THE STRATEGIC PLAN TO

EXPAND FARM TO CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS IN ARIZONA



ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
HEALTH AND NUTRITION SERVICES
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SECTION 1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) Health and Nutrition Services (HNS), the state agency responsible for state-level administration of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Child Nutrition Programs (CNPs) and the state implementing agency for farm to school, presents the Strategic Plan to Expand Farm to Child Nutrition Programs in Arizona.

PRIMARY OBJECTIVES

At the onset of this project, ADE-HNS had **three** primary objectives:

1. Understand best practices for successful farm to school implementation in Arizona.
2. Define HNS's role within the farm to school landscape in Arizona.
3. Develop a farm to school strategic plan to establish a framework and measurable outcomes intended to guide future work carried out by ADE-HNS in the areas of local food procurement, nutrition and agriculture education, and school gardens.

To identify the best practices proven to enhance farm to school activities in Arizona, ADE-HNS sought insight from an external consultant and was advised to complete a series of steps, including:

- **Interviews with other states** operating successful farm to school models;
- Collecting **input from key stakeholders**;
- Conducting a thorough **literature review** of farm to school strategies; and
- Disseminating a **statewide community survey**.



The best practices identified were used to inform the priorities, goals and strategies outlined in this plan and to clarify ADE-HNS's role within Arizona farm to school and farm to early care and education (ECE).

PLANNING PROCESS

The Strategic Plan to Expand Farm to CNPs in Arizona was developed through a **collaborative, research-based process** designed to reflect both national best practices and Arizona-specific needs. ADE-HNS gathered insights through interviews with peer states, a review of national literature, a statewide survey, and convening the Arizona-based Farm to School Working Group with represention from education, agriculture, government, and community partners. Stakeholders participated in focused subgroup discussions to identify priorities related to ECE, K–12 engagement, local procurement, and food education. This work was further strengthened by a review of national literature and case studies from leading organizations and by results from a statewide survey that captured perspectives from 195 stakeholders across Arizona.

Findings were synthesized and refined collectively, ensuring the plan was informed by broad community input, grounded in evidence, and structured to support implementation.



STRATEGIC PLAN:
PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIES SUMMARY

Informed by farm to school best practices and an improved understanding of ADE-HNS's role as a **capacity builder, connector** and **convenor** in Arizona's farm to school landscape, this Strategic Plan outlines three overarching priorities:

PRIORITY 1	Increase the capacity of Arizona schools and early care institutions operating the NSLP and/or CACFP to procure local foods.

Strategies:

- Conduct a comprehensive analysis of Arizona's Try It Local program and creating an Arizona-specific guidebook highlighting best practices and approaches for local procurement in schools.
- Fund and/or host facilitated gatherings to support relationship-building between farmers, schools, and ECE organizations.
- Utilize the Farm to School Census to analyze trends of locally grown foods within Arizona.
- Continue local procurement assistance initiatives offered by ADE-HNS that were developed through Try It Local for producers and National School Lunch (NSLP) operators and expand initiatives to Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) operators.
- Work with existing partners to determine the next steps for establishing and maintaining a statewide consolidated vendor list that is accessible and responsive to the needs of schools and ECE providers.
- Issue guidance and share best practices to help School Food Authorities (SFAs) design solicitations accessible to smaller/local vendors.
- Facilitate communication, sharing resources, and promoting funding opportunities.
- Gather annual feedback from program operators surrounding local procurement assistance initiatives.
- Collaborate with partner organizations to develop and implement a support plan for local producers to build awareness of institutional food program opportunities. This may include training and resources that build producer capacity to participate in school food programs.
- Utilize knowledge gained from the comprehensive analysis of Arizona's Try it Local program to determine where gaps in accessibility to the school market may exist and develop and execute an outreach plan intended to address gaps.
- Support coordination between producers and NSLP and CACFP-operating entities to incorporate local products into menus.

PRIORITY 2	Improve access to local food promotional activities and nutrition and agriculture education opportunities for children participating in USDA Child Nutrition Programs.

