



# **FARM TO EARLY CARE EDUCATION NETWORK**

## **MICHIGAN FARM TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION NETWORK STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-2028**



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Michigan Farm to ECE Implementation Team:

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- Michigan State Department of Education Office of Great Start
- Michigan State Department of Education Office of Health and Nutrition Services
- Michigan State Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
- Michigan State Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs
- Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

Policy Equity Group

The Early Care and Education Providers in the Focus Groups

Michigan Farm to ECE Network Members

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Michigan Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) Network worked with nearly 200 early care and education providers, farmers and food producers, and families of young children and over a dozen partner organizations including ECE professionals, public health entities, non-profits, universities, and other state agencies to inform the 2023-2028 farm to ECE strategic plan. Development of the plan took place across group and individual virtual meetings from December 2022 through June 2023 (see Appendix).

Using the existing mission, vision, and equity vision, the development of the strategic plan includes the agreement of two broad goals with corresponding strategies and activities to realize those goals. Further, the group agreed that conceptualizing the activities using short-term, middle-term, and long-term approaches would best meet the Michigan Farm to ECE Network's overarching vision of children ages 0-5 growing, choosing, and eating nutritious local food in Michigan early care and education settings.



# INTRODUCTION

Michigan is a state ripe with opportunity. From the Cereal City on the West to the Motor City on the lower East, the Mitten state is first in the nation for production crops including asparagus, tart cherries, pickling cucumbers, dry black beans, cranberry beans, and small red beans, chestnuts, milk production per cow, winter squash, and turnips (Michigan Economic Development Corporation, 2021).

Although the Mitten state ranks first in several production crops and is known for its Motown flair, it was hit hard by the pandemic, with obesity rates among young children increasing and access to affordable care decreasing. National data indicates 13.7% of Michigan's preschoolers participating in WIC were considered obese ranking Michigan 29 of 51 among states (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2020). Beginning in 2008, the percent of children in Michigan aged 2 to 4 years participating in WIC identified as obese declined, but recently the percentages started to trend upwards again. Increases in BMI were noted during the pandemic across age groups as well (Korioth, 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, about 11 million children under age 5 in the U.S. spent an average of 35 hours per week in the care of someone other than a parent, usually in early care and education (ECE) settings (Child Care Aware, 2018). Michigan childcare licensing data indicated the number of childcare facilities declined by nearly 5,000 since 2010, although capacity remained relatively unchanged (Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs, 2021). Equally important, even before the pandemic the cost of childcare was noted as an economic burden for families in a 2016 Michigan Department of Education [report](#) on childcare access and affordability. To offer a sense of comparison, four years of quality childcare in Michigan, which includes healthy meals and snacks, can cost the same as a four-year degree from the University of Michigan (French & Wilkinson, 2021). This also underscores the multiple opportunities within farm to early care and education.



It was noted, there is “no farm to ECE without the ECE” (Bhat, personal communication). The pandemic simply revealed and exacerbated the fragile and disjointed nature of childcare with deeply rooted inequities (Jessen-Howard, Malik, & Falgout, 2020). Many in early care and education are focused on the day-to-day but are willing and enthusiastic participants in farm to ECE. They see it as something they are already doing rather than starting from the beginning. Equally as important, as we talk with those engaged in the day-to-day work of growing our youngest learners—the early care and education providers and those who are feeding them—they are often taking part in farm to ECE practices but may not be calling them such. What we have learned from the first five years of existing as a farm to early care and education network is similar to that of learning how to tend a garden. We are at our best when we can learn with and from one another, when we are able to start small and celebrate our successes, and when we can share what works as much as what didn’t work so we can continue to learn, grow, and flourish.

We also recognize that growing a farm to ECE network is a process and want to acknowledge the organizations and people that are providing support and implementing practices at their sites. Small, incremental aspects are essential as we address challenges, knowing that “every garden is going to be in the shade at some point.” We appreciate that it is too much to ask one person to do everything and support the idea that “many hands make light work.” It is also important to have the right people doing the right things in order to cultivate a successful network. *Michigan’s Farm to ECE Strategic Plan* is intended as a strengths-based approach, building on what its members have grown and continuing to expand and support one another.

