



Minnesota

Farm to Early Care Network Action Plan





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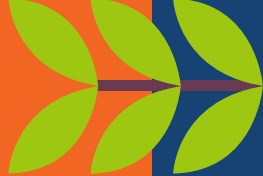
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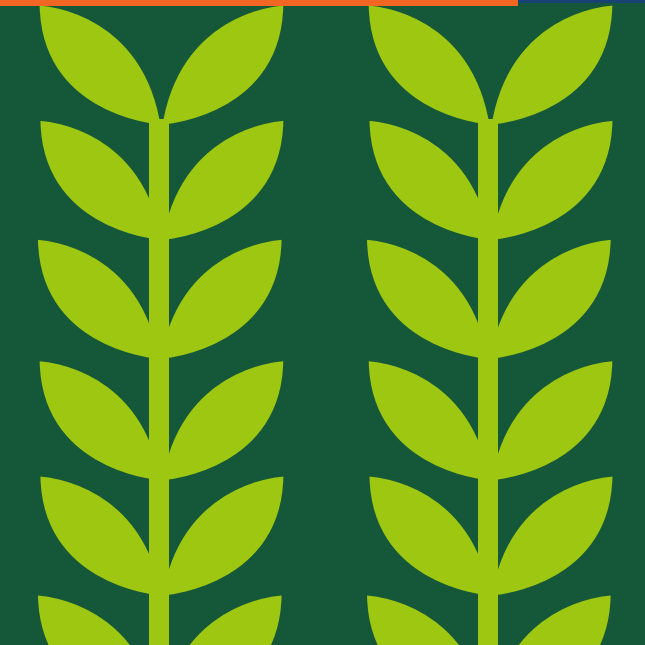
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INTRODUCING THE MINNESOTA FARM TO EARLY CARE NETWORK

The Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network started in 2014. Since its beginning, the network has focused on gathering and supporting those who believe in and support Farm to Early Care programs—including those working in state agencies; nonprofit organizations; and education, public health, and early care settings. The network is a group of people who bring together tools, resources, and people to help expand Farm to Early Care work across the state of Minnesota.

The Mission of the Farm to Early Care Network

Minnesota's Farm to Early Care Network supports Farm to Early Care in early learning programs across the state—by developing and supporting effective partnerships; advancing policies that benefit children, early care providers, and communities; and building systems that promote equitable access to locally sourced foods and experiential learning.

FARM TO EARLY CARE



Farm to Early Care works through strategic partnerships to help children ages 0–5 access healthy, local food; promote lifelong healthy eating behaviors and food skills among children, early care providers, and families; and support nearby farmers. Farm to Early Care initiatives can work through these partnerships to center communities that have historically been furthest from access, education, and other resources surrounding healthy foods. Early care programs play an important role in the partnership by “narrowing the gap” in nutrition access, especially through school meal programs and meals provided to children in childcare settings. Farm to Early Care supports early care settings and their communities in three main ways:

1

Food and agriculture education

exploring and talking about food and farming.

2

Local purchasing

buying locally grown products for young children’s regular meals and snacks.

3

Gardening

growing food on-site at early care facilities.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Minnesota's Farm to Early Care Network has turned its attention to planning the next steps for the network's Farm to Early Care efforts. To do so, the members of the network have been working together to

- support continued expansion of Farm to Early Care efforts,
- revisit the role of the network and existing partners,
- identify who else needs to be at the table for the next phase of work, and
- create a plan to continue to advance the work using available resources.

THE PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIES

To help expand equitable access to Farm to Early Care programs across the state, the Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network is focused on four key areas:

1

STRENGTHENING COLLABORATIONS



We know this work cannot be done alone. This focus area is all about making sure we include a broad range of partners in Farm to Early Care work and strengthen connections between farmers and early care programs.

What actions can help us get there?

- Expand the Farm to Early Care Network to engage a more diverse partnership.
- Create connections between farmers / farmer support organizations and early care programs.

2

INCREASING OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT



Many communities that could benefit from Farm to Early Care programs have not yet been reached. This focus area is about developing tailored materials and communication strategies that will make sure everyone is able to learn about this work and get involved.

What actions can help us get there?