Strategies:

- Issue solicitations to fund organizations to carry out farm to NSLP and/or CACFP projects reaching multiple schools and childcare organizations across Arizona.
- Identify and document Arizona state agency goals, objectives, and resource needs related to farm to school and farm to ECE and consider strategic support of partnerships through Interagency Service Agreements (ISAs).
- Leverage available data to determine which NSLP and CACFP operators are engaged in “farm-to” activities to inform where program access barriers exist and where additional support is needed.
- Assess resource needs through collaborative participation in Arizona’s Early Childhood Nutrition Policy Team.
- Survey CACFP operators to better understand farm to ECE knowledge, barriers and current activities.
- Update and share CACFP guidance, training, and resources to include farm to ECE best practices.
- Support CACFP operators with initiating nutrition and agriculture education and garden activities that align with the CACFP meal pattern.
- Partner with organizations working directly with ECE organizations to explore the creation of an Arizona-specific farm to ECE education.



PRIORITY 3	Strengthen connections and integration of farm to school and farm to ECE activities statewide.

Strategies:

- Ensure a farm to NSLP point of contact and a farm to CACFP point of contact is in place to support connections, develop partnerships and enhance collaboration between ADE-HNS and farm to school/ECE partners.
- Collect content for storytelling from NSLP and CACFP operators successfully integrating “farm-to” programming to highlight the benefits of farm to school and ECE to parents/guardians, school/ECE administrators and state-level decision makers.
- Provide direct support and strategic messaging to SFAs and CACFP operators wanting to approach their administration and/or organization decision-makers about investing resources in farm to school/ECE.
- Incorporate food sovereignty principles into “farm to” initiatives while supporting community-led efforts, particularly in Indigenous communities.
- Issue solicitations to fund projects supporting the growth and expansion of the Arizona Farm to School Network.
- Identify opportunities to align Arizona state agency goals, objectives and resources related to farm to school and farm to early care and education and consider the use of ISAs to support coordinated, statewide partnerships and initiatives.
- Consult the ADE legislative team in order to define advocacy roles within Arizona farm to school/ECE.

SECTION 2

INTRODUCTION

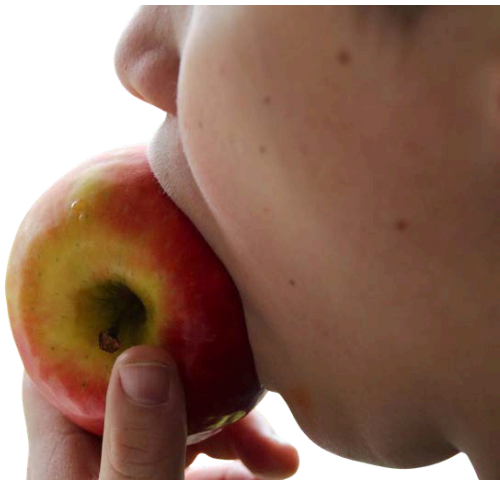


INTRODUCTION

The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) Health and Nutrition Services (HNS) administers USDA Child Nutrition Programs (CNPs) statewide, including the **National School Lunch Program (NSLP)** and the **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)**.

ADE-HNS aims to support schools and early care and education (ECE) facilities in serving more meals with optimal nutrition and believes that all students deserve the opportunity to learn and grow in a safe and healthy environment.

To ensure participants receive the **maximum benefits from our programs**, ADE-HNS works collaboratively with stakeholders across Arizona to increase access to nutritious foods and support food service departments operating CNPs in meeting program requirements and goals. Farm to school and farm to ECE initiatives offer an effective strategy to advance these efforts by increasing a child's exposure and access to fresh, locally sourced foods and hands-on education.



These initiatives are grounded in **three core pillars**:

1. local food procurement;
2. nutrition and agriculture-based education; and,
3. school gardens.

HNS Specialists provide training, technical assistance and create resources that **raise awareness and highlight the partnership and outreach opportunities that support farm to CNP implementation** across diverse school and ECE settings statewide.

