

Success Story

Growing Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) in Maine

October 2023

Background

Farm to ECE initiatives aim to enhance children’s educational experience by increasing access to three core elements: local food sourcing, on-site gardens, and food and agriculture education. With support from the Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Technical Assistance Program (HKHF TAP), the Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Maine (HKHF Maine) team developed a virtual Farm to ECE pilot program to grow the Farm to ECE initiative and increase healthy eating and physical activity in Maine ECE settings.

Farm to ECE Pilot Program

The HKHF Maine team piloted a three-month Farm to ECE virtual Learning Collaborative pilot in March 2021. This pilot engaged ECE providers in professional development and shared peer learning opportunities. The Learning Collaborative incorporated Farm to ECE best practices from Go NAPSACC and used the self-assessment to measure changes made by ECE sites. ECE providers participated in three live virtual sessions and self-paced educational assignments while receiving tailored technical assistance.

The pilot represents a collaboration among organizations in the Physical Activity and Nutrition (PAN) in ECE coalition. These partners worked with the HKHF Maine team to design the pilot, supply lesson content, and provide technical assistance to participants. The HKHF Maine Project Assistant was the key point person for the program implementation and communication, which allowed for consistent and organized outreach and data tracking. These partnerships and assignment of roles were instrumental in the pilot's success.

Additional drivers of success included: knowledge and expertise of the professional development providers, ability for ECE providers to share their projects on an open platform and overall ECE provider excitement and engagement.



"It has been great watching the excitement on the children's faces as they see the seeds grow into tiny plants and the strawberry plants get bigger over the past few weeks."

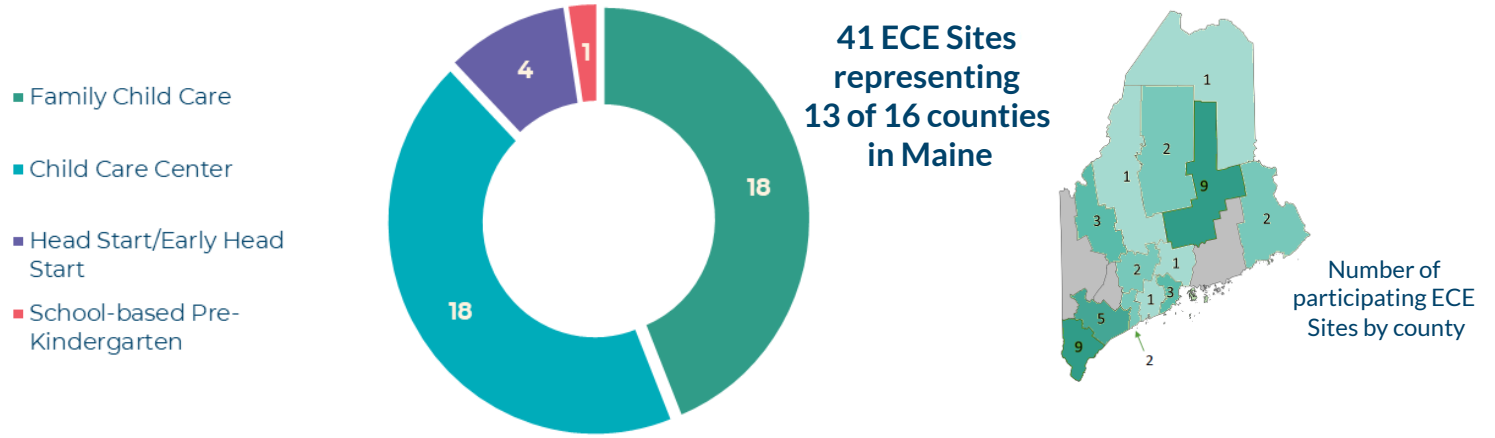
**Margo and Mark Baker,
Child Care Providers at
Giggling Goose Child
Care**

To learn more about this success story or HKHF TAP, please contact mwhite@mcd.org, dawn.littlefield@maine.gov, or hkhftap@nemours.org.

Impact & Outcomes

As a result of this pilot, participating ECE providers made program improvements to support Farm to ECE at their sites. The pilot program’s implementation led to increases in the number of best practices in place in ECE settings, as measured by Go NAPSACC. A breakdown of participating ECE sites and key takeaways from the pilot program are outlined below.

Participating ECE Sites



Key Takeaways

- More ECE providers were interested in and persisted through the Farm to ECE pilot program than in previous pilot programs. A total of 46 ECE providers, representing 41 ECE sites from across the state participated in the Farm to ECE pilot program. Together, these sites serve **1,368 children on a weekly basis**.
- Most ECE providers established gardens and expanded gardening lessons. Out of 46 ECE providers, **42** ECE providers created or improved their gardening space and **39** ECE providers added agriculture and gardening classroom lessons or engaged with local farmers.
- Almost **half of all ECE sites (21)** reported changes in policies including:
 - Creating more in-depth nutrition policies.
 - Adding language on local and home-grown food in children’s menus, on gardening activities for children, and regarding healthy food.
- ECE providers are interested in staying involved with Farm to ECE work and learning more across all three content areas , with **44** wanting to stay connected.
- Most **(40 of 41)** sites showed improvement in meeting best practices. The number of sites meeting the highest level of best practices increased from **nine** sites pre-pilot to **30** sites post-pilot with an average increase of **120%**.

HKHF Maine plans to expand on this work and spread it to other settings, such as out of school youth-serving programs. In addition, HKHF Maine plans to design and develop an online Farm to ECE presence and explore a model with a more self-directed approach for providers.

Nemours Children’s Health is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) under a five-year Cooperative Agreement (5 NU38OT000304-05-00) to support state ECE organizations to integrate best practices and standards for healthy eating, physical activity, breastfeeding support, and reducing screen time in ECE systems and settings. The views expressed in written materials or publications do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Department of Health and Human Services, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.