



Farm to Early Care Sourcing Strategies

Local food can help grow healthy kids and communities by expanding food access for vulnerable children and positively impacting local economies. Increasing the amount of local food in children's meals and snacks requires identifying and facilitating opportunities for early care and education (ECE) sites to source local foods.

In this document, we share local food sourcing best practices, challenges, and successes from a 2019-2021 research project tracking the activities of four Georgia ECE purchasers Local Food to Early Care Solutions Initiative: Farm to ECE Supply Chains Report." [Click here to view the full report.](#)

Best Practices

The following are key takeaways for ECE success in sourcing and serving local food.



First Steps



Start with just one local product on the menu to develop knowledge and comfort with local foods. After some experience, expand local purchasing one product at a time.

Develop knowledge of seasonally available local produce by reading local planting and harvest calendars.

Reach out and begin building relationships with local farmers and/or distributors in your area and ask about local, seasonal food availability.

Discuss potential new menu items with kitchen staff to get feedback and buy-in.



Highlight one "local food of the week" on menus.



Use Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) funding to support local food and serving utensil purchases.

Build a local food and recipes binder with students' favorite foods to guide menu planning and execution.

Systemic Changes



Expand purchasing of local fresh foods by adding one new product at a time.



Use CACFP funding to support allowable local food and garden supply purchases.



Develop menus to allow for flexibility with produce in recipes to account for seasonality.



Create a weekly menu based on confirmed availability of local products.



Communicate with farmers or distributors about expectations for quality, pack size, and standards in advance of orders to avoid surprises.



Include milk and bread in produce orders to help reach a distributor's minimum order requirement.



Find a farmer near you from whom you can regularly buy and who is willing to discuss production planning. You can use [Georgia Organics' Good Food Guide](#) to find local farmers!



Have a local dairy deliver milk to eliminate staff time and physical demands of shopping for milk.



Employ a skilled staff member who is dedicated to food purchasing and prep for the capacity and creativity to maximize seasonality and whole, local produce.

Challenges faced by ECEs sourcing local products

Despite the obstacles, understanding the various challenges will prepare you to navigate potential local sourcing setbacks to your Farm to ECE program.

Sourcing Challenges

- Limited supply of local produce through typical ECE vendors (Grocery and Big Box Stores).
- Origin of produce is often unknown when purchasing from a big box store or broad line distributor. Farm identification practices are not standardized across the distribution industry.
- Small and community farmers are often too busy farming to negotiate purchasing relationships.
- Farms are often located far from ECEs, making pick-up and/or delivery inconvenient.
- Few distributor delivery options exist for suburban and rural ECEs because suppliers limit delivery zones to metropolitan areas and/or have relatively high order minimums.
- Efficient ECE food programs require consistent purchasing opportunities, making it difficult to follow seasonality and to accommodate production disruptions or shortfalls due to weather or other events.

Funding Challenges

- CACFP paperwork and administration require intense time dedication.
- CACFP micro purchasing guidelines limit relationship building with one, community-based farmer.
- Local food can sometimes command higher prices. Many ECEs have limited budgets and find it hard to sustain premium pricing.



Sourcing local, organically grown food:

A South Georgia Family Child Care Learning Home serves only fresh, organic foods to her six students. To achieve this seemingly expensive and labor-intensive standard, the provider grows a large vegetable garden, which is incorporated into the students' curriculum and daily activities. Because of its southern location, the garden produces enough to contribute to meals and snacks year-round. The provider saves a considerable amount of money by growing her own food and dedicates these savings to purchasing certified organic produce from a local farm stand. The farmstand is conveniently located in her community, and she is now friendly with the farmers.

The provider uses social media and newsletters to share photos of her students eating fresh vegetables in their meals and snacks, and sometimes straight out of the garden. The student's parents are routinely surprised to see their children enjoying so many of the vegetables that they have never eaten at home!

Sourcing local milk and bread:

When an Early Care and Education Center on the outskirts of metro-Atlanta had a difficult time finding a fresh produce source nearby or one willing to deliver, the provider looked to other local products to satisfy her local sourcing goals. She quickly found a local dairy willing to deliver to the center. The price of the milk was reasonable, especially considering the time and physical labor savings of shopping for milk. An added benefit to purchasing the local milk is that because it is pasteurized at a lower temperature than commercially available milk, it is tolerable for her students who had digestive issues with the commercially produced milk. Thus, the provider no longer needs to buy special milk for these students.