Research *overwhelmingly* supports the integration of farm to school into school environments. A 2019 USDA literature review found that "**children exposed to farm to school programming consumed more fruits and vegetables and demonstrated increased willingness to try unfamiliar foods**" (USDA, 2019). **These outcomes directly align with ADE-HNS's efforts to improve meal quality, enhance student nutrition education, and expand access to locally grown food in CNPs.**

Farm to school and farm to ECE initiatives also generate meaningful economic and community benefits across Arizona. By creating reliable markets for local producers, these efforts support the circulation of food dollars within local economies and strengthen connections between schools and agricultural partners. Research indicates that direct procurement from local farmers can diversify producers' revenue streams, foster valuable relationships, and build social capital within communities. As Arizona experiences the loss of farmland due to urban development, farm to school strategies can play an important role in sustaining agricultural viability while ensuring children have access to fresh, nutrient-dense foods.

Since 2011, ADE-HNS has prioritized farm to school as a strategy to connect the recipients of CNPs to locally grown food, promote healthy eating habits, and support Arizona's agricultural economy. Historically, this has included hosting farm tours, regional buyer-supplier meetings, school garden summits, supporting Arizona producers' entrance into the school market through food shows and listings in the Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh Produce and establishing the Arizona Farm to School Network.



This Strategic Plan is intended to clarify ADE-HNS's role within the statewide farm to school and farm to ECE landscape, define actionable goals and strategies, and provide the framework to establish an internal roadmap that will plot next steps in local procurement, nutrition and agriculture-based education, and school garden activities.

HISTORY OF FARM TO SCHOOL IN ARIZONA

The farm to school movement in Arizona has grown steadily over the years. This timeline highlights many milestones, partnerships and initiatives that have shaped the landscape of the movement and contributed to **Arizona's commitment to connecting students with fresh, locally grown food, while supporting local farmers and producers**. Although it offers an overview of the progress achieved, it does not serve as a comprehensive account of every activity or contribution, and numerous efforts are not included in this summary. HNS appreciates the work of all individuals and organizations that have helped shape farm to school movement in Arizona.



A FARM TO SCHOOL TIMELINE

History of Farm to School in Arizona

1993-2025

The Arizona Department of Health Services and the Arizona Department of Agriculture worked together under the Arizona Grown initiative to promote state licensing. Their partnership supported the 5-a-day campaign, aiming to raise awareness of Arizona's Specialty Crop Industry and encourage local consumption.

1997

The University of Arizona launched Arizona's Agricultural Literacy Program as part of a nationwide initiative established in 1981 by the USDA. This program aimed to address the significant gap in educational resources regarding the origins of our food supply.

2007

The Arizona Farm Bureau established the Agriculture in the Classroom program to support educators throughout the state. Agriculture in the Classroom produced classroom presentations and provided information about Arizona Farm Bureau farm members, enhancing agricultural education for students.

2008

The National Farm to School Network is a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing the "farm to school" initiative. Through partnerships with each state, it is known for bringing people together and sharing resources, currently emphasizing the importance of fostering equity within this movement.

2010

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act was enacted, leading to the establishment of the USDA Farm to School Program. This initiative aimed to providing local food and agricultural education to participants in child nutrition programs through grants, research, technical assistance, and training.

2011

The Arizona Department of Education, Health and Nutrition Services, appointed the state's inaugural Farm to School Coordinator. This role was specifically intended to provide technical assistance and enhance resource development for Child Nutrition Program operators.

The Arizona Department of Agriculture established a part-time position aimed at assisting small producers who wish to scale their operations while complying with industry and USDA food safety standards.

The Arizona Department of Education convened a Farm to School Advisory Council to support the development of its programs.

2012

The Arizona Department of Health Services is revising its SNAP Education policy to incorporate strategies related to systems and environments that promote the establishment of school gardens. This initiative aims to enhance awareness and support for the development of school garden programs.

The University of Arizona Maricopa County Cooperative Extension has inaugurated the Beginning Farmer Program.