- Develop and share culturally adapted and accessible materials.
- Produce a communications toolkit to support effective messaging to various audiences.
- Identify methods of engagement and collaboration with early care providers.

3

CREATING SUSTAINABILITY



For this work to continue for years to come, we must figure out how to get funding and support for both the statewide Farm to Early Care movement and the Farm to Early Care Network, which serves as the backbone organization to coordinate this work.

What actions can help us get there?

- Mobilize supporters to pursue policy and budget decisions that benefit Farm to Early Care.
- Seek out financial resources that help Farm to Early Care to grow and evolve as a statewide strategy.

4

BUILDING PROGRAMMATIC CAPACITY

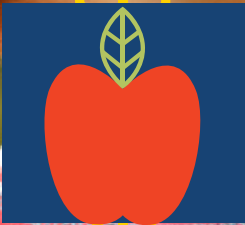


In addition to funding, farmers and early care providers should be able to easily find simple information, resources, and support to help them with their Farm to Early Care programming.

What actions can help us get there?

- Expand mini-grants and other funding opportunities to provide up-front capital for community-based Farm to Early Care initiatives.
- Streamline and centralize resources to make Farm to Early Care accessible for early care providers and local farmers.
- Create positions to support Farm to Early Care at the state level and regionally.





SETTING *the* CONTEXT

HEALTHY EATING IN THE EARLY YEARS

All children deserve access to nutritious, local foods that help them grow and thrive. In young children, healthy eating is a prime contributor to benefits such as stable energy, healthy brain development, strong bones and teeth, improved mental health, and avoidance of chronic illness.^{1,2} As children grow, adequate nutrition is also associated with positive outcomes such as increased school attendance rates, higher cognitive function and attention, and improved mood.³ To put it simply, healthy eating and access to adequate nutrition in the early years are at the foundation of healthy child development, which brings lifelong benefits for children and can have ripple effects within communities.

Unfortunately, because of social injustices such as poverty, racism, and uneven distribution of resources, not all children have equal access to healthy foods. In Minnesota, one child in 11 faces hunger. As in much of the United States, hunger disproportionately impacts children who are American Indian, Black, or other children of color, as well as those living in rural communities and those who are immigrants or members of migrant communities.⁴ In some Minnesota counties, as many as one in four children are hungry.⁵

Early care programs can have an important role to play to facilitate healthy eating and access to nutritious foods in the early years.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has long noted that schools—and more recently, early care programs—could play an important role in “narrowing the gap” in nutrition access, especially through school meal programs and meals provided to children in childcare settings through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Beyond providing nutritious meals, the CDC has also identified school and childcare settings as important venues for children to learn about healthy eating and build healthy habits.⁶



1 Cusick, S. E., & Georgieff, M. K. (2016, August). The role of nutrition in brain development: The golden opportunity of the “first 1000 days.” *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 175, 16–21. <https://www.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2016.05.013>

2 Decker, E. (2021, March 11). The importance of good nutrition for kids. *700 Children's: A Blog by Pediatric Experts*. <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/family-resources-education/700childrens/2021/03/importance-good-nutrition-kids>

3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). Childhood nutrition facts. *CDC Healthy Schools*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/nutrition/facts.htm>

4 Feeding America. (2021). *Food insecurity among child (<18 years) population in Mahnomon County*. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2020/child/minnesota/>

5 *Ibid.*

6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). School health guidelines to promote healthy eating and physical activity. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 60(RR05), 1–76. Cusick, S. E., & Georgieff, M. K. (2016, August). The role of nutrition in brain development: The golden opportunity of the “first 1000 days.” *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 175, 16–21. <https://www.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2016.05.013>

FARM TO EARLY CARE

Minnesota uses strategic partnerships to build initiatives that help children from birth through age 5 access healthy, local food and promote lifelong healthy eating behaviors and food skills.

These initiatives support children, early care providers, families, and nearby farmers; foster economic vitality; and strengthen communities. Farm to Early Care is dedicated to the incorporation of three main components in early care settings:

1 Food and agriculture education

exploring and talking about food and farming as part of a comprehensive early learning program.

2 Local purchasing

buying locally grown products to incorporate in young children's regular meals and snacks.

3 Gardening

growing food on-site at early care facilities.