“ We created drawings, started the plants from seeds, had circle time to discuss how the plants were growing, discuss how to keep the rabbits out, how to plant the trees, how the flowers turn into fruit, and so many more discussions and hands on experiences these children had with growing their own food. They have picked green peppers, tomatoes, and couple beans straight from the garden and ate them right there. ”

-Provider

# MISSION AND VISION



## *Mission*

As the Network was forming in 2018, a draft logic model was formed that included a mission statement intended to guide the Network's purpose.

The Michigan Farm to ECE Network exists to:

- improve access to healthy food,
- increase nutritional awareness and health outcomes, and
- support ECE providers as they work to improve children's learning environments.

We do this by sharing resources and making connections between community and state partners, farmers, ECE providers, and families.



## *Vision*

The Network also agreed on a Vision statement to identify the intent of the Network moving forward:

*Children ages 0-5 in Michigan early care and education settings are growing, choosing, and eating nutritious local food.*

By growing farm to ECE statewide, we support state- and community-level goals related to food procurement and child nutrition, including Michigan's [Great Start to Quality](#), [Hope Starts Here](#), and the [Michigan Good Food Charter](#).

# EQUITY VISION

Equity is central to guide strategies, outputs, and outcomes for this work. Intentional thinking about the complexity and collaboration of multiple systems is necessary to address positive change at multiple levels. When the Network drafted its logic model, we included the following assumptions in that draft including:

- The Network holds equity as a core value.
- The Network intends to utilize an equity lens, particularly a racial equity lens, in this work.
- A racial equity lens means paying disciplined attention to race and ethnicity while analyzing problems, looking for solutions, and defining success.
- Farm to ECE efforts in Michigan are intended to build and sustain supports for early care and education providers to improve quality food service and learning as a component of continuous quality improvement.

Additionally, in 2021 the Network used a modified version of the National Farm to School Network's *Racial and Social Equity Assessment Tool for Farm to School Programs and Policy* as part of a two-day facilitated workshop. The Network also hosted a follow up workshop, *Michigan Farm to ECE Network Racial Equity Workshop: Moving from Assessment into Action*, resulting in the Racial Equity Debrief Document. As a result of the workshop, action steps were developed, with three prioritized for the Network:

- Engage constituents and build trust (Advocacy, point 2)
- Increase Network participation from the FTECE field (Practice, point 1)
- Disseminate information about the Network widely (Practice, point 2)

# HISTORY OF FARM TO ECE IN MICHIGAN

Farm to School has existed in Michigan for decades, with an infrastructure in place to support those efforts. More recently, Michigan has seen Farm to ECE sprouting, although it has become evident that many ECE sites have been implementing farm to ECE activities far longer than the labeling them as such and well before the Michigan Farm to ECE Network has been formally in existence. Noting the latter, the timeline of farm to ECE in Michigan is based on the documented events and meetings rather than the implementation of activities within sites occurring well before the start date of our timeline.

## Timeline

- In the 2016-2017 school year, 10 Cents a Meal for Michigan's Kids and Farms was launched to increase what K-12 sites spend on fresh Michigan-grown products, offering grants of up to 10 cents per meal.[1]
- In July 2019, the Michigan Farm to ECE Network was formally established to increase collaboration across the state and to provide more robust resources and opportunities for ECE providers.
- In 2020, the Michigan Farm to ECE Network received a Farm to Early Care and Education Implementation Grant (FIG) from the Association for Public Health Nutritionists (ASPHN) to help increase the capacity to facilitate long-term sustainable and equitable programming.
- In the 2020-2021 school year, 10 Cents a Meal for Michigan's Kids and Farms expanded access to non-school sponsors like early care and education sites.
- In 2022, Governor Gretchen Whitmer approved a budget that included \$9.3 million for 10 Cents a meal.[2] The budget language simplifies reporting and administration requirements and allows grant funds to be spent on supportive farm to ECE activities.
- The Network was awarded a Year II and a final Year III grant to continue their work, and in 2022 received funding from ASPHN to create this Statewide Policy Strategic Plan.

[1] Michigan State University. (n.d.). 10 cents a meal. <https://www.canr.msu.edu/10-cents-a-meal/>

[2] Melanie Wong. (2022). *10 Cents A Meal Funding Of \$9.3 Million Secured For FY '23*.