2013

The Arizona Department of Health Services, in collaboration with the University of Arizona and the Arizona Department of Education, has developed food safety guidelines that reflect the USDA's Good Handling Practices and Good Agricultural Practices program, specifically tailored for school gardens. A part-time coordinator was appointed to provide coaching and conduct audits on food safety within these school garden programs.

The Arizona Garden Network was established in Maricopa County to coordinate SNAP-Ed, PSE initiatives, and school gardens. This group collaborated to create and conduct workshops focused on school gardening.

2014

The University of Arizona Agricultural Literacy Program partnered with the Arizona Department of Health Services to host statewide food safety workshops focused on school gardens.

The Arizona Department of Education has been awarded a USDA Farm to School Event Grant to facilitate the participation of farmers at food shows.

2015

The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona successfully completed its inaugural delivery to the Tucson Unified School District!

The Arizona Department of Education was awarded a Specialty Crop Block Grant from the Arizona Department of Agriculture to develop marketing materials aimed at promoting vegetables that align with the vegetable subgroups of the National School Lunch Program specifically, orange, red, and dark green vegetables. These subgroups were identified as key findings during an Administrative Review.



2016

House Bill 2518 has been enacted, supporting the inclusion of produce from school gardens in school cafeterias.

The Arizona Department of Health Services appointed a Food System Coordinator to enhance farm-to-school initiatives within the Policy, Systems, and Environmental framework. This role has revised the framework to include all Farm-to-Institution activities, such as promoting local purchasing with School Food Authorities, improving access to local food in corner markets, offering technical assistance to producers and food hubs, and implementing strategies for Farm-to-Early Childhood Education.

Stern Produce appointed a Local Food Coordinator to develop their Arizona Fresh Together Program. This initiative aims to create opportunities for small and mid-sized producers by establishing new market channels, including schools and restaurants.

2017

The Arizona Department of Education designated a "Core Partner" for Arizona by the National Farm to School Network. In addition to launching Arizona Farm to ECE efforts, this "Level 2" scope of work included mentorship and encouraged ADE to host one all-program encompassing F2S Network instead of hosting three separate networks/coalitions.

The Sun Produce Cooperative founded and successfully completed its first sales to the Litchfield Elementary School District.

The Arizona Department of Education obtained a Specialty Crop Block Grant from the Arizona Department of Agriculture to launch its first school garden grant program. This initiative designed to promote sustainability in school gardens throughout Arizona, ensuring their viability extends beyond a three-year period.

The Arizona Department of Education launched the Arizona Farm to Early Care Coalition to promote the incorporation of knowledge from farm-to-table initiatives into early childhood care environments.

The Arizona Department of Education expanded the Harvest of the Season Program and continued to subsidize local food vendors booths at events. This initiative associated with the DoD Fresh Local Listing, which fostered a stronger partnership between School Food Authorities and the Department of Defense as a means of accessing local produce.

2018

The Arizona Department of Education launched its first-ever Farm Fresh Challenge for SFSP Operators. This initiative encompasses three essential components: taste, teach, and connect, all aimed at promoting the holistic growth of farm-to-school programs.

2019

The Arizona Department of Education, served as the lead applicant, was awarded the Farm to Early Childhood Education grant from the Association of State Public Health Nutritionists. This developed and tested professional development for ECE Providers coupled with incentives to address implementation barriers.

The Arizona Department of Education initiated the Arizona Farm to School Network, which integrated the three previously established topic-based work groups, following the recommendations of the National Farm to School Network.

2020

The Arizona Department of Education received the USDA Farm to School Grant, which is focused on enhancing the growing Arizona Farm to School Network. This initiative also enabled the testing of proof-of-concept strategies aimed at furthering this vital effort across the state.

The USDA Team Nutrition Training Grant enabled the creation of the Arizona Department of Education's Kitchen Creations Program, a recipe development initiative that emphasized unique, local, and traditional Native American foods. This program showcased products such as blue cornmeal, tepary beans, a variety of orange-fleshed winter squashes, and White Sonora wheat.

