

## Farm to ECE Listening Session- Mixed Group (Farmers/Food Hubs and Providers)

### Setup

- Participants seated in a circle/rectangle facing one another
- Each participant gets a nametag and/or table tent with name, org. and job/role
- Post-its or note cards for each participant (2 or 3 per person)
- Flipchart/sticky wall chart with ground rules, introduction question
- Flip chart sheet with definitions of common words/acronyms that may be used throughout the session

Session goals: find out what they are already doing, how farm to ECE fits in, why they aren't currently doing it, and what supports/pushes they need

### Welcome

Hello and welcome to our listening session. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy day to join our group. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I work for \_\_\_\_\_. Today we are joining you on behalf of the Alabama Farm to ECE Coalition, a group of individuals and organizations who are committed to helping Alabama's youngest children eat and enjoy fresh foods grown right here in Alabama. The purpose of today's session is to learn how you feel about building connections between farmers and early childhood programs— where are the opportunities and what challenges might get in the way.

### What is a listening session?

A listening session is an opportunity for us to hear, first hand, about your experiences on a specific topic – today we are focusing on Farm to Early Care and Education, or Farm to ECE for short. We do this by asking you questions about what you know and what you see every day in your work and in your community. Specifically, we want to know your thoughts about bringing Alabama produce into early childhood programs. We understand that this might be a new idea for some of you, and that's completely fine. It's important you share not only your good opinions or experiences but also the bad. We will use you share with us to help us identify ways to make participating in Farm to ECE activities easier and more appealing for child care providers, farmers, and other stakeholders.

### Overview of the topic

Some of you may not be familiar with the early care and education or ECE field. In Alabama, there are hundreds of individuals and organizations that care for children from birth through about age five on either a full-time or a part-time basis. When we talk about early care and education programs, we mean

child care centers or what you might think of as “daycare”, Head Start, state preK, and family child care homes where one or two adults watch up to six children in their home. We’re fortunate to have a few early care and education providers joining us today, and I’m sure they’d be happy to share more about the work that they do if you have other questions for them.

Before we go into the listening session, I’d like to give you a little background on Early Care and Education, or Farm to ECE, for those of you who are less familiar. The National Farm to School Network is the leading information, advocacy, and networking organization focused on connecting schools and child care to local food sourcing, gardens, and agriculture education. They describe Farm to ECE as offering: “increased access to...local food sourcing, school gardens and food, and agriculture education to enhance the quality of the educational experience in all types of ECE settings (e.g., preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start, programs in K - 12 school districts). Farm to ECE offers benefits that parallel the goals and priorities of the early care and education community including emphasis on experiential learning opportunities, parent and community engagement and life-long health and wellness for children, families and caregivers.” In practice, Farm to ECE can mean a child care center buying local peaches and serving them at lunch, children growing tomatoes in their family child care garden, a field trip to a local farm, or bringing a farmer into a classroom to teach preschoolers a lesson about how plants grow.

### Housekeeping

Before we begin, I’d like to take care of some housekeeping items. This discussion will last no longer than two hours. My primary job is to keep us on track. There may be times when I will ask for more details about a comment or a topic, but other times I will try to speed us up or I might wrap up a conversation to keep us from going over time. You are welcome to eat or drink as we chat. Please take breaks as you need them! We are going to record this discussion so that we don’t miss any of your comments, however, we will not be sharing any information that could identify anyone who took part in this session. This is a voluntary activity – you can skip any questions that you do not want to answer, and you can opt out of the session at any time. Any final reports that are made about this discussion will be kept confidential--we will not use any names or information that would identify you or might let people know what you said. Also, we ask you to keep the information you hear from others confidential. It’s important to protect everyone’s privacy.

## Introductions

First, let's get to know each other. Going around the room, I'd like each of you to share: *[refer to chart paper that lists these questions as a "cheat sheet"]*

- First name
- Where you work, and what you do there
- What was your favorite fruit or vegetable when you were a child?

Thanks so much for sharing and welcome again!

## Initial Questions

Before we get started, I'd like each of you to take a minute to write down what you think of when you hear the term "Farm to ECE" or "Farm to Preschool." Write down a few words on the post-it in front of you and we'll collect those post-its at the end.

Okay, now we're going to dive into the listening session. For the first two questions, we'll just go around the room and have you say your answers on a scale of 1-5. There's no need to explain your answers now—we'll have plenty of time to get more information during other parts of the listening session.

*[Moderator: post a scale on the flip chart, and tally each response]*

1. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is none and 5 is a lot, how much do you know about Farm to ECE activities?
2. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is none and 5 is a lot, how interested are you in participating in Farm to ECE activities?

Great. Moving forward, go ahead and chime in whenever you have an answer to share.

3. Is serving, growing, and teaching children about local foods is important? Why or why not?
4. What appeals to you most about Farm to ECE?
5. What stops or prevents you from being involved in Farm to ECE?

Thanks. Now that we've heard some of your initial feelings about Farm to ECE, we are going to take some time to learn more about how you decide where to sell or buy food. Some of these questions will be specific to farmers and others will be specific to ECE providers, and if you operate as a food hub, feel free to join whichever group makes sense to you. To do this, we're going to break out into groups. I'd like the farmers and food distributors to form one group, and the people involved with child care to

break out into another group. We're going to give you each a set of similar questions, and I'd like you to answer them as a group. You'll have 10 minutes to answer these questions. After the 10 minutes are up, we'll all come back together and share your answers. I'd like each group to choose a representative to report your answers to the larger group. Remember that there are no wrong answers here so if you have a thought or idea please share it with your group.

(Moderator gives the **farmers and food distributors** group a sheet of chart paper with these questions and post it notes):

6. For those of you who grow fresh fruits and vegetables, where do you sell most of what you grow?
7. For food distributors - how do you find farmers to buy from? How do you find places to sell the food you buy?
8. When you decide where to sell your fruits and vegetables, what do you think about? Take a post-it and jot down three things that are important to you when you're selling fruits and vegetables.
9. What are some foods you produce that you'd like to be able to sell more of locally?
10. What has prevented you from either selling those foods locally or buying local foods?

(Moderator gives the **ECE providers** group a sheet of paper with these questions):

11. For those who purchase fresh fruits and vegetables to serve in your program, where do you usually purchase them?
12. When you decide to purchase fruits and vegetables for your program, what do you look for?  
Take a post-it and jot down three things that are important to you when you're shopping for fruits and vegetables
13. *For ECE providers:* What are some local foods that you would like to be able to buy but haven't been able to?
14. *For all:* What has prevented you from either selling those foods locally or buying local foods?

Thank you, everyone! The 10 minutes are up, so I'd like you to finish up your thoughts, and will the representative for each group come to the front and share your answers? We'll be keeping track on the flip chart, and we'll note where there are overlaps in each group's answers. We'll spend about 5 minutes on this. Also, we'll be sharing out both farmer and ECE provider lists for the fruits and vegetables farmers/food distributors decide to sell, and ECE providers decide to buy. Group leads, please bring

those post-it notes to the front with you, and I'll record them on the flipchart. *[moderator writes on flipchart and tallies repeat answers]*

Thank you all for sharing. Now we'd like to hear a little more about your experiences with and feelings about Farm to ECE. For this part, we'll all talk together as a large group. Please feel free to chime in with your responses.

### Past Experience

15. Do any of you have experience selling farm-fresh foods directly to institutions (schools, hospitals, child care, etc), or purchasing and serving farm-fresh produce to children?
  - a. If you've had some success, what helped you succeed? *[training, food hub, farmers market, personal relationships, etc.]*
  - b. If you've tried to work on Farm to School or Farm to ECE in the past and haven't been successful, what happened?
  - c. For those of you who haven't tried it yet, why not?
  - d. Are there any policies or regulations that you are aware of that get in the way of you doing so?

### Opportunities

Since Farm to ECE may be a new idea to some of you, I'd like to take some time to talk about what opportunities might be for farmers, food hubs/distributors, and child care providers to work together to help get fresh Alabama produce on the plates of our youngest kids. Farm to ECE covers three groups of activities: serving fresh local foods, gardening and growing food, and nutrition or agriculture education.

16. We've touched on a few of them, but what opportunities are there for farmers and ECE provider to connect to serve more local foods in child care? *[build personal relationship, direct buying arrangements, CSA shares, using food hubs or farmers markets, etc.]*
17. How could farmers and ECE providers work together to get young kids involved in gardening?
18. What opportunities are there for farmers to be involved in nutrition or agriculture education in child care? *[field trips, farmer visits, sharing seeds that kids can grow, etc.]*

## Challenges

We've heard a few of the concerns you have about getting involved in Farm to ECE, but now we'd like to hear a little more.

19. What are some of the things that make it difficult to get fresh local foods onto the plates of children in child care? *[transportation, cost, space for storing food, lack of relationships between farmers and ECE providers]*
20. Can you think of any laws or regulations that could pose a challenge to buying, selling, or serving fresh local produce in child care?

## Final Questions

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and experiences with us today. I just have a few more questions to wrap up the listening session.

21. What, if anything, would you like to know more about related to Farm to ECE activities?
22. Given all that we've discussed so far, what is one suggestion you have to better connect local foods and farmers to early care and education?

*Moderator gives a brief summary of what she's heard/key takeaways from the entire session, then asks "Does that sound right?"*

23. What else do you have to share that you haven't had a chance to share already??
24. Thank you again for helping us learn more about your experiences with local foods. Please make sure you sign our receipt form to receive your stipend before you leave.

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Post-session debrief: After the listening session have the administering team regroup and talk about how the session went:

- What went well?
- What went poorly?
- Did the conversation lose sight of the goal at any point?
  - If it did, how can we prevent that at the next session? How?
- What specific topics spurred discussion?
- Can that topic be used to spur conversation at other listening sessions when participants struggle to keep the conversation going?
- Were there any points made that were not considered before?
- Did you run out of time?
  - Do we need to have a longer listening session next time?