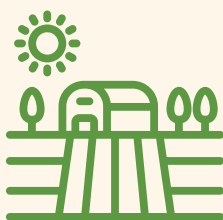
Working With Local Distributors

Best Practices for ECEs Sourcing Local Food Through a Distributor

Georgia fresh food distributors are optimistic about working with ECE providers. However, as ECEs are a new and emerging market, distributors have had limited experience navigating their specific needs.

Common Hurdles ECEs face when using a Distributor:

- Smaller distributors (often those that source from small, local producers) have limited delivery ranges. ECE orders are typically small and do not justify the associated transportation costs.
- Distributors typically have a high-volume business model. ECEs are small volume purchasers.
- Distributors cite a limited supply of local food to meet demand.
- Seasonality complicates production and purchase/pricing planning.



Collaborating with community growers:

An Early Care and Education Center in a rural area seeking a source of local produce other than the grocery store, found a unique partner in a local college. As part of the colleges' sustainability program, they have a large garden where they teach the community to grow food. The provider inquired about purchasing fresh produce from the college and established a weekly purchase agreement. She was able to get one local, fresh product for a meal as well as smaller quantities of items for student taste tests. The school even agreed to begin growing crops specifically for the Early Care and Education Center.

Enhancing kitchen infrastructure:

A middle Georgia ECE provider with a robust local purchasing program noticed that during certain times of the year there is an overabundance of peak seasonal produce at good prices. The provider figured out how to use the seasonal abundance to her benefit by investing in additional refrigeration and a commercial stove. This allows the center to store fresh produce for longer. The center employs a trained chef, who processes and freezes locally sourced and garden grown produce so that they can continue to serve and enjoy the bounty year-round.

As the above success stories indicate, the Farm to ECE lessons and best practices described in this document can make a significant positive impact on the health and wellness of Georgia's little eaters, those who care for them, and their communities.

Recommendations for Supporting ECE Local Purchasing Relationships

ECEs have the potential to be significant participants in the local food system. ECEs act as direct markets for local food, cultivators of the next generation of local and fresh food eaters, and as nexus points between the local food system and wider communities.



Recommendations for Local Distributor and Farmers working with ECEs



Catalog

Provide a current catalog with local sources identified.



Process

Offer pre-cut, pre-portioned, and high-quality, fresh, processed/packaged local items to help ECEs to reduce staff time and labor cost.



Farm Box

Consider offering Farm Box/ Local Produce Variety Boxes to serve the ECE needs as well as support the families of ECE students.



Order Minimum

Consider reducing order minimums for ECEs as they are small volume purchasers.



Projections

Consider offering projections that can help ECEs plan future local food offerings.



Consistency

Ensure consistency of product quality to create trusting relationships.



Communication

Communicate promptly and consistently about availability, delivery schedule, and changes.

Finding Additional Support

Recommendations for ECE and Farmer Support Organizations, State and Federal Agencies:

Findings from this project suggest the importance of assisting ECEs while implementing their Farm to ECE programs and beyond. ECEs face challenges in accessing and using the range of available local food financial resources, navigating CACFP rules for local sourcing, and understanding how to extend their food budgets and minimize time spent shopping for local food.

*** Recommendation:** Agencies to offer local procurement support and technical assistance to ECE providers



EXAMPLE

The existing Quality Care for Children Harvest of the Month offers a forum where DECAL or support agencies could share procurement information such as a list of local sources and local procurement guidance.



EXAMPLE

A support organization could pilot a buying cooperative in rural regions of the state where distributors have a high threshold for order minimums.



EXAMPLE

The USDA could relax CACFP micro-purchasing guidelines specifically for ECEs to allow for establishing consistent and dependable purchasing relationships with farmers in their community.



EXAMPLE

Farmer support organizations and The Georgia Department of Agriculture could offer technical support or business development for interested farmers to facilitate business relationships with ECEs.



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