

Farm to Early Care and Education Continues to Foster Bright Futures for Children and Communities

COVID-19 AND FARM TO ECE | SEPTEMBER 2022

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Farm to early care and education (ECE) promotes child health and increases access to healthy foods through a collection of strategies that are centered in experiential learning and family and community engagement. Farm to ECE brings three core elements—gardening, food and agriculture education, and local food purchasing—into every type of ECE setting. These include family child care homes, child care centers, Head Start, and preschools in K-12 districts.

Not only does farm to ECE hold many benefits for children and families, child care sites, and farmers, but it has also been used as a strategy to mitigate the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many providers, farm to ECE supportive organizations, and government agencies have seen the opportunity to improve food access for families, communities, and ECE staff impacted by the pandemic while simultaneously supporting local farmers and vendors struggling under the strained supply chain. This has been achieved by building capacity and infrastructure for local

purchasing and other farm to ECE activities.¹ In addition, many organizations took advantage of the flexibilities offered to them by changes in federal policy, leveraging the adaptability of farm to ECE and propelling the movement forward¹.

In its fourth iteration, intended to add to the knowledge of the previous three surveys, National Farm to School Network (NFSN) partnered with Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) to implement the 2021 version of the National Farm to Early Care and Education Survey. The survey series completed by NFSN and CRFS in 2012², 2015³, 2018⁴, and now 2021, is the only national farm to ECE-specific assessment of activity reach and participation. Information on the background and methodology of the 2021 National Farm to Early Care and Education Survey can be found in the “Background and Methods” 2021 survey brief⁵. This brief aims to explore ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of local purchasing practices, financial support received, and ECE programming.

Key Findings

- Approximately one quarter (26%) of respondents participating in farm to ECE increased their local purchasing due to COVID-19, while 26% decreased their local purchasing, and 25% reported no change.
- The most frequently reported reasons for changes in local purchasing practices due to COVID-19 were the cost of items, reliability of product supply, the seasonality of fruits and vegetables (30%), and delivery changes and limitations (26%).
- The most frequently reported strategies used to connect children and families to meals during COVID-19 were providing recommendations for community food sources (26%), distributing food boxes (13%), and offering grab and go (13%), followed by providing food from an onsite garden for families (9%).

Practice and Policy Recommendations

- Consider continuation of virtual opportunities for enhanced family engagement and to reduce barriers to ECE provider trainings and professional development opportunities.
- Support CACFP flexibilities and expanded eligibility through Child Nutrition Reauthorization to increase CACFP participation, equity, and food access.
- Support funding for farm to institution as an avenue for supply chain resiliency.
- Sustain and expand virtual platforms for local purchasing past COVID-19 as a strategy to reduce barriers to local purchasing.



Starting Farm to ECE: Motivations and Barriers

Respondents were asked whether their local purchasing practices were affected by COVID-19. Of those participating in farm to ECE, 26% reported their local purchasing had increased greatly or increased some. Similarly, 26% reported their

local purchasing had either decreased greatly or decreased some. A quarter (25%) of respondents reported no change in their local purchasing due to COVID-19 (Table 1).

Table 1. Change in Local Purchasing Among Farm to ECE Respondents Due to COVID-19^a

