and I was like ‘Wow! A yellow flower turned into a tomato.’ ... It's been life-changing.”

ASHLEY STRICKLANDE,
LITTLE ONES LEARNING CENTER IN GEORGIA

A Vision of Every Child Thriving

Since 2015, WKKF has invested more than \$18 million to support state partners in Georgia, Iowa, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, and has funded technical assistance through the National Farm to School Network and Policy Equity Group to build a vibrant network of farm to early care and education programs. Our focus has been on developing capacity within each state and creating tools and resources for sharing the model across the country.

Farm to school programs have been immensely successful in kindergarten through 12th grade settings. Philanthropy has a unique opportunity to support similar success starting even

younger – and at the same time improve access to high-quality early learning and connect families to local food systems. **Collectively, we can plant this seed in every community across America.**

“At the Kellogg Foundation, we work to ensure children and families are nourished by healthy food at home, in early child care and at school by supporting equitable and sustainable community food systems. Our five-year, five-state pilot in the farm to early care and education movement provides a blueprint for other states to accelerate its adoption as a key strategy to improve learning, child nutrition and health.”

LINDA JO DOCTOR,
W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION



The Ripple Effects of Investing in Farm to Early Care and Education

NATIONAL MOVEMENT

spreads farm to early care and education and its benefits across the country.



STATE COALITION

encourages cross-sector collaboration among health, education, agriculture and more.



REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

are sustainable and equitable, contributing to local economies and community well-being.



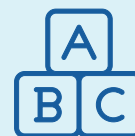
LOCAL FARMERS

connect with early care and education providers and communities, and have increased access to markets that sustain their livelihood.



EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROVIDERS

gain new knowledge and skills, are able to meet quality early learning standards and are part of the regional food system.



FAMILIES

have increased access to healthy food and develop agency and leadership in ensuring their children are nourished.



EVERY CHILD

benefits from quality early learning opportunities and improved access to nourishing foods that support healthy cognitive, physical and social-emotional development.



Challenging Intersecting Inequities

Because of centuries of purposeful and systematic racism, inequities in education, health and food availability and affordability are deeply embedded in United States systems and institutions. Many of these inequities cut along both racial and income lines, such that communities of color with low incomes experience even greater challenges and disadvantages. Farm to early care and education works at the intersection of these inequities to improve access and opportunity for communities of color and communities with low incomes.

Food Security

Food insecurity is a longstanding and significant problem for families in the U.S., especially for families of color. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 42 million Americans, including 13 million children, are likely to experience food insecurity in 2021.¹ In particular, Black, Latinx and Indigenous households experience food insecurity at twice the rate of White households.²

Access to nutritious food is critical to child development. Especially for children 5 years and younger, early good nutrition is linked with educational success, healthy social-emotional development and opportunities later in life.

Early Care and Education

Many children of color and children living in families with low incomes lack access to *high-quality* early care and education that meets their cultural and linguistic needs. This unequal access leads to cognitive gaps among Black children

“Our food system is central to many of the important issues of our day – a global pandemic that has made food scarce for many families ... the Black Lives Matter movement calling us to acknowledge that there is no food justice without racial justice. Changing the inequities that persist within our food system will have ripple effects far beyond what we eat.”

NATIONAL FARM TO SCHOOL NETWORK

as early as 9 months, and those gaps continue to widen throughout their academic careers.³ Restricted access to high-quality care also creates unfair challenges and economic disparities for working parents of color. At the same time, early care and education providers are undervalued and underpaid, with workers of color often receiving the lowest wages. This is a systemic challenge to creating an early learning system that works for people of color.⁴

Health

Lack of access to nutritious foods and high-quality early learning can affect children’s health and well-being, including having higher incidences of asthma and mental health problems.⁵ Black, Latinx, Asian and Indigenous

people in the United States are more likely to suffer diet-related chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease than their White counterparts, which can also be traced to food access.⁶

Farming and Food Systems

A long history of colonization, land theft and exploitation of communities of color has created significant inequities in our food system. People who are Black and Latinx are more likely to be employed in food service jobs with unsafe working conditions and paid less than a living wage. Black Americans collectively own less than 3 million acres today, compared to more than 15 million acres of rural land in 1910.⁷ Disproportionately fewer loans are made to Black, Asian and other farmers of color, keeping them from buying land and starting farms.⁸

The links between access to healthy food, access to quality early education and access to economic opportunity are inextricable. To address inequities anywhere in the system requires a holistic approach.