<https://www.groundworkcenter.org/10-cents-a-meal-funding-of-9-3-million-secured-for-fy-23/>

<https://www.tencentsmichigan.org/about>

# ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In sharing accomplishments, it is important to acknowledge that many, if not most, of those implementing farm to ECE are doing so without additional funding opportunities. Both early care and education providers and farmers and food producers consistently share cost as a top challenge. Despite this, in the last five years the Michigan Farm to ECE Network has managed significant accomplishments upon which to build. Our “container garden” is ready to transplant to a larger plot based on the following endeavors, made possible because of effective collaboration:

## Farm to ECE Implementation Grant

Michigan applied for and was awarded a Farm to ECE Implementation Grant (FIG) and used the first year to learn more about the complex needs and collaborative efforts of the systems in our state. Moreover, the Network was afforded a chance to learn more about how we can (and cannot) best connect two sometimes disparate systems to improve access to healthy, local food and advance early childhood outcomes. One of the most important lessons learned in the first year was that the pandemic is still a challenge for providers in our state, resulting in year 2 activities focusing on “meeting providers where they are” and working more actively to reduce barriers to participating in farm to ECE programs.

Key deliverables of this funding source included 10 Cents a Meal outreach, expansion of Go NAPSACC, and training and technical assistance opportunities for farmers, food producers, and providers. As we work to eliminate racial disparities in each of those outcomes, we look forward to implementing lessons learned, capitalizing on what is working in farm to ECE in our state, and supporting policy change so that all of Michigan’s children grow and learn within settings that implement comprehensive farm to ECE initiatives.



## Procurement Pilots

The Farm to ECE procurement pilots were intended to help ECE staff obtain locally grown, nutrient dense foods from a variety of sources, including direct from farmers as well as through farmers markets, food hubs and/or distributors, to serve in meals, snacks, and/or as part of educational activities. Through these pilots, the goal was to develop collective local food sourcing solutions driven by the unique needs and goals of each community. Providers also received strengths-based self-assessment data available in “real time” via Go NAPSACC, online webinars with professional development credit available in MIRegistry (available “on demand”), and a Farm to ECE Procurement Pilot monthly newsletter.

## Michigan Grow More Awards

The [Michigan Grow More Award](#) was first introduced in 2021 and awarded to seven early care and education sites in its inaugural year. In its second year, one farmer and eight ECE sites received the award. Funding was identified for stipends to acknowledge farm to ECE providers and farmers and food producers engaged in extraordinary work in farm to ECE. As a Network, the goal is to continue to celebrate champions in farm to ECE across the state with this award as an annual occurrence in conjunction with Farm to School month.

## Allen Foundation Grant

The Allen Foundation Grant provides hands-on education through the delivery of Michigan produce via community supported agriculture (CSA) to early family childcare home providers. A family childcare provider learning cohort will serve as an emerging model by connecting Michigan growers to family childcare home providers resulting in built networks sustained over time.

## Go NAPSACC

Increasing use of Go NAPSACC for ECE providers, including training and technical assistance, was embedded into Michigan’s year 1 goals, continued through year 2 and year 3, and will be embedded in the Strategic Plan. Michigan uses [MI Registry](#) as a mechanism for early care and education providers to engage in and track professional development opportunities. In addition to hosting a handful of online, on-demand webinar opportunities free-of-charge for providers, the Network collaborated to coordinate Go NAPSACC training completion with MIRegistry. This is significant not only due to the waiver the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) afforded for the 30-minute trainings (professional development typically must be 1-hour in length), but also because the two systems are able to “communicate” with one another, thus eliminating the need for staff time to enter provider information into the registry system after completion of the trainings. Go NAPSACC offers 37 half hour trainings for providers to complete free of charge, including the farm to ECE trainings. This option and the use of Go NAPSACC to improve the early care environment helps providers to demonstrate and document they are meeting standards in Quality Rating Improvement Rating System (QRIS).



# LOOKING AHEAD

The MI Farm to ECE Network has increasingly understood the importance of shared language for farm to ECE. Shared language to describe the work makes it easier to connect with one another, not only about the importance of the work, but also to share resources and strategies.

