



Farm to Early Care & Education in Illinois

What is farm to ECE?

Through **food education, hands-on gardening, and local food procurement**, farm to early care and education (“farm to ECE”) activities empower children and their families to make informed food choices while strengthening the local economy.

Farm to ECE is connected to the broader farm to school movement in Illinois, which seeks to strengthen the connection that K-12 institutions have with fresh, healthy food and local food producers.



Main goals of farm to ECE:

- Increase children’s access to local and nutritious food.
- Provide hands-on learning opportunities.
- Influence eating habits and food preferences during formative years.
- Educate children about food systems and local agriculture.
- Support local farmers and local communities.

Who can participate?

Farm to early care and education can be implemented in many types of childcare settings including:

- Preschools
- Child care centers
- Family child care homes
- Head Start/Early Head Start
- Programs in K-12 school districts.

Why farm to ECE?

Farm to ECE offers many benefits that support the goals of the early care and education community. Activities like hands-on nutrition education, gardening, and farm field trips are fun and engaging ways to meet the **Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards** for children in their preschool years. In addition, farm to ECE strongly aligns with **Head Start priority areas**, which emphasize experiential learning opportunities, parent and community engagement, and life-long health and wellness for children, families and caregivers.

Sourcing local food for snacks and meals also expands healthy food access for children and families, provides additional market opportunities for farmers, and supports thriving communities.





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How do I get started?

Step 1: Evaluate Your Current Program

- Know your program's rules and regulations for purchasing food.
- Assess your current meal planning practices and identify opportunities to add local foods to your menu.
- Talk to your current distributors about what local food options they offer.
- Identify specific farm to ECE initiatives and activities that fit naturally into your current programming and curriculum.



Step 2: Build Community Connections.

- Join the Illinois Farm to School Network to receive our newsletter, updates, and resources on how to grow your farm to ECE program.
- Create a farm to ECE team that involves parents, teachers, staff members, local farmers, and community members to help plan and implement your program.
- Network with farmers, community organizations, other childcare centers, schools and institutions in your community to learn about their local food purchasing practices and sources.

Step 3: Start Small

- Plan a visit to your local farmers market to source a healthy snack for children.
- Conduct a food education lesson that ties into existing learning objectives (i.e. building vocabulary through a food taste test).
- Start growing with an herb box or a small container garden.
- Plan for a local farmer to visit the classroom.

Stay Connected!

Email Us: farmtoschool@sevengenerationsahead.org

Join Our Network:
illinoisfarmtoschool.org

Facebook:
Illinois Farm to School Network

Twitter:
[@ILFarm2School](https://twitter.com/ILFarm2School)

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The Illinois Farm to School Network is a program of [Seven Generations Ahead](#) and a Core Partner of the [National Farm to School Network](#).