Forging Pathways to Self-Determination

Communities of color continue to thrive in spite of racist policies and practices. Indigenous people pass on their rich history and traditional knowledge of hunting, fishing, foraging, harvesting and processing foods from generation to generation through robust Tribal food programs, such as classes, trainings and community gatherings, as well as through family sharing. Across the country, Tribal early care and education programs provide culturally relevant, high-quality early learning.

Black communities and the Black Panther Party launched the first free school breakfast program, feeding tens of thousands of young children from 1969 through the early 1970s, and inspiring what is the federal School Breakfast Program today.⁹ Mexican-Americans have come together to create their own community schools, like Escuela De La Raza Unida in California, where everyone pitches in to teach, cook and clean.¹⁰

Asian farmers have been integral to agriculture in the U.S., introducing the Bing cherry, ginger, bok choy and many other fresh fruits and vegetables. In the mid-1990s, Black farmers in Florida organized and were among the first to promote “small farm to school.”¹¹

In every instance, communities who are most affected by oppression and marginalization know what’s needed in their communities. They are building on their strong agricultural traditions, learning systems and cultures to forge pathways to self-determination.

Farm to Early Care and Education Works Across Systems to Address Inequities

Farm to early care and education creates pathways for advancing racial equity by linking health, education and food systems to meet the needs of children and communities who have been adversely impacted by racist policies and practices. It requires intentionality, and focusing specifically on issues of access and opportunity for children, families, providers, farmers and communities of color.

Through farm to early care and education programs, children of color experience opportunities to connect with nourishing food and the land through outdoor play in edible gardens, meeting farmers who look like them and learning how food grows.

Early care and education providers and families feel agency too in learning about nutrition and connecting to local food systems. The prioritization that farm to early care and education puts on purchasing local, sustainably grown food from farmers of color means these programs are building the capacity of smaller-scale farms with regular purchasing commitments.

By cultivating relationships with food, with the farmers and producers of color who supply our food, and with the providers who care for and educate our children, we begin to shift our deeply racialized food, health and education systems and promote well-being across communities.



Kids Forward intentionally structures their farm to early care and education initiatives to ensure racial food justice by meeting community organizations' individual needs – and not assuming everyone's needs are the same. The organization is one of many partners working together to advance farm to early care and education in Wisconsin.

“We intentionally focus on underserved populations, knowing that everybody is going to benefit down the road,” says Daithi Wolfe, early education policy analyst at Kids Forward. “We’re very aware if we just do things as they’ve been done in the past that we’re just going to replicate systems that are oppressive and actually create further inequity.”

When Kids Forward realized that most mini-grant applications were coming from organizations that already have resources, time and someone who can fill out forms, they decided to focus on communities with less funding and opportunity.

“If we want to address racial equity through farm to early care, we have to empower and invest in providers who are rated lower in YoungStar, Wisconsin’s quality rating system – 2 or 3 stars – and tend to be located in food deserts,” says Dadit Hidayat, policy and engagement specialist at Kids Forward. They used data to identify providers that are rated lower in YoungStar and in areas that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) identifies as

food deserts, prioritizing centers led by women of color who know best the communities they serve.

“The introduction of food access is not just for children, but also for adults. We go beyond consumption to start to have conversations,” continues Dadit. Instead of focusing on the traditional “supply chain” approach that can further inequities, Dadit says they are focused on the “demand chain” and creating greater demand for and access to local, healthy foods among communities that have been historically underserved.



Courtesy of Mother and Daughter Child Nurturing Center

Children, Farmers and Providers: Racial Equity at the Center



Courtesy of Little Ones Learning Center

Farm to early care and education enriches the connection young children have with local food production by bringing farm-fresh food into early care and education settings and offering experiential learning with edible gardens, cooking and tasting locally grown foods. Through small shifts in our deeply racialized food, health and education systems, farm to early care and education nurtures the well-being of children and their families, early care and education providers, local farmers and communities.