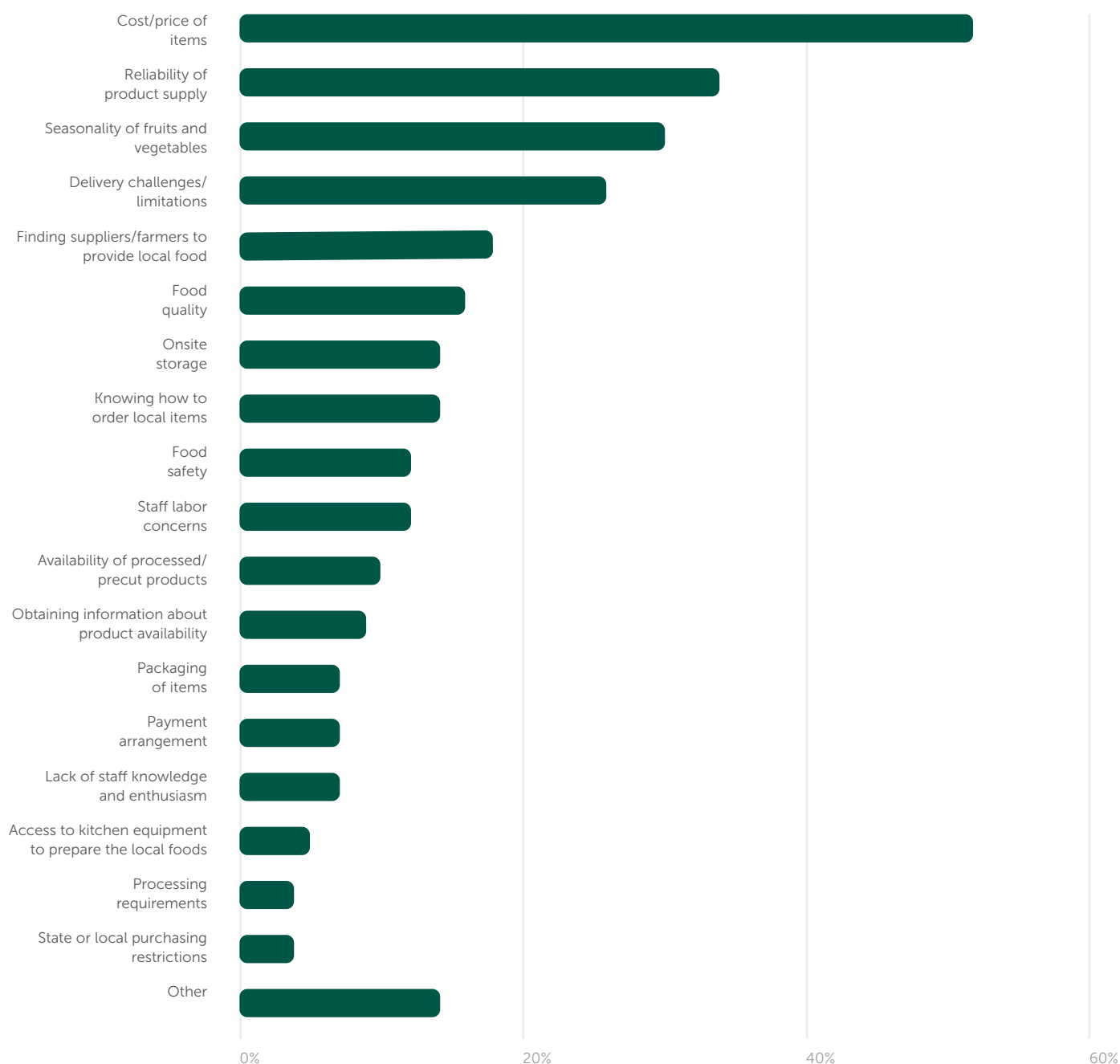
	Percentage of Farm to ECE Respondents	Frequency of Farm to ECE Respondents
Increased Greatly	12%	297
Increased Some	14%	326
Decreased Some	16%	394
Decreased Greatly	10%	242
Stayed the Same	25%	601
Don't Know	6%	146
Missing	16%	391

^a N=2397 farm to ECE respondents

Those who reported changes in their local purchasing practices were also asked why their local purchasing practices had changed due to COVID-19. The most frequently reported reason among farm to ECE participants was the cost of items (52%), followed by reliability of product supply

(34%), the seasonality of fruits and vegetables (30%), delivery changes and limitations (26%), and finding suppliers and farmers to provide local products (18%). The reported reasons influenced either increases in local purchasing or posed challenges for those who decreased their local purchasing.

Figure 1. Reported Reasons For Changes in Local Food Purchasing Due to COVID-19 in Farm to ECE Participants^a



^a N=1437 farm to ECE participants

Respondents shared approaches they've used to connect children and families to meals during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most frequently reported strategy was providing recommendations for community food sources (26%). The next most

common strategies were distributing food boxes (13%) and offering grab and go (13%), followed by providing food from an onsite garden for families (9%), and offering meal delivery (6%).

Table 2. Approaches Used by Respondents to Connect Children and Families to Meals During COVID-19^{a,b}

	Percentage of All Respondents	Percentage of Farm to ECE Respondents
Offered grab and go	13%	13%
Offered meal delivery	5%	6%
Distributed food boxes to families	12%	13%
Provided food from an onsite garden for families	7%	9%
Provided recommendations for community food resources	24%	26%
Other	3%	3%
None of the above	33%	32%
Missing	29%	28%

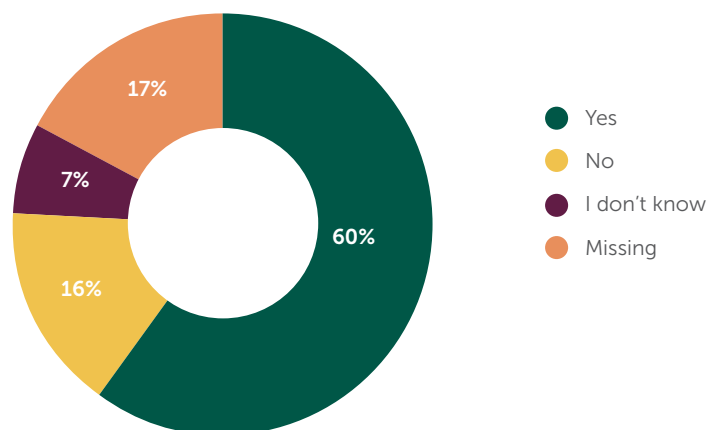
^a N=2914 total respondents

^b N=2397 farm to ECE respondents

COVID-19 Support

A majority of farm to ECE participants (60%) received additional COVID-19 support, while only 16% did not (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of Respondents Who Received Additional COVID-19 Support

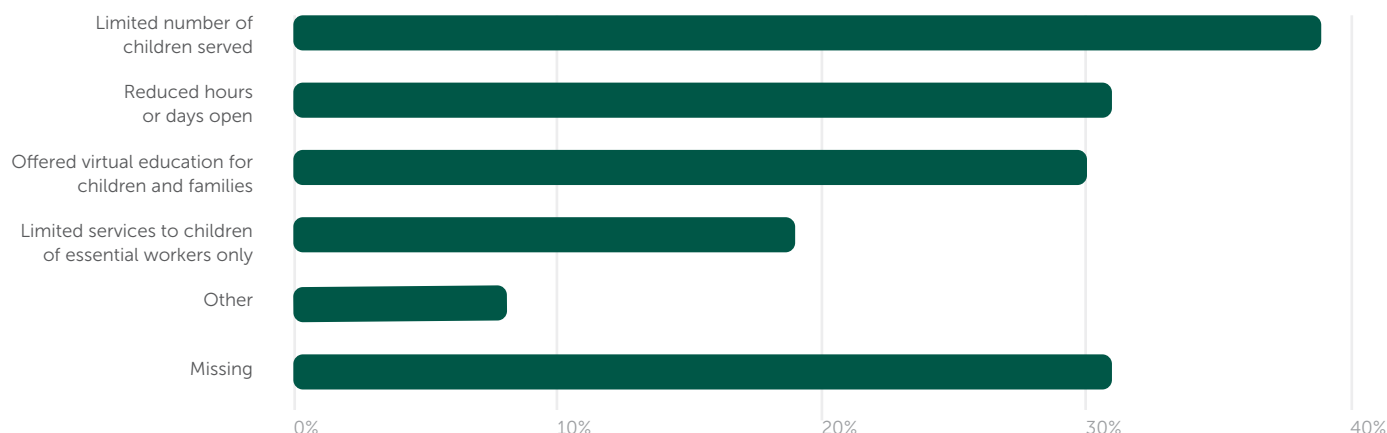


Effect of COVID-19 on ECE Programming

Respondents were asked how their programs changed due to COVID-19, outside of closures. Of those participating in farm to ECE, 40% limited the number of children they served, 32% reduced the

number of hours or days open, 31% offered virtual education for children and families, and 19% limited services to children of essential workers.

Figure 3. Reported Changes Made to Respondents' ECE Programs During COVID-19



Policy Opportunities & Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying public health measures have significantly affected multiple sectors, including ECEs. Closures and other strategies to reduce the risk of infection have dramatically impacted the sustainability of the ECE system. This can be seen in 39% of respondents who reported limiting the number of children served during COVID-19, while 31% reduced hours or days open. Historically inadequate funding and the underpayment and undervaluing of the ECE workforce has only exacerbated the issues caused by the pandemic. However, the pandemic has also accelerated the use of technology for farm to ECE and ECE systems, as seen in the 30% of respondents who offered virtual education for children and families. This shift to online learning brought farm to ECE to the family home, increasing engagement

with caregivers. While this online approach must be included within recommended age-appropriate screen time and may not be a viable option for home-based providers or those with technology barriers, it does offer an avenue to increase family engagement, expanding the benefits of farm to ECE programming and increasing capacity for farm to ECE. In addition to farm to ECE activities, ECE trainings and professional development opportunities were also moved to virtual platforms, increasing participation in workshops and trainings². The use of virtual spaces as a strategy to reduce barriers to ECE provider trainings, professional development opportunities and farm to ECE family engagement should be considered for continuation past the pandemic. This is supported by the discussion in the 2021 "Farm to ECE Reach" brief⁶ on the importance of professional development in the ECE workforce.

A slight majority (60%) of farm to ECE survey respondents received funding to support and mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on ECEs, drawn from multiple federal funding streams. Many Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funding requirements were waived through the CARES Act, with continuation through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act. This funding helped with basic operations through closures and participation reductions. Additionally, federal waivers for Child Nutrition Programs helped children access meals even when ECE sites were closed. Waivers included provisions to allow parents and guardians to pick-up meals, allowed for non-congregate feeding and flexibility to meal patterns, and gave area eligibility for at-risk afterschool and family home daycare providers. This allowed all children to have access to healthy meals, reducing stigma for children and families while reducing administrative burden for overwhelmed programs⁷. ECEs as access points for meals has been vital to supporting food security during the pandemic, as seen by the quarter (26%) of farm to ECE respondents who provided recommendations for community food resources and the 13% who offered grab and go meals and food box deliveries to families. Efforts are currently being made through the Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act, a draft of Child Nutrition Reauthorization, to revise area eligibility requirements in order to reduce administrative burden and increase accessibility to the program. Reauthorization has the potential to streamline access for parents and providers. It can achieve this by improving the use of technology through increasing the use of CACFP direct certification, improving the area eligibility test to reach family child care providers in rural and other low-income areas, and increasing reimbursements for CACFP providers and sponsors⁸. This comprehensive legislation champions many key priorities for farm to school and farm to ECE,

and also outlines expanded investments in school meals and CACFP to support the whole of child nutrition, including expansion of the USDA Farm to School Grant Program. Considering the findings in the 2021 survey brief "Local Purchasing" that there is a statistically significant association between sites that received CACFP funding and sites that purchased and served local foods⁹. Considering that only 46% of respondents received CACFP funding, reauthorization can both reduce barriers to CACFP Participation and improve healthy food access for children.

Approximately one quarter (26%) of respondents participating in farm to ECE increased their local purchasing due to COVID-19, while 26% decreased their local purchasing. One of the key arguments for farm to school and ECE is that it can support the survival of local farms and vendors, and COVID-19 related supply chain disruptions have highlighted the importance of local farms and their contributions to robust, diverse food systems. When respondents were asked why their local purchasing changed as a result of COVID-19, more than half (54%) said the change was due to cost of items, about one-third (34%) said it was due to the reliability of product supply, and 25% said they experienced delivery challenges or limitations. Open responses described in the 2021 Survey brief "Local Purchasing" further support the fact that supply chain issues led many sites to increase their local purchasing due to reduced access to and increased pricing of grocery store items⁹. Open responses also showed how the pandemic increased interest in local purchasing from site administrators, providers, and families. This support for local farms and farm to school and ECE has been translated into increased USDA support for farm to institution funding through grants such as the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP), Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP) program, the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP), and increased Farm to School Grant funding.

Momentum should continue for farm to institution, and specifically farm to ECE, as an avenue for supply chain resiliency.

As previously mentioned, 25% of respondents saw a reduction in local purchasing. This could be due to a host of reasons, but aside from common barriers to local purchasing seen outside of COVID-19, causes could be due to delivery challenges/limitations (26%) and/or finding suppliers/farmers to provide local food (18%). Both of these issues have been addressed through innovative strategies on the part of producers and producer support organizations who had to find new ways to get products to consumers during the pandemic. For example, the use of online platforms for aggregating and selling local foods through “virtual farm stands” was a strategy seen in Iowa². Other strategies include using online platforms to facilitate pick-up and delivery from producers and farmers markets. The strategies have not only mitigated COVID-19 related barriers to local purchasing, but also reduced barriers consistently seen within farm to ECE, such as providers’ lack of time to navigate local purchasing and lack of access to local foods. Sustaining and expanding virtual platforms for local purchasing post COVID-19 can be an important strategy to reduce barriers to local foods for ECEs. However, it is important to note that producers and consumers (including ECE sites and providers) with limited technology access and capacity limit the benefits of this strategy.

Explore more farm to ECE resources, learn how to get involved, and connect with partners in your state by exploring the National Farm to School Network site at www.farmtoschool.org/ECE. Visit www.foodsystems.msu.edu to find resources and research on regional food systems from Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems.

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