

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Young children learn about healthy eating through Farm to Early Care and Education

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension, in partnership with Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, advances nutrition and healthy lifestyle education at 10 early care facilities in south central Idaho.

The Situation

The rising prevalence of obesity among Idaho youth concerns public health officials statewide. Nationally the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports (2017) childhood obesity affects 18.5% of children. Recent studies show that obesity prevalence has sharply increased among children aged 2 to 5 years.

Childhood obesity was named one of the five health priorities outlined by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's 2019 health assessment, *Get Healthy Idaho*, because 28% of Idaho children are considered overweight or obese. Without sufficient attention paid to reducing childhood obesity, children and adults in Idaho risk developing preventable diseases like heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and obesity-related cancers. By 2030, Idaho is expected to spend an estimated \$3 billion in costs due to obesity-related illness. Eating healthy foods and exercising regularly are some of the important ways to prevent the early onset of disease.

The preschool years are a formative time as children begin to develop their own taste preferences and model adult habits and behaviors. National farm to school research documents that early and effective interventions in childcare facilities are associated with



Patrick Long, farm coordinator with The Hunger Coalition, leads a Farm to ECE activity about winter squash for a pre-K class.

children's greater willingness to try fruits and vegetables at school and at home and increased knowledge on healthy eating, gardening and agriculture.

Our Response

To address childhood obesity in Idaho, the Farm to Early Care and Education (Farm to ECE) pilot program was developed to help children and families establish healthy eating habits while supporting local farms. Farm to ECE procures locally grown food and assists educators in leading nutrition education in early care settings. Ten IdahoSTARS certified providers in the South Central Public Health District participate in Farm to ECE, which launched in September 2019. A variety of childcare settings participate in

Farm to ECE including preschools, child care centers, family child care homes and K-12 school districts.

Early care professionals lead Farm to ECE lessons four times a month. The curriculum opens with a book read aloud to introduce the featured “Harvest of the Month” food, a vegetable that is available seasonally in south central Idaho. In the following weeks, children try the new food family-style, practice new vocabulary, engage in growing their own vegetable or act out the life stages of the plant, and partake in physical games and activities. Students take home stickers, posters, food samples and parent newsletters in English/Spanish.

Farm to ECE partners exclusively with Idaho Preferred growers and family-owned businesses to procure the featured “Harvest of the Month” food (table). Produce is delivered directly to the educators.

Program Outcomes

Our Farm to ECE program currently reaches 383 children, aged 3 to 5 years old. Children are primarily evaluated through qualitative data and taste testing. Following each month’s curriculum, educators identify the aspects of the curriculum that were impactful or challenging for themselves and the children. They report the changes they observe in children’s eating behaviors and reflect on the reactions of families.

Nearly 3,000 tastings have been offered in participating classrooms. Through the process of taste testing, both parents and teachers are surprised to learn that children enjoy the vegetables they tried in class. A teacher in Jerome expressed her surprise to learn that children liked raw bell peppers, a food she does not typically offer at snack time. As a result of the taste tests, she now buys bell peppers for her classroom. Across the board, educators similarly report purchasing more vegetables for snack and lunchtime.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Idaho farms benefit from Farm to ECE. Through newsletters, farms share their stories and products amongst a vast network of local families. Farm to ECE local procurement is summarized in the following table.

Month	Seasonal Vegetable	Quantity (lbs)	Local Farm/Location
Sep	Bell Pepper	75	Blue Rock Farms, Buhl
Sep	Bell Pepper	21	King’s Crown Organic, King Hill
Oct	Beets	10	Lookout Farm, Bellevue
Oct	Beets	16	Blue Rock Farms, Buhl
Oct	Beets	13	Desertflower Farm, Twin Falls
Nov	Winter Squash	120	Agrarian Harvest, Buhl
Dec	Potatoes	75	Agrarian Harvest, Buhl
Jan	Dry Beans	64	Agrarian Harvest, Buhl
Feb	Oats	50	Highland Milling, Bancroft
Mar	Salad and Micro Greens	28	Viola Victory Gardens, Twin Falls

The Future

University of Idaho Extension and Idaho Department of Health and Welfare will continue to offer Farm to ECE programming through May 2020. Farm to ECE received attention from news outlets in the Magic and Wood River Valleys, generating excitement among early care providers and the broader community. Offering a widely available training to IdahoSTARS certified providers could provide an effective avenue for expanding Farm to ECE statewide and beyond.