Offering a definition of farm to ECE as a group of strategies and activities that increase access to nutrient dense local foods and provide gardening opportunities and education about food, nutrition, and agriculture helps to provide a starting point for conversation. In our work in the last few years, the Network has found these strategies to be overlapping as providers have shared that as they are gardening, they are teaching the children in their care about how food is grown and where it comes from, with the idea that they will harvest what is grown for snacks or even as part of meals. In other words, the three core elements of farm to ECE overlap. Farmers and food producers share they are also working to provide nutrient dense food, offer educational experiences, and collaborate with ECE providers to meet the needs of their sites.



This same overlap and need for shared language exist in the policymaking process. Policy touches everyone's lives, and it is especially impactful in the daily work of ECE providers. ECE professionals are bound to state licensing standards as well as expectations around quality, safety, and a myriad of other metrics. Some providers are also navigating Federal Nutrition Programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and/or subsidy programs such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG).

Similarly, farmers and other stakeholders that maintain a functioning food system are required to account for their own policy considerations on food safety, which can include processing and transportation. Both groups of stakeholders are aware of one critical outcome of policymaking: funding.

Policy is a profound systemwide driver of inequities. It is not unusual for the loudest advocates to have the greatest access to resources. However, grounding policymaking in stakeholder voice helps ensure the most equitable outcomes. The field of ECE is predominately women, and often women from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, whose voices are often left out of policymaking, whether intentionally or not. In Michigan, where the average hourly wage for 28,000 early childhood educators is \$11.61, some of the lowest in the state, promoting equity in policymaking requires centering the voices of ECE providers.[1,2]

The Michigan Farm to ECE Network also believes that the outcomes of this strategic plan have the potential to be even more powerful if the voices of ECE professionals are included throughout the process. Therefore, the Network intentionally engaged ECE providers throughout the strategic planning process and integrated their thoughts, experiences and feedback in the final plan.

[1] Zero to Three, Think Babies. (2021). *The State of Michigan's Babies, State of Babies Yearbook 2021*. <https://zerotothree.wpenginpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Michigan-MI-State-of-Babies-Yearbook-2021.pdf>

[2] Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. (2020). Early Childhood Workforce Index 2020 - Michigan. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/states/michigan/>



# GOALS AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

During meetings and conversations, many stakeholders equate farm to ECE with gardening—it is embedded in the name “farm to ECE”. We know as we engage in deeper discussion however, that the actual implementation of the activities is often gardening and a whole lot more, as previously indicated. For Michigan’s Farm to ECE Network Strategic Plan, each goal is presented with the corresponding strategies and activities identified in manageable “garden metaphors”. In other words, we are thinking about a 5-year plan as container gardening, small plots, and community gardens with the hope that each of our members are able to envision themselves beginning in one of these spaces and perhaps growing into another.

**Goal 1: MI ECE providers increase their knowledge, awareness, and utility of resources, staff, coaching, and mentors that support expanded farm to ECE programming.**

Strategies	Short Term Activities (6-12 months)	Medium Term Activities (1-3 years)	Long Term Activities (5 years)
<p><b>Expand awareness of and adoption of Go NAPSACC through the MDE Great Start to Quality and/or Resource Centers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Finalize MDE/MDHHS contract for Go NAPSACC with UNC</li> <li>Create infrastructure plan for Go NAPSACC with GSQ/Resource Centers</li> <li>Train GSQ/Resource Center staff to serve as TA Consultants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share Go NAPSACC provider recruiting materials and support plan with providers</li> <li>Create Go NAPSACC newsletter to share with GSQ/Resource Center staff</li> <li>Share Go NAPSACC trainings/opportunities with providers across Network listserv and partner listservs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Track usage of Go NAPSACC across three years to provide evidence for FTE and “host cost” as policy ask for permanent funding</li> </ul>

