

Childcare professionals learn to implement Farm to Early Care and Education strategies

AT A GLANCE

Two professional trainings, led by the University of Idaho Extension Farm to Early Care and Education team and offered through IdahoSTARS, explored best implementation practices in early care settings.

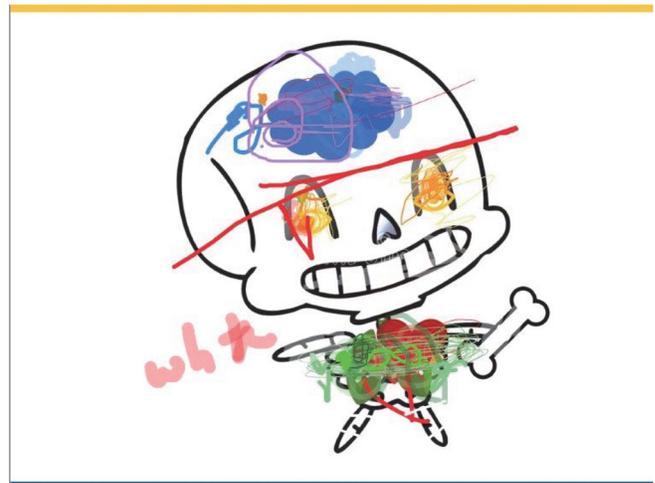
The Situation

The Idaho Farm to Early Care and Education (Farm to ECE) program, funded by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, addresses childhood obesity through three core strategies: (1) food and agriculture education, (2) local food procurement and (3) hands-on gardening experiences.

Since establishment in 2019, the program has been implemented in 18 IdahoSTARS-certified childcare sites across Idaho's South Central Public Health District. Idaho Farm to ECE connects children and communities with fresh and healthy food options through the purchase of local food from Idaho farmers and the introduction of food education activities in childcare settings. A variety of childcare settings are enrolled in the program including preschools, family childcare homes, programs in k-12 school district daycares and after-school programs. In three years, Idaho Farm to ECE has reached over 1,100 children between the ages of three to five.

Our Response

In 2021, the Idaho Farm to ECE team sought to broaden and strengthen statewide support for childcare centers interested in nurturing healthy habits in



Using the Zoom annotate feature, participants were engaged in learning how different colored foods support human bodies.

young children and improving the quality of education through farm to ECE. The Idaho Farm to ECE team partnered with IdahoSTARS, Idaho's quality standards and licensing organization, to offer a two-part, online statewide training to childcare professionals on farm to ECE strategies and implementation. Participants in the virtual trainings earned credit hours to maintain their ECE certification.

The first training, a one-hour introductory session, *Nurturing Health and Curiosity: Introducing Farm to Early Care and Education* was held on Feb. 23, 2021. It focused on introducing the foundational concepts of farm to ECE strategies and their associated benefits to children, families and communities. Participants were encouraged to identify how they currently practice

farm to ECE strategies, such as cooking, gardening, tasting fruits and vegetables, food and agricultural education, etc.

The second virtual training, a three-hour workshop, *Nurturing Health and Curiosity: Implementing Farm to Early Care and Education* was held on March 13, 2021. This session focused on best practices for implementing farm to ECE strategies in early-learning classrooms taught through interactive activities from the Idaho Farm to ECE curriculum. Participants listened to an example of a Farm to ECE book read aloud, participated in a taste test and contributed farm to ECE drawings by using the annotate feature in Zoom (see photo on page 1).

Participants in the three-hour workshop also took part in a farm to ECE goal setting activity by identifying and outlining attainable goals for establishing or expanding farm to ECE strategies in their early care and educational setting.

Program Outcomes

At least 33 ECE stakeholders in the IdahoSTARS trainings participated, serving a combined total of 248 Idaho children. Participants joining the first training represented a variety of stakeholders including childcare providers, educators, health professionals, and farmer's market managers. Participants in the first session were polled to identify their farm to ECE needs (Figure 1). These included funding for serving fresh fruits and vegetables in classroom settings, recipes and classroom cooking ideas, access to farm to ECE curriculum and activities, locating local food producers, and gardening and growing information.

Participants of the second workshop were educators or directors at early childcare centers. Participants completed a goal setting worksheet, adapted from the *Getting Started: Georgia Farm to Early Care and*

Education Guide during the training. When polled during the goal setting activity, 65% of participants (n=11) reported that their farm to ECE goals were focused on implementing class taste tests and establishing edible gardens (see Figure 1).

Poll of Educator's Farm to ECE Needs (n=17)

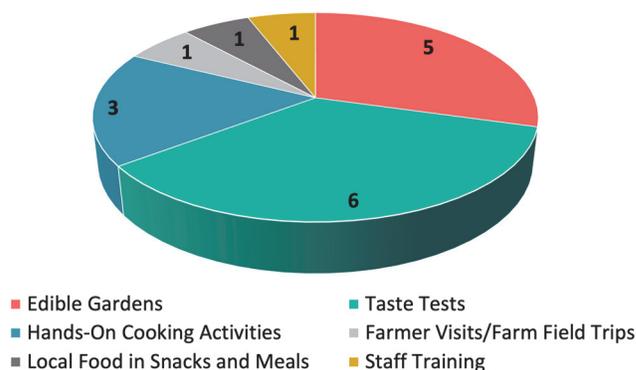


Figure 1. Poll of Educator's Farm to ECE Needs

Both trainings introduced the core components of farm to Early Care and Education and raised awareness to the efforts of the Idaho Farm to ECE program. Participants were directed to resources on the University of Idaho Extension Farm to School website, as well as other local and state resources including the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, Idaho Preferred and Idaho Farmer's Market Association.

The Future

The Idaho Farm to ECE team continues to address stakeholders' needs. In 2021, the team published a bulletin guiding taste testing in group settings titled *Building Healthy Eating Habits through Taste Testing in Early Childcare Centers*. A repeated three-hour workshop training has been requested by IdahoSTARS for delivery in spring 2022.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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