

## **Mississippi Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) Strategic Plan: 2021-2023**

In 2020, Mississippi was awarded a Farm to Early Care and Education Implementation Grant (FIG) from the Association of State Public Health Nutritionists (ASPHN) to strengthen its state-level farm to ECE initiatives over a one-year period. Farm to early care and education (ECE) improves access to healthy, locally grown foods, gardening opportunities, and food-based learning activities in all types of ECE settings, including child care centers, preschools, family child care home providers, and Head Start/Early Head Start programs. Increasing access to local gardens, fresh food sourcing, and agriculture education promotes family wellness, and enhances child educational experiences within ECE settings. Farm to ECE food-based activities and strategies create market opportunities for farmers and supports community connections. Local, “Mississippi grown” produce is abundant and includes blueberries, muscadine grapes, strawberries, plums, watermelon, okra, purple hull peas, sweet potatoes, mustard greens, and collard greens, all of which could benefit from greater access to ECE providers through farm to ECE activities. To guide the implementation of farm-to-ECE in Mississippi, the Mississippi FIG subcommittee engaged in a collaborative process to develop the following strategic plan.

**Vision:** All of Mississippi’s farmers and early care and education programs serving children ages 0-5, including center-based childcare, family child care home providers, Pre-K, Head Start and Early Head Start, are equipped with the tools and resources to successfully implement and sustain farm to early care and education activities to benefit young children across the state.

**Mission:** The Farm to ECE Subcommittee aims to build sustainable infrastructure and local capacity to create more equitable access to healthy, Mississippi-grown foods and nutrition education for children, families and early care and education providers while building new marketing opportunities for farmers.

**Goal 1:** Advance a sustainable and inclusive farm to ECE movement by building awareness and engaging a network of leaders and stakeholders across the state

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**Objective:** *Establish a statewide coalition that brings together ECE, food, and public health system partners*

- Assemble a cross-sector statewide farm to ECE subcommittee to promote the long-term sustainability of farm to ECE through monthly meetings (**Lead: MS State Dept of Health; February 2021**)
- Develop an asset map to identify opportunities for further coordination (**Lead: FIG partners with subcommittee; March 2021**)
- Promote collaboration and coordination across state departments of health, human services, education, and agriculture to sustain farm to ECE (**Lead: FIG partners with subcommittee; Ongoing**)

**Objective:** *Identify communication and outreach strategies that successfully engage and inform ECE and food system partners*

- Create and maintain a farm to ECE-specific webpage with resources on the Mississippi Farm to School Network site (**Lead: MS Farm to School Network; May 2021**)

- Develop and disseminate 3-5 marketing resources that highlight the importance and benefits of farm to ECE to multiple audiences (e.g., farmers, ECE programs, policymakers) (**Lead: MS Farm to School Network; Ongoing**)
- Identify 3-5 individuals who can serve on a Speakers Bureau to present on farm to ECE at conferences and meetings; develop content for slides for different audiences (e.g., food system, ECE system, public health system) and identify opportunities for 3-5 presentations in 2021-2022 (**Lead: FIG partners with subcommittee; December 2022**)
- Identify 3-4 ECE and farm sites for field visits and demonstration of proof of concept (**Lead: MS Farm to School Network; December 2022**)

## **Goal 2:** Support ECE providers and families by improving access to and training on healthy local foods and nutrition education opportunities

**Objective:** *Develop professional development and nutrition education resources for ECE programs serving young children and their families*

- Establish a technical assistance model for ECE programs receiving mini grants through the FIG program to receive guidance on farm to ECE self-assessment and action plan implementation (**Lead: FIG partners; July 2021**)
- Continue to coordinate an online learning collaborative of ECE programs that will meet regularly to discuss their work and share ideas with their peers (**Lead: MS Farm to School Network; Ongoing**)
- Hold five webinars to offer creative ideas for teachers to incorporate farm to ECE/nutrition education into ECE classrooms (**Lead: FIG partners; October 2021**)

**Objective:** *Support ECE programs, farmers, and families in connecting and streamlining the purchase and preparation of Mississippi grown foods*

- Identify and engage cross-sector teams from farms and ECE programs, including directors/owners, food service staff, teachers, and parents (**Lead: MS Farm to School Network; Ongoing**)
- Incorporate a Farm to ECE track/component into MS Farm to School Network 2022 Institute featuring lessons learned from FIG mini-grant programs (**Lead: MS Farm to School Network; July 2022 and July 2023**)
- Continue to promote farm to ECE web page with families, farmers, and providers (**Lead: FIG partners; Ongoing**)

## **Goal 3:** Build capacity for local food procurement infrastructure across the state, while engaging key ECE and food system partners

**Objective:** *Explore procurement models that support affordability for farmers and consistency for ECE sites*

- Create resource materials and pathways to implementation that highlight different types of local food procurement strategies (i.e., resources to describe promising practices in other states, including food hubs, central kitchens, community supported agriculture, shared services) (**Lead: Policy Equity Group; 2022-2023**)
- Explore purchasing practices and potential opportunities between ECE sites and K-12 school districts to allow more small programs to access local food distribution strategies (**Lead: Policy Equity Group, MS State Dept of Health (LP); 2022-2023**)

***Objective: Cultivate self-sustaining relationships between farmers and ECE sites***

- Organize four local/regional networking events (virtual or in-person) to create connections between farmers and ECE sites (i.e., “speed-dating” to better understand needs in different regions of state) (**Lead: MS Farm to School Network; April - May 2022 and April - May 2023**)
- Disseminate opportunities and resources to encourage ongoing communication and coordination between farmers and ECE sites (i.e., online directory of farmers and ECE sites interested in farm to ECE by region) (**Lead: FIG Partners (Dorothy & Purvie); Ongoing/coordinated with networking events**)

**Goal 4:** Achieve long-term sustainability for scaling of farm to ECE to more programs, reaching more children and families

***Objective: Identify additional funding sources to sustain long-term farm to ECE expansion***

- Emphasize connections between farm to ECE models in supporting the goals (i.e., food, child nutrition/health, and early childhood program quality) in applications for public and private grants (**Lead: MS Dept. of Health (sugg. for other support partners); Ongoing**)
- Explore opportunities to apply for funding that align with and can support farm to ECE efforts (**Lead: MS Dept. of Health (sugg. for other support partners); Ongoing**)

***Objective: Identify additional local, state, and federal policy opportunities to sustain long-term farm to ECE expansion***

- Identify and leverage emerging policy opportunities to support and scale farm to ECE implementation (i.e., state childcare plans, American Rescue Plan Act funding) (**Lead: Policy Equity Group, MS State Dept. of Health, MS Farm to School Network; Ongoing**)

**Appendix: Asset Mapping Exercise Graphic**