In Minnesota, Farm to Early Care can be an important lever for addressing food access disparities among the state's youngest and most vulnerable residents. Recognizing the impact of limited access to healthy foods, those working to support Farm to Early Care initiatives across the state can work to center communities that have historically been furthest from access, education, and other resources surrounding healthy foods. By bridging the state's agricultural, food procurement, and early childhood systems, Farm to Early Care programs have been proven to create conditions that are good for children, good for local farmers, and good for communities.⁷

Good for children

- Participating in Farm to Early Care programs has been shown to benefit children, as they are more likely to be willing to try new foods and to eat a wider variety of foods, including fruits and vegetables.
- Early care is a great setting, since kids in early care settings consume most of their daily calories there, and they are developing taste preferences and eating habits that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives.
- Children in Farm to Early Care programs develop a deeper understanding of where food comes from and a sense of connection to their communities.
- Reaching kids can also indirectly influence the food and nutrition behaviors of early care providers, families, and community members.
- Farm to Early Care fits perfectly with the hands-on learning techniques already used in early care environments.

Good for farmers

- Farm to Early Care programs open an additional market for farmers, giving them another income stream in a diversified business model.
- Selling to early care programs can provide an opportunity to sell to additional markets.
- Selling to early care programs can offer reliable, predictable sales.
- Farm to Early Care programs build farmer relationships with community members, strengthening support for buying local and highlighting farmers' vital role in the community.

Good for communities

- Farm to Early Care programs build authentic relationships and strengthen community ties.
- For comparison, every \$1 spent on Farm to School, \$2.16 worth of local economic activity is generated.
- Money is invested into the local economy, supporting local jobs and businesses and helping communities thrive.

⁷ Minnesota Farm to Early Care. (n.d.). *Benefits of Farm to Early Care*. Retrieved May 2023 from <https://www.farmtoearlycaremn.org/benefits-of-farm-to-early-care>



THE MINNESOTA FARM TO EARLY CARE NETWORK

Since its inception in 2014, the Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network has focused on gathering and supporting key advocates and implementers of Farm to Early Care initiatives, including those representing state agencies; nonprofit organizations; and education, public health, and early care settings. The network is organized around a shared vision:

- a coordinated effort to advance Farm to Early Care initiatives statewide
- policies and legislation that sustain and promote Farm to Early Care
- a shared set of tools, resources, and best practices among Farm to Early Care advocates and implementers
- public awareness about the benefits of Farm to Early Care for children, farmers, and communities
- conditions in which all children can thrive through access to healthy foods and nutrition education

The network serves as a place where tools and resources are centralized and where various stakeholder groups can collaborate. Through meetings, network members have had opportunities to learn from one another and to apply new strategies and resources within their own communities

The mission of the Farm to Early Care Network

Minnesota's Farm to Early Care Network supports Farm to Early Care in early learning programs across the state—by developing and supporting effective partnerships; advancing policies that benefit children, early care providers, and communities; and building systems that promote equitable access to locally sourced foods and experiential learning.



Key milestones

- **2014:** The Farm to Early Care Network was established as a collaboration among Farm to Early Care advocates from state agencies; nonprofits; and education, public health, and early care settings. Initial network efforts focused on sharing resources, promoting enhanced coordination, and minimizing duplication of effort among organizations working in early care across the state.
- **2019:** Minnesota received funding from the Association of State Public Health Nutritionists (ASPHN) in the form of the Obesity Mini Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (Mini CollIN). This funding helped the network to strengthen Farm to Early Care's integration into the Minnesota public health system (the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership, or SHIP), identify trainers for Farm to Early Care across the state, and create materials for trainers promoting Farm to Early Care.
- **2020:** Minnesota received funding from ASPHN in the form of the Farm to Early Care Implementation Grant (FIG). This funding enabled the network to raise awareness, establish a mini-grant program, and leverage data to better understand the need statewide.
- **2021:** The first round of mini grants totaling \$10,000 were distributed to 13 settings throughout Minnesota.
- **2022:** The network launched Minnesota's Farm to Early Care website, which offers key information about the Farm to Early Care movement and how it is impacting Minnesota, along with resources for early care providers.
- **2022:** 31 mini grants provided \$22,500 to support Farm to Early Care efforts. These grants impacted nearly 700 children throughout Minnesota (over \$275,000 was requested).