Successful farm to early care and education programs bring together a diverse group of partners across sectors and cultures with the purpose of addressing systemic inequities, especially related to race and income. Increasingly, state coalitions are forming to embrace farm to early care and education as a win-win-win strategy that improves quality early learning, increases access to healthy foods with critical nutrition support and builds sustainable local food systems.

“Farm to early care and education is connecting kids to food production and natural spaces – and rebuilding those very human connections to a sense of place and the confidence to grow and select their own food.”

HAWTHORN MCCrackEN,
ROOTED IN WISCONSIN

What

The three main ingredients of farm to early care and education are procuring locally sourced food for early care and education settings, engaging young children and their families in learning about local agriculture and offering hands-on activities like gardening, cooking and taste testing.

Where

Farm to early care and education programs can take place in many settings, including preschools, child care centers, family child care homes and Head Start/Early Head Start programs. With nearly 13 million children under the age of 6 spending an average of 30 hours each week in non-parental care settings,¹²

these are critical spaces to reach young children and their families, especially families living on low incomes and families of color. In 2018, farm to early care and education programs were active at 2,035 participating sites across 46 states in the U.S., reaching 255,257 young children.¹³

Why

By linking education, health and food systems, farm to early care and education programs foster myriad benefits:

- **Adding nutritional value to meals and snacks.** Farm to early care and education enables centers to offer critical nutrition support by serving healthy food to children and providing resources for healthy food preparation to parents and caregivers.
- **Meeting quality early learning standards.** Tending to an outdoor garden, measuring ingredients and cooking together are just a few of the creative ways farm to early care and education programs engage children and support their cognitive, physical and social-emotional development.
- **Integrating food education into learning.** Farm to early care and education creates enthusiasm for healthy eating at a crucial stage of childhood development, when introducing new foods creates lifelong healthy eating habits – setting children up for success in school and life.
- **Boosting mental health and wellness.** Spending time outdoors, growing edible gardens and being physically active have positive effects on children's well-being.
- **Investing in providers' professional development.** Curricula, resources and training empower providers to implement culturally relevant and reflective farm to early care and education programs.

- **Engaging providers and families.** Planting gardens, cooking and eating together engages staff of early learning centers, helping them develop healthy eating habits, too. Sending home extra fruits and vegetables, seeds and kid-friendly recipes extends the experience to families as well. Programs also can shape families' choices on what they eat at home.
- **Opening new markets for farmers.** Farm to early care and education programs provide small to midsize local farmers and farmers of color with regular year-round contracts. Some centers also serve as hubs for delivering community-supported agriculture (CSA) boxes to families.



Courtesy of Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children

A Holistic Approach to Nourishing Children, Families and Communities



Center for Environmental Farming Systems | North Carolina

“Food is a natural vehicle to do a lot of racial equity and inclusion work,” says Caroline Stover, project director of the NC Farm to Early Care and Education initiative. The cross-sector initiative is coordinated through the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS), and is bringing together a number of food systems and early learning partners to connect local farms with local early care and education providers. The vision? Community-based, equitable food systems that nourish children and families.

To support the implementation of farm to early care and education, CEFS delivers training and resources to providers and helps develop local procurement systems.

Shironda Brown, CEFS training project coordinator, sees farm to early care and education as critical to turning the tide in restoring thriving farmlands and supporting nutrition security. This is done, she says, “By getting back to having local farmers and having child care centers and connecting them, so children and their families understand this is a viable way of life and respect what farmers and those that work the land do.”

She is most excited to have conversations with the children. “I ask ‘What are you growing in your garden? What is your favorite food? Have you tasted it?’ And, the children can give me honest answers, which makes me know they have been living this way and doing this for some time. They are respectful of the food.”

Not only are farm to early care and education programs in North Carolina engaging children, they are fostering community.

“Farm to early care and education is a natural extension into the community,” shares Caroline. “We are seeing centers sending food home to families, and families coming into centers and making recipes. They’re now connected to new farmers, the youth program down the street is involved and child care directors are linked and swapping garden stories and resources.”

Local food procurement is an important part of farm to early care and education. “We’re excited about the procurement pathways we’re figuring out to get fruits and veggies on children’s plates in a regular way,” Caroline says.

CEFS is focused on models that aggregate demand, including collaborative purchasing among providers, tapping into local sourcing with K-12 school districts, establishing central kitchens that serve multiple areas and engaging families to purchase CSA boxes through early care and education sites. CSA boxes help build community around local farming by connecting consumers and producers, and provide a regular income stream for farmers.



Courtesy of Center for Environmental Farming Systems

A Call to Funders to Act

Funding farm to early care and education is one of the most powerful investments we can make to ensure that every child in America has access to healthy, culturally relevant foods and is meeting nutrient-driven developmental milestones. To sustain and expand the movement, we need more people to advocate for farm to early care and education policies, and more foundations to invest in farm to early care and education programs.

Farm to early care and education is an opportunity for philanthropists with a wide range of interests, from education, health, equity or food justice, to have enormous impact, collectively and individually. As funders, we play a catalytic role in supporting community-led efforts, core infrastructure and coalition building so people and organizations connect across sectors and state lines.

Philanthropy has helped fuel the farm to early care and education movement and led the way for additional support from the private sector and federal, state and local government. Now is the time to build on this momentum to grow and feed the proven farm to early care and education movement – and give our youngest learners the strong start they need in school and life.

What to Fund

Through a five-year, five-state investment in Iowa, Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, we've heard from organizations what's needed to support farm to early care and education programs.

“For farm to early care to really work, you need cross-sector partners working together. You need people from the food systems, people from early care, people who are at these state agencies, like departments of agriculture, education and health and human services – they all have to be at the table.”

ARLENE ENDERTON,
*IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION
AND OUTREACH*

Coalition building. Farm to early care and education collaboratives that bring together partners in health, early learning, education, agriculture and workforce development are the backbone of successful state efforts. These coalitions are able to coordinate across sectors and connect across issues, fashioning systemic solutions. They unify a diverse group of partners who can work together on mutual goals and advocate for needed policy changes. Coalitions can be solely focused on farm to early care and education, part of broader early learning coalitions or combined with kindergarten through 12th grade farm to school efforts.

Systems change. To achieve equitable outcomes, we need policies and practices that account for past injustices and work to level the playing field. As a funder, you can use your position to advocate for policy and practice change – and fund policymaker education and policy advocacy initiatives – that make farm to early care and education possible. Examples include requiring fair wages for providers and farmers of color, promoting incentives to purchase local, sustainably grown food from producers of color and increasing funding for early care and education providers in communities most affected by inequities.

Community capacity. Investing in professional development and training for providers to gain knowledge and tools for integrating farm to early care and education is essential. Funders can also support state Child Care Resource and Referral Centers to serve as hubs for farm to early care and education information. Another area of capacity building is communications. Resourcing communications to lift up farm to early care and education successes spreads awareness, which in turn helps increase support. In addition, funders can provide direct support like technical assistance or actual staffing to help early care and education providers apply for grants and access funding.

Infrastructure. Early care and education sites need kitchens, cooking equipment and garden materials to implement farm to early care and education activities. Funding physical infrastructure equips providers to deliver high-quality experiential education. Funders can also support systemic infrastructure initiatives that: connect farm to early care and education sites, promote coordination between early learning and with kindergarten through 12th grade



Courtesy of Little Ones Learning Center

systems to aggregate local food purchasing and build bridges between farm to early care and education programs and regional food hubs.

Community-driven evaluation. Building in funding for evaluation is important because it takes time and energy. This is also an opportunity for funders to build trust and learn: Communities know what kinds of data will best serve their needs, and metrics should be community-driven, not funder-directed.

How to Fund

As we've worked with farm to early care and education partners at the national, state and local levels, we've learned from and with them about key opportunities and lessons for funders, including how to work equitably with nonprofit and community-based organizations.

Use a racial equity framework. This means intentionally supporting efforts led by people and communities of color that have been historically excluded and systematically marginalized. In farm to early care and

education, this includes listening to and investing in early care and education providers led by and serving communities of color that have been under-resourced and that may be rated lower by the state's quality rating and improvement system, or lack access to licensing. It is also supporting farmers of color who, because of institutional barriers, have had less access to opportunity.

Give multiyear, unrestricted funding.

To sustain and expand farm to early care and education programs, nonprofit organizations, providers, local farmer associations and other partners must work together. Flexible funding allows organizations to direct dollars to achieve their aspirations and adapt to changing needs. Building capacity and creating change takes time and patience. Reliable funding creates sustainability.

Be open to continuous learning. Listening to and following the lead of communities most impacted will have the greatest success because people closest to the problem are already closest to the solutions. It is vital to recognize the systemic impacts of white supremacy on every aspect of our society while investing and working to improve the racial disparities in this country. We are on a collective journey of learning, and must be flexible and adaptive to meet community needs and aspirations.

Build an exit strategy. Create an exit plan to build capacity and ensure sustainability when funding priorities shift. Every minute nonprofit organizations, providers or farmers spend on seeking funds is time not spent on serving children and communities. As funders, we can use our position and connections to advance strategies that support organizations' viability, such as policy changes to increase reimbursement rates, promote incentives for buying local and sustainably grown food and expand local and state investment.

"If funders and government agencies want to be true allies, they need to advocate for and support efforts to ensure fair wages to farmers and early care providers."

ISEL OTERO VERA,
THE FOOD TRUST IN PENNSYLVANIA



Georgia Farm to Early Care and Education Coalition | Georgia

The Georgia Farm to Early Care and Education Coalition unites more than 25 partners in early care, food, farming and nutrition to support farm to early care and education, build statewide programming and push for enabling policies.

“We’re as successful as we are in Georgia making system-wide change because we have the Departments of Early Care and Learning, Education, Public Health and Agriculture, who are all stakeholders in this work,” says Kimberly Della Donna, farm to school director at Georgia Organics, which coordinates the coalition. “We’ve also had private foundations who see the value in this network and nonprofit leadership really pushing for innovation and being nimble enough to bring everyone together.”

“When we put children first everything falls in place,” says Olutoyin Okunoren, owner of Little Ones Learning Center, a coalition partner that turned a swimming pool into 12 garden beds for teaching farm to early care and education.

The coalition is building connections between farmers and early care and education providers. “Our families do not readily have access to fresh produce because they don’t have transportation or the stores don’t carry it,” Olutoyin says. To introduce families to new options, Little Ones Learning Center is partnering with Common Market to offer a farmers market at the center where families can use food stamps to purchase farm-fresh food.

Voices for Georgia’s Children is another partner in the coalition that is working with the Georgia Family Connections Partnership to host WIC

farmers markets at Head Start locations, which mutually reinforce each other’s early childhood nutrition goals.

“We have so much more evidence and attention focused on food now and to support early care and education environments to help meet that need,” says Erica Fener Sitkoff, executive director of Voices for Georgia’s Children. “An example where that has started to manifest is in the relationship between Head Starts, WIC, local communities, farmers and pediatricians. Those sectors joining forces demonstrates how when we work together we can create improved food access at centers, as well as take home for families.”

Erica describes farm to early care and education and the coalition’s work as a win-win. “If you see the equation in its totality, it’s really powerful how it is a feedback loop of local farms, our state’s number one industry, supporting our number one future asset, our children.”



Courtesy of Quality Care for Children

For More Information

We're eager to share our knowledge in support of expanding farm to early care and education. Visit Every Child Thrives at <http://wkkf.co/itzy> for more resources on farm to early care and education. You can also contact us at communications@wkkf.org.

Additional Resources

National Farm to School Network is the go-to resource for farm to early care and education and farm to school. Their vision is that 100% of communities hold power in a racially just food system by 2025.

- For farm to early care and education, check out <http://www.farmtoschool.org/our-work/early-care-and-education>
- For state-by-state information, see <http://www.farmtoschool.org/our-network>
- For resources, explore their database <http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources>

Policy Equity Group works to promote equity and support the well-being of children and their families. WKKF funded them to serve as a technical assistance provider for implementing farm to early care and education in the five pilot states.

- Learn more at <https://policyequity.com/what-we-do/technical-assistance/>



Endnotes

1. https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/National%20Projections%20Brief_3.9.2021_o.pdf
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