Strategies	Short Term Activities (6-12 months)	Medium Term Activities (1-3 years)	Long Term Activities (5 years)
<p><b>Encourage use of existing resources (website, Network meetings, learning collaboratives) and identify additional resources to support implementation of farm to ECE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey of Network members to determine knowledge of existing resources, preferences for receiving information</li> <li>• Identify work group for planning and implementation of Network meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create regional/role alike or other configuration of learning collaboratives</li> <li>• Establish work group to review and revise/update resources and/or website</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify funding source for text messaging system for Network</li> <li>• Create communication plan</li> <li>• Implement text messaging service for farm to ECE</li> </ul>
<p><b>Engage in a social marketing campaign in three priority communities with replication statewide at conclusion of pilot</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop social marketing campaign using “Grow More” concept with consultant</li> <li>• Engage in technical development of campaign, including identification of participating sites for implementation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement campaign at pilot sites in three priority communities</li> <li>• Evaluate effectiveness of materials for increasing awareness of farm to ECE and usefulness of materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replicate campaign statewide</li> </ul>
<p><b>Identify opportunities to align current and future MI Early Learning Standards (ELS) with farm to ECE activities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a review of other ELS that align well with farm to ECE and identify what those could look like in a future MI revision</li> <li>• Offer clear communications on webinars, websites, and briefs that outline current alignment with ELS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in conversation with MDE in advance of next ELS -- Begin building connections between ELS and farm to ECE</li> </ul>	



**Goal 2: The MI Farm to ECE Network will grow and strengthen partnerships to sustain the community of farm to ECE.**

Strategies	Short Term Activities (6-12 months)	Medium Term Activities (1-3 years)	Long Term Activities (5 years)
<p><b>Ensure all childcare providers participating in a child nutrition program can successfully participate in the 10 Cents a Meal program</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share lessons learned from the 10 Cents a Meal home-based provider pilot to encourage/increase participation among CACFP sponsors and home-based providers</li> <li>• Review resources and templates for accessibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create and support a 10 Cents a Meal learning collaborative to assist with increased site utilization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create work group to identify “what works,” improving efficiencies between and among programs, share success stories</li> </ul>
<p><b>Expand the uptake of CACFP by ECE providers across MI</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Landscape assessment of CACFP usage</li> <li>• Review and acknowledge real and/or perceived barriers among childcare providers associated with participating in CACFP</li> <li>• Explore opportunities to streamline program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning collaborative of novices and mentors to share about CACFP, 10 Cents a Meal and their overlap to support farm to ECE</li> <li>• Connect with organizations that advocate for improvements to CACFP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work group to identify existing resources and new resources for providers</li> </ul>

Strategies	Short Term Activities (6-12 months)	Medium Term Activities (1-3 years)	Long Term Activities (5 years)
<p><b>Support providers in adopting policy, systems, and environmental change strategies to support farm to ECE within their settings</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share resources about farm to ECE, including the farm to ECE Network through listservs</li> <li>• Increase awareness of the Michigan Grow More Award</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase number of providers using Go NAPSACC, with demonstrated changes in best practices from pre- to post-assessment</li> <li>• Survey Network each year to learn new farm to ECE strategies and promote sharing among members</li> <li>• Connect farmers and food producers with ECE sites to increase access to locally grown, nutrient dense food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a proposal for integrating farm to ECE into Michigan's QRIS</li> <li>• Connect ECE sites with farmers through annual, facilitated virtual networking events</li> </ul>
<p><b>Increase stakeholder engagement within the network and expand outreach to include more diverse stakeholders (Providers, farmers/producers, and community organizations)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess current composition of network to identify gaps</li> <li>• Ideate how different stakeholders could engage with the MI Farm to ECE network (i.e. workgroups) and how to communicate purpose of participating in network activities</li> <li>• Identify ways to communicate with desired stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and deepen relationships with stakeholders through focus group sessions, community discussions, attendance at events, hosting events etc.</li> <li>• Invite new stakeholders to join the network</li> <li>• Use identified communication methods to share news about network events, and happenings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form Farm to ECE topic-centered workgroups led by network members that members can join based on interest (i.e., gardening with kids, farmers/producers engaging with Farm to ECE)</li> </ul>

Strategies	Short Term Activities (6-12 months)	Medium Term Activities (1-3 years)	Long Term Activities (5 years)
<p><b>Identify sustained funding for FTEs to support farm to ECE in community and state organizations</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Landscape assessment of current community and state organizations supporting farm to ECE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create “faces of farm to ECE” stories for sharing with social media and policy makers</li> <li>• Compile quantitative and qualitative evidence on the benefits of farm to ECE, especially from the evaluations of Goal 1 activities</li> <li>• Conduct cost estimates</li> <li>• Create subgroup to develop infrastructure and administration plan</li> <li>• Create policy and advocacy plan</li> <li>• Develop farm to ECE info sheets for policy “rep” to share</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy ask for sustained funding for farm to ECE</li> </ul>



# APPENDIX

## Stakeholder Engagement Process

Members of the Michigan strategic planning ‘core group’ met monthly between December 2022 through June 2023. The initial few meetings were focused on setting up the strategic planning process and by February, the substantive pieces of the plan came under discussion. Through the policy strategic planning process, the Policy Equity Group conducted one-on-one conversations with each of the core group members in addition to the monthly meetings. In those conversations, a variety of policy goals emerged. The group identified the core components of the Strategic Plan shown on pages 15 to 19 in the following order:

1. **February** – The Policy Equity Group (PEG) convened a core group of members to initiate the policy strategic planning process. Together, PEG and the core group examined the overall goals of policy strategic planning and assessed the current landscape of early childhood education in Michigan. Focus groups with ECE providers began to inform the strategic planning.
2. **March** – PEG staff held individual meetings with each member of the core group to develop strategic plan strategies and activities that align with the policy goals. The strategies were then presented to the entire core group for feedback and input.
3. **April/May** – The core group reviewed the activities necessary to achieve the strategies. PEG then met with the FIG Implementation Team to present the current progress of the strategic plan and gather feedback for further refinement.
4. **May** – The core group expanded a revised three year plan to a five year plan with the intent of sharing the revised draft in advance of the July full Michigan Farm to ECE Network meeting to allow members ample time to review with two questions to guide the discussion of the plan including:
  - a. Do you see yourself in this plan and if so where? and
  - b. What is missing and how do we build that in?
5. After opportunity for feedback from the Network (in keeping with the Network’s Racial Equity Debrief Document Action Steps), next steps would be identified for moving forward, including the creation of work teams/groups and actions for finalizing the plan.

The core group initially reviewed and identified ongoing efforts across the state to advance. The group also completed a crosswalk of current statewide early childhood plans, including the Child Care and Development (CCDF) Plan for Michigan (FY22-24), and their most recent Michigan Farm to ECE Network Theory of Change.[1]

Members of the core group included representation from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Michigan Department of Education, Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems, Michigan State University Extension, The Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities, The National Kidney Foundation of Michigan, and Michigan's Children.

## Focus Groups

In recognition that the strategic plan is intended to expand farm to ECE programming - activities led and initiated by ECE professionals - it was imperative to ensure that ECE provider voices informed the policy strategic plan. During initial planning, the core group recognized this and expressed the need to ensure that all strategic policy goals be relevant and situated to the daily realities and needs of Michigan early care and education providers engaging (or hoping to engage) in farm to ECE. Therefore, to equitably design the FIG Policy strategic plan, members of the core planning group partnered with the Policy Equity Group to host six focus groups with early care and education providers across the state. Focus group questions were designed to understand provider experience of barriers, supports, and needs related to farm to ECE implementation.

MI Farm to ECE Network partners helped spread the word about the focus groups by sharing the registration survey through multiple email listservs. Interested providers completed an online survey, provided their contact information, and selected a time slot. The response was overwhelming, with 67 providers applying for the first two sessions. As a result, a waitlist was created, and participants for the latter four sessions were selected from the waitlist. The initial survey collected information on provider site type and experience with farm to ECE. This resulted in a diverse mix of providers in the first two sessions. For the subsequent sessions, only partial demographic information was available as some providers entered the waitlist through email rather than completing the initial survey.

[1] Michigan Department of Education. (2022). Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Plan for Michigan (FY 2022-24). <https://www.michigan.gov/mde/Services/early-learners-and-care/cdc/partners/state-plan-draft>

Throughout the strategic planning process, focus groups were held at various stages. Two were hosted in February 2023 as the core group was still refining their policy goals. Two more were hosted in March as the core group was refining its list of strategies and activities. Finally, the final two input sessions were hosted in May as the plan was being completed. While the questions changed slightly, the overall themes remained the same.

To accommodate providers' schedules, a Thursday evening and Saturday morning session was held monthly for a total of six focus groups. In total, 32 providers attended. The number of providers in each focus group ranged from three to eight individuals. Providers who attended the focus groups were given a \$75 gift card to a local grocery store as compensation for their time and input.[1]

### **Additional Perspectives**

The focus groups in spring of 2021 provided a sense of direction for the Michigan FIG activities and also provided baseline data to inform the strategic plan. The FIG team conducted outreach to recruit participants to these focus groups, including sending 6500 emails and posting to social media. These efforts resulted in the registration of 163 farmers/food producers, early care and education providers, and “families” for sessions, with 36 scheduled into role alike demographically randomized group with a wait list. Focus group sessions were transcribed and coded using NVivo, with primary themes examined by the resulting ‘nodes’. Broad themes shared by each of the three groups indicate cost is a challenge, marketing and shared language an opportunity, gardening a source of connection, and resources, particularly those that include hands-on learning, especially valuable.

[1]The grocery gift cards were made possible through funds from the National Kidney Foundation of Michigan

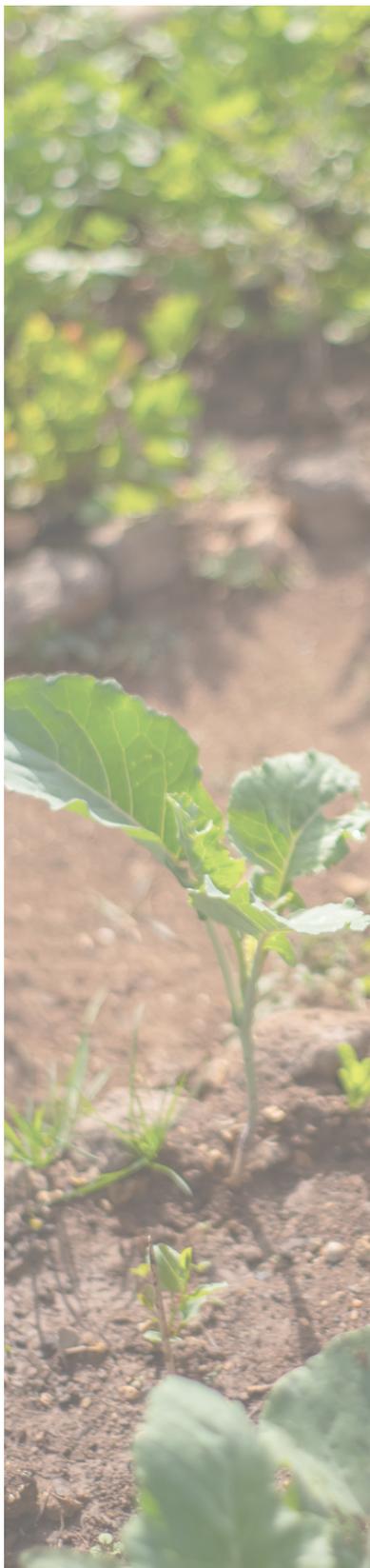




### **Procurement Pilot Survey Data**

In 2019, funding for farm to ECE procurement pilots address a specific goal of supporting a procurement pilot in three priority communities. This included sourcing directly for use in meals, snacks, and as part of their educational activities from farmers, but also purchasing from farmers' markets, food hubs, and/or distributors. The pilots were designed to develop sourcing solutions at the local level as part of a collective local food solution based on the needs and goals within communities. Participant feedback was intended to inform and develop a shared learning collaborative, as participating sites met regularly as part of discussions about farm to ECE implementation strategies and training and technical assistance opportunities. A monthly newsletter was sent to providers and additional online (on demand) training opportunities with credit in the professional development system for early childcare providers was available. The pilot opportunity was expanded with year 2 of FIG funding. With the expansion of the geographic boundaries, ECE sites across the state were eligible for the funding opportunity but were also invited to participate in the learning collaborative and have access to the same supports for training and technical assistance. The qualitative data gathered from both cohorts is intended to be used to help support statewide farm to ECE efforts and inform the Strategic Plan.

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