The priority areas

To reach the goals of its mission, the Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network has chosen to prioritize these four strategies:

Strengthening collaborations

No single entity has the resources and reach to advance Farm to Early Care across all Minnesota communities. Creating meaningful progress toward this mission will require commitment and action from a diverse and multidisciplinary body of partners working toward a common goal.

Increasing outreach and engagement

Farm to Early Care is a win-win, not only for young children and early care programs, but also for farmers, the local economy, and the community. Accurate and consistent messaging to the public and to decision-makers is key to building interest and support.

Creating long-term support

In a climate in which funding and political support for initiatives can ebb and flow, initiatives that stand the test of time need a broad base of support, including financial resources, strategic partnerships, and engagement of decision-makers.

Building programmatic capacity

At the local level, Farm to Early Care efforts rest upon the ability of early care providers to embed initiatives into their early care and to partner with others, including farmers, to support the effort. This requires financial resources as well as nonfinancial resources, such as training and technical assistance.



THE OPPORTUNITY

Over the past 3 years, the Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network has made progress in its mission due to resources from the Farm to Early Care Implementation Grant (FIG). During the multiyear grant period, the network focused on supporting early care providers by partnering with them, educating state policymakers on the value of adding early them to the state's local food reimbursement program, and using geographic information system (GIS) mapping to identify providers with the greatest healthy food access challenges. The FIG served to unify the network around a shared set of grant-defined goals and activities and created a strong foundation of relationships, common intentions, and lessons learned. As the grant period comes to an end, the network turns its attention to the next generation of its Farm to Early Care work.

The opportunity at hand is to revisit the role of the network and existing partners, identify who else needs to be at the table for the next phase of work, and create a plan to continue to advance the work using available resources.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

From January to May 2023, the Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network received funding from ASPHN to engage in strategic planning to sustain the network's Farm to Early Care efforts beyond the life of the current grant period. With support from School Readiness Consulting, members of the network collaborated to identify previous accomplishments and challenges and to determine priorities, opportunities, and strategies for sustaining the network's Farm to Early Care initiatives moving forward.

THE STRATEGIC PLAN

The strategic plan will serve to articulate the mission, priorities, and efforts that all members of the network have in common and will create a road map for a unified effort in the coming years. Furthermore, as the network seeks additional financial and nonfinancial resources to sustain its work, the strategic plan will offer a concise account of prior, current, and future efforts as a way of communicating the network's direction to potential supporters.

The plan represents not only a commitment to action on the part of the network, but also an invitation to all who have a stake in the well-being and vitality of Minnesota's children, families, and communities. The network seeks to encompass more voices and to modify its work to reflect the values, needs, and desires of the broader community.



Looking **AHEAD**



Priority 1: Strengthening Collaborations

No single organization or entity has the resources and reach to advance Farm to Early Care across all Minnesota communities. Creating meaningful progress toward this mission will require commitment and action from a diverse and multidisciplinary body of partners working toward a common goal.

What strengths can we build on?

The Farm to Early Care Network has a strong track record of partnership and commitment.

From the first meetings in 2014, the then-unfunded network was born of a shared vision among partners working to bring Farm to Early Care to fruition. The initial effort was focused on sharing resources, information, and the intention to deliver high-quality Farm to Early Care programming to more of Minnesota's young children. Since then, the network has had the opportunity to expand its work through funded initiatives. Through these structural shifts, the same spirit of motivation and engagement among core partners has remained a defining quality of the Farm to Early Care Network. To date, the network benefits from longevity and familiarity among existing members who hold in common a strong desire to work in ways that are collaborative and nonduplicative.

Among the committed partners in Minnesota's Farm to Early Care Network are state agencies and others that have statewide reach and influence.

Over time, the participation of these partners has created opportunities for the network to build awareness of Farm to Early Care as a growing part of the early childhood system, enabling emerging connections with state-administered programs such as pre-K, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the state's early childhood Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The participation of these partners continues to open doors for sustainability by embedding Farm to Early Care within the state early childhood system and other sectors in various ways.

What strengths can we build on?

While it has been intentional and beneficial to the Farm to Early Care movement that the network is composed of partners with statewide reach, the hope is to balance the involvement of partners at the state level with participation from those who are more directly linked to and impacted by Farm to Early Care efforts.