2021

Arizona Department of Education collaborated with the Chef Ann Foundation and the Lifetime Foundation to pilot a three-year investment initiative aimed at supporting School Food Authorities in enhancing their operations and promoting scratch cooking in the aftermath of the pandemic.

2023

Arizona Department of Education has been awarded the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement, which aims to incorporate local food into school meal programs while simultaneously supporting socially disadvantaged producers and small businesses.

2024

The Arizona state legislature has allocated $100,000 to Arizona Department Education specifically for the "School and Community Gardens" initiative. This grant supported the sustainability of a garden coordinator positions across seven participating schools.

FARM TO CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS AT THE ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Since 2011, ADE-HNS has built a foundation of initiatives and programs aimed at integrating farm to school practices. Past efforts have included:

- ***Implementation of the Farm to School Program:*** Since 2011, ADE-HNS has prioritized farm to school as a strategy to connect children with agriculture, promote healthy eating habits, and support Arizona's agricultural economy. The first position devoted to farm to school focused on providing technical assistance and enhancing resources for CNP operators.

- ***School Garden Initiatives:*** ADE-HNS facilitated the development of school gardens across the state, promoting hands-on learning about agriculture, nutrition, and sustainability. These gardens serve as experiential learning spaces for students and support food, agriculture, and nutrition education.

- ***Regional Buyer-Producer Meetings:*** ADE-HNS facilitated regional meetings aimed at enhancing the accessibility of local foods in schools. By connecting local farmers with school food service directors, the initiative fostered stronger relationships and aimed to streamline procurement processes.

- ***Arizona Farm to School Network (AZ F2SN):*** ADE-HNS received the USDA Farm to School Grant in 2020 and focused on enhancing and growing the AZ F2SN. Since 2022, ADE-HNS has co-convened the statewide network alongside The Mollen Foundation and remains an active member.

- ***Kitchen Creations:*** The USDA Team Nutrition Training Grant was awarded to ADE-HNS and funded the initiation of the Kitchen Creations project, which focuses on creating standardized recipes with traditional ingredients for use in school meal programs. Recipes were created in collaboration with the Chef Ann Foundation.

- ***Grants and Funding Support:*** The Department has facilitated access to federal and state grants to support farm to school initiatives, including funding for school gardens, procurement activities, and professional development.

These initiatives have collectively contributed to **increasing awareness, capacity, and implementation of farm to school practices across Arizona**, establishing the foundation for the creation of this Strategic Plan and additional projects ahead.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

ADE-HNS currently promotes farm to school statewide through the following efforts:

- ***Farm to School Formula Funding:*** ADE-HNS received the Farm to School State Formula Grant in 2022. This funding is dedicated to advancing farm to school activities, supporting procurement of local foods, agricultural education, and school garden efforts within child nutrition programs. It will be utilized to support activities identified in the Strategic Plan.
- ***Try It Local! Local Food for Schools*:** Try It Local is the state's branded implementation of the USDA's Local Food for Schools (LFS) Cooperative Agreement Program. Through June 30, 2026, it provided funding for schools to purchase unprocessed or minimally processed local foods, supporting Arizona farmers and engaging students with local agriculture.
- ***The Farm Fresh Challenge***: ADE-HNS organizes the Farm Fresh Challenge throughout the school year and the summer to encourage program operators of the NSLP and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to complete a series of challenges to promote participants' tasting, teaching, and connection to foods local to Arizona. The challenge involves serving local products, hosting educational activities, and promoting activities in communities.
- ***upLIFT Fresh Futures: Farm-to-Table School Meals Initiative*:** upLIFT is an ADE-HNS nutrition promotion initiative and platform intended to provide Child Nutrition Professionals with information and resources highlighting the significance of proper nutrition and nutrition programs. During the creation of this Strategic Plan, the platform's annual initiative focused on farm to table meal models that connect Arizona farmers to schools through innovative procurement strategies, menu development, and student-centered food education.
- ***Local Food Procurement Resources and Promotions:*** Resources and promotions focus on incorporating local foods into school menus. They include the Kitchen Creations Toolkit, a toolkit designed for incorporating indigenous foods in Arizona school meals, nutrition knowledge fact sheets, and the Taste AZ monthly informational resource that promotes an Arizona-grown food for integration into school meals.
- ***Procuring Local Workshops:*** In-person workshops for school nutrition professionals that explore the importance of local procurement for school meals by reviewing topics such as sourcing local ingredients for menus and strategies for establishing successful partnerships with local producers.
- ***Cross-Team Collaboration:*** There is a division-wide commitment at ADE-HNS to the integration of local food, agriculture, and nutrition education into Arizona's CNPs. Six teams work within ADE-HNS to support child nutrition operators in the successful administration of CNPs and integration of farm to school activities through their established functions.