To use Farm to Early Care as a lever that advances equity, it is critical to engage impacted communities in envisioning and co-designing initiatives that respond to their specific values, strengths, and needs. Diversifying the voices at the table—particularly by including more early care providers, community leaders, farmers, and families of young children—can help to shed light on the most pressing challenges that can be addressed by Farm to Early Care initiatives and can help bring to bear community-driven, sustainable solutions.

Furthermore, the involvement of state agencies and statewide programs brings challenges related to coordination. While there is significant potential for integrating resources and embedding Farm to Early Care into the fabric of the early childhood system, there is not always adequate capacity or incentive for meaningful collaboration. As is true in many states, in Minnesota early childhood work is often siloed within state agencies and programs, as leaders spend their limited resources focusing on funder-specific activities and benchmarks. While coordination and collaboration across agencies and programs may be intended and highly valued, it requires dedicated capacity and leadership to make connections and create incentives for statewide entities to operate in this way. Relatedly, Farm to Early Care work to date has largely focused on partnerships with state agencies and programs focused on early care settings, with less representation from those focused on agriculture and food procurement and distribution systems. This gap in engagement could be standing in the way of a stronger, truly cross-sector effort driven by strong relationships between the farming and early care communities. By expanding the network to include additional thought leadership, the network could access fresh solutions and ways of operationalizing the mission, along with increased buy-in and visibility for the work.



Some opportunities to strengthen collaborations include the following:

1 **Expand the Farm to Early Care Network to engage a wider range of partners, reflecting those with state-wide reach and those with on-the-ground experience.** As a priority, the network could make an intentional effort to incorporate early care providers, farmers, community leaders, and families of young children as collaborators and decision-makers on community-based Farm to Early Care initiatives, to ground this work and to ensure its effectiveness and relevance. To effectively engage a wider group of stakeholders, the network has worked to increase opportunities for nap-time connection for early care providers, as well as a newsletter and other communications efforts. To further expand, the network will need to continue to explore other ways of engagement for the various stakeholders in Farm to Early Care

2 **Create connections between farmers or farmer support organizations and early care programs.** This opportunity could begin with an effort to hear from both farmers and early care providers about how they would hope to benefit from stronger connections and what challenges they face or anticipate facing when it comes to participating in a robust Farm to Early Care effort. This might also include leveraging the statewide reach of existing partners to forge new or stronger partnerships at the state level and to engage additional support and leadership from agencies and programs focused on agriculture and food procurement and distribution.

Priority 2: Increasing Outreach and Engagement

Farm to Early Care is a win-win, not only for young children and early care programs, but also for farmers, the local economy, and the community. Accurate and consistent messaging to families, early care providers, and decision-makers about the significance of Farm to Early Care is key to building interest, engagement, and continued support.

What strengths can we build on?

The Farm to Early Care Network has worked through community partnerships to build relationships and awareness of Farm to Early Care among early care providers. Network members highlight the importance of meeting community members where they are with information about Farm to Early Care initiatives and are committed to outreach that adds value to community-based programming and doesn't overburden communities. For example, outreach to early care providers has included cooking activities and kits, topical learning sessions, and more. The network has been able to support some pilot work of partner organizations, including the implementation of Farm to Early Care kits with Spanish-speaking early care providers and the creation of gardening and growing professional development for Hmong early care providers.

Beyond early care providers and farmers, member organizations of the network have initiated a variety of strategies to increase awareness in the broader community. The most effective efforts have leveraged storytelling by elevating the voices of early care providers participating in Farm to Early Care and sharing the impact. Engaging stories and photos of initiatives in action bring Farm to Early Care work to life for many who might not otherwise hear about Farm to Early Care efforts. Strategies to increase awareness include the network's website, updated by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), which features case studies that document the success of Farm to Early Care initiatives; an emerging social media presence; and efforts to connect early childhood programs to state funding opportunities. These strategies also include the efforts of Renewing the Countryside (RTC) to distribute literature and resources at the state fair and other events that draw a crowd of people who are diverse geographically and in their roles.

What are the gaps and opportunities?

While the network and its member organizations have made headway in connecting with early care providers and farmers, not all communities are being reached equally. Early care providers and farmers of color, those representing and serving low-income and minoritized groups, and those who speak a primary language other than English have not been reached as consistently. Part of this challenge is related to limitations on the capacity of the network and its member organizations to focus on accessibility of communications—including arranging for timely translation of materials, seeking out trusted community leaders and organizations to serve as conduits of communication, and building relationships.

While individual members of the network have made significant contributions to increasing awareness, these efforts have not consistently been grounded in a cohesive, network-wide strategy. There is an opportunity to streamline efforts around building awareness into a single, focused communications strategy, owned and executed collaboratively by the network. A focused strategy can ensure the network reaches key audiences—including both community-based providers and organizations that could benefit from Farm to Early Care and decision-makers, funders, and potential partners whose engagement could help to advance the statewide effort. A focused communication strategy could also build awareness generally across the state, delivering the message of Farm to Early Care to community members who may benefit from or have interest in the efforts (e.g., grandparents, future parents, local businesses, or community programs). A connected effort can help achieve higher levels of engagement and reduce dependence on the capacity and resources of individual organizations or people within the network.

Some opportunities to increase awareness include the following:

1 Develop and disseminate culturally adapted and accessible materials. One key element of a cohesive communications strategy would include building the network's capacity (through existing or new partnerships or by drawing on resources that exist within state agencies and statewide programs represented by the network) to efficiently communicate to racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse communities. This would include mechanisms to support timely and accurate translation of materials, relationship-building with trusted community leaders and organizations, and the continuous commitment of network members to build critical awareness and ensure their interactions with communities honor the strengths and assets that exist while supporting community priorities.

2 Develop a communications toolkit to support effective messaging to various audiences. Another way to be more strategic and aligned in messaging to key audiences is through shared norms and tools. Recognizing that differing audiences will respond to different messages and platforms, the network could focus on identifying key audiences and creating a set of concrete tools (e.g., social media posts, case study templates, talking points) shown to be effective at building awareness and support for Farm to Early Care. This toolkit would be made available to multiple groups with a vested interest in spreading the message about this work, including early care providers, state agencies and programs focused on early childhood services and support for farmers, families, community members and leaders, advocates, and more.



Priority 3: Creating Sustainability

In a climate in which funding and political support for initiatives ebb and flow, initiatives that stand the test of time are those that are proactive about seeking a broad base of support, including financial resources and engagement of decision-makers.

What strengths can we build on?

Farm to Early Care is currently well positioned to be elevated as a statewide policy priority in Minnesota. Upon the reelection of Governor Walz and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan in 2022, the executive office expressed a bold commitment to the state's young children. In the words of Governor Walz, "as a former teacher, coach, and parent, I have made it my mission to make Minnesota the best state in the country for kids to grow up. We have a historic opportunity to take bold action to deliver for Minnesotans, and we're putting forward a budget that meets the moment."⁸ The stated commitment to young children, backed by a promise to infuse additional state funding into the early childhood system, creates an opportunity for Farm to Early Care advocates to make sure support for initiatives is on the table and that the benefits and connections to education and child well-being are well understood by decision-makers. Along with additional funding for early childhood programs and services, the governor has proposed a consolidated governance structure for the state early childhood system. Such a change has the potential to streamline services for children and families from birth to age 5, laying the groundwork for stronger collaboration, data sharing, and decision-making that would benefit the effort to embed Farm to Early Care in a sustainable, cross-sector way.

On the national stage, the success of Farm to School (K–12) initiatives has set an important precedent to expand into the early childhood space. Farm to Early Care's demonstrated

benefits to children and families, early care programs, farmers, and local economies have earned it bipartisan and multi-sector support and have created an appealing opportunity for funders. For example, the State Physical Activity and Nutrition (SPAN) program, through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), has supported states in implementing evidence-based strategies to improve nutrition and physical activity, and this funding opportunity is expected to renew. Such opportunities to infuse dedicated funding for statewide or locally based Farm to Early Care initiatives sit alongside opportunities to leverage existing funding streams, such as CACFP, Head Start and Early Head Start, and US Department of Agriculture block grants, by aligning the tenets of Farm to Early Care with the intent and requirements of existing funded efforts.



⁸ KTTC Staff. (2023, January 17). Gov. Walz announces budget to make MN the best state for kids. KTTC. <https://www.kttc.com/2023/01/17/gov-walz-announces-budget-make-mn-best-state-kids/>

What are the gaps and opportunities?

While the benefits of Farm to Early Care are well recognized and affirmed by a broad range of stakeholders, funding and sustaining Farm to Early Care initiatives at the state level can be a challenge. Unlike K–12 systems, early childhood systems are highly decentralized. Among other challenges, there is no single funding stream or agency that could support a statewide approach to Farm to Early Care. Instead, proponents of Farm to Early Care face the challenge of embedding the work across multiple subsystems and continuously seeking additional funding to create the infrastructure to do so. This requires dedicated leadership capacity and skill, which is not readily available and funded within the patchwork system of early care providers.

At the program and community level, early care providers in Minnesota face their own challenges in securing funding for local Farm to Early Care efforts. To date, the availability of funding to implement Farm to Early Care efforts has been limited for early care providers, who have largely relied on grant applications and reimbursement. Limited funding results in continued access in more well-resourced settings and barriers for settings that lack the capacity to apply for grants. This challenge presents the need for additional community-level coordination and the support of eligible entities to partner on behalf of Farm to Early Care.

Some opportunities to increase awareness include the following:

1 Mobilize advocates to pursue state policy and budget decisions that benefit Farm to Early Care. In the wake of the governor's stated commitment to young children, the opportunity exists to align advocacy efforts surrounding both early childhood and local agriculture to present a cohesive policy agenda that prioritizes Farm to Early Care and creates as much flexibility and benefit as possible for early care providers representing or serving historically marginalized communities. The network can continue to work to educate and influence decision-makers and raise up champions for Farm to Early Care in Minnesota with an emphasis on equity.

2 Seek out financial resources that help to sustain and grow Farm to Early Care as a statewide strategy. As a collective of cross-sector Farm to Early Care leaders, the network could be positioned to focus its efforts on identifying and forecasting federal and state funding opportunities. Part of this work would involve recognizing and aligning opportunities to the institutional advantages of the various partners involved in Farm to Early Care while prioritizing the collective goals and interests of the statewide Farm to Early Care movement. This effort would include working to systematize ways of leveraging existing reliable funding streams to embed and sustain programming, while seeking out additional grant funding and other resources to sustain the network and create the infrastructure for an effective Farm to Early Care strategy.

Priority 4: Building Programmatic Capacity

At the local level, Farm to Early Care efforts rest upon the ability of farmers and early care providers to effectively partner with one another and embed the initiative within their respective roles. To do so will require financial resources as well as nonfinancial resources such as training and technical assistance.

What strengths can we build on?

In recent years, the Farm to Early Care partners have worked to build relationships with early care providers by offering financial and nonfinancial resources. By focusing on relationship-building with trusted community entities already supporting Farm to Early Care, partners within the network have created opportunities to add capacity and value to community-driven efforts. These opportunities have come in the form of mini-grants to early care programs to help initiate local food procurement efforts, gardening, and other Farm to Early Care priorities, as well as collaboration on professional learning and technical assistance alongside community partners already engaged in Farm to Early Care.

As part of a commitment to equity, these efforts have focused on building sustainability within community-driven Farm to Early Care efforts in historically marginalized communities. A key aim of investment in community-based Farm to Early Care initiatives has been to support these initiatives to become more sustainable. To do so, there has been an emphasis on tracking the impact of these investments and working to make a case for embedding local Farm to Early Care initiatives in the larger Farm to School movement, including making early care providers eligible for additional state funding and other supports. According to the values of the network, supporting sustainability of community-driven initiatives also means honoring the assets that communities have built. Through the Farm to Early Care partners' ongoing engagement with communities, they have taken care to work alongside community initiatives and to acknowledge the richness of resources such as "relationship capital," space and time, community wisdom, shared responsibility for collective well-being, a culture of resource sharing, and more. For those seeking to support community-driven efforts, a successful approach to investing in sustainability often means building on these powerful assets—not attempting to create new ones.

What are the gaps and opportunities?

Financial support is often available as reimbursements, but small businesses frequently need resources up front. In many instances, funding opportunities for Farm to Early Care are set up as reimbursements. However, many early care programs and local farms are small businesses, and like many other types of small businesses, they often operate on small margins and do not have the capital to extend themselves. For funded initiatives to effectively support Farm to Early Care, it is critical that they make financial resources available up front to avoid overburdening early childhood programs and small local farms. This shift requires advocacy and rethinking of existing funding mechanisms and expectations of funders.

A key challenge for local Farm to Early Care initiatives is embedding them in day-to-day programming according to existing regulations. To apply the innovation of Farm to Early Care within existing guidelines and other constraints requires a nuanced understanding and level of effort that not all early care providers can access in the course of their day-to-day work. The effort could include navigating CACFP regulations, integrating nutrition education and gardening with existing curricular requirements, establishing mutually beneficial partnerships with local farmers, and more. Meanwhile, local farmers need assurances that their market is reliable and at a large enough scale to be profitable, but both qualities can be difficult to achieve when working with individual early care programs. Considering the full scope of demands on early care providers and on farmers, taking a strategy such as Farm to Early Care to scale would have to include mechanisms to streamline key elements, making the strategy an accessible and appealing opportunity for all.

Some opportunities to build programmatic capacity include the following:

1 Expand funding opportunities to provide up-front capital for community-based Farm to Early Care initiatives. As partners within the Farm to Early Care Network push for opportunities for early care providers to receive grant funding directly from the state, it should be recognized that state bureaucracies move slowly and that there will be a need for up-front investment in local initiatives. This could include offering support to community-based initiatives to leverage public-private partnerships as supplements to state investments or offering loans to enable initiatives to get off the ground without overextending themselves financially.

2 Streamline and centralize resources to make Farm to Early Care accessible for early care providers and local farmers. As part of the governor's effort to consolidate governance and implementation of the early childhood system, and potentially leveraging existing structures (e.g., Minnesota's early childhood hubs), there could be a timely opportunity to support staff positions that focus on linking early care providers to local farmers and building the capacity of both for the purposes of participation in Farm to Early Care. This support could include technical assistance to help early care providers navigate regulations as they seek to procure food locally; dissemination of information to strengthen regional participation and create economies of scale; development or curation of ready-made, standards-aligned curricula and classroom resources to integrate nutrition education; and more.





NEXT STEPS: WHERE DO WE START?

The Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network stands firm in the belief that every child in Minnesota can and should have access to fresh local foods and nutrition education through their early care program. The network is committed to making that belief a shared value among all stakeholders and a reality for Minnesota's youngest residents. This plan seeks to outline initial steps in pursuit of the network's mission. The plan acts as a guide and a living document to build from as the network's capacity increases and as the policy landscape and conditions for Minnesota's young children, families, early care providers, and farmers shift over time.

As the strategic planning process comes to an end, the Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network focuses on implementation. Continued engagement and collaboration with local, state, and national partners will be foundational to sustaining and advancing Farm to Early Care work. Therefore, this plan represents not only a commitment to action on the part of the network, but also an invitation to all who have a stake in the well-being and vitality of Minnesota's children, families, and communities. The plan calls on everyone to envision and work toward improved food and nutrition education access for Minnesota's youngest and most vulnerable residents and toward a higher standard for beneficial food systems for all who call Minnesota home. The network seeks to encompass more voices and to modify our work to reflect the values, needs, and desires of our broader community. We welcome feedback and conversation to support Farm to Early Care in Minnesota; join us at www.farmtoearlycaremn.org.

APPENDIX: WORK PLAN

How will the Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network continue its efforts to expand equitable access to Farm to Early Care programs across the state? Building from four key areas, the network has started to develop specific strategies and measurable outcomes as a road map to guide its work within the four key areas and to drive toward the intended outcomes. The network will develop and expand the following work plan as it continues to pursue funding to support its Farm to Early Care efforts.

Statement of Purpose				
Minnesota's Farm to Early Care Network supports Farm to Early Care in early learning programs across the state, by developing and supporting effective partnerships; advancing policies that benefit children, early care providers, and communities; and building systems that promote equitable access to locally sourced foods and experiential learning.				
KEY AREAS	STRATEGIES	KEY PLAYERS	MEASURABLE OUTCOMES	DATA TO MEASURE OUTCOMES
Strengthen collaborations				
Increase outreach and engagement				
Create long-term support				
Build programmatic capacity				