SECTION 3

BEST PRACTICES



BEST PRACTICES

PURPOSE



Understanding best practices was essential in shaping The Strategic Plan to Expand Farm to CNPs in Arizona. Through the exploration of successful initiatives in other states, a thorough analysis of current literature guiding national efforts, and a reflection on Arizona's existing conditions, ADE-HNS sought to establish this plan based on **strategies that are effective, measurable, and conducive to program sustainability**. This analysis offered a rich foundation of evidence-based practices that shaped our priorities and helped to clarify ADE-HNS's role in Arizona farm to school landscape.

PROCESS

Best practices were identified through a combination of research, collaborative input, and reflection. To ensure the resulting plan included priorities and measures that were well-informed and actionable, **the process included the following phases:**

1	***Peer Learning: Interviews with Model Farm to School Programs*** The process began by engaging with other state agencies leading farm to school efforts. ADE-HNS met with leaders from Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, and Ohio to understand their program models, challenges, and successes. These conversations provided valuable insights into effective strategies, staffing structures, funding mechanisms, and cross-sector collaboration. The shared experiences helped inform HNS's approach as the state implementing agency in farm to school and farm to ECE.
2	***Stakeholder Sessions: Arizona-based Farm to School Working Group*** Following this discovery phase, ADE-HNS convened a diverse Farm to School Working Group composed of Arizona farm to school stakeholders. This group included representatives from state agencies, school food authorities, nonprofit organizations, early childhood providers, local producers, and more.

3	***Expert Insights: Subgroup Meetings*** To allow for deeper exploration of focus areas, the Working Group was divided into four subgroups: • Early Care and Education • K-12 School Champions • Local Procurement and Production • School Gardens and Food Education Each subgroup engaged in dialogue around their subject area to identify needs and compile supporting evidence. This structure created space for rich discussion and led to the identification of critical priorities that were presented to the larger Working Group for consideration.
4	***Arizona Priorities: Critical Areas of Focus*** The final meeting brought all subgroups back together to synthesize their findings. Collectively, the group refined and prioritized the critical areas identified by each subgroup. This final step helped to ensure this Strategic Plan was informed by the voices of those most actively engaged in farm to school across Arizona.
5	***National Priorities: Literature Review*** As a part of the best practice determination process, a focused review of national literature, census data, and case studies was conducted to identify key models and emerging priorities in the Farm to School and Farm to ECE movements. This review drew primarily from USDA, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), and the National Farm to School Network (NFSN).
6	***Community Voice: Statewide Survey*** ADE-HNS conducted the Arizona 2025 Farm to School/ECE Community Survey to better understand the current landscape, capacity, and needs of Arizona's farm to school and farm to ECE community. This survey collected 195 responses from school administrators, educators, community partners, non-profit organizations, and local producers across Arizona.

BEST PRACTICES AND INSIGHTS

LEARNING FROM PEER STATES

As a first step in the strategic planning process, ADE-HNS was advised by USDA Southwest Regional Office to consult with other states about their farm to school efforts. Programs in **Ohio, Iowa, Indiana, and Kansas** were recommended as relevant to Arizona because they operate similar initiatives, have well-established programs, similar network structures, and integration of work into their CNPs. Like Arizona, each agency administers CNPs for their state while also serving as the state implementing agency for farm to school and are further characterized by having many small SFAs serving less than 2,500 students.

These conversations offered insights into program organization and partnership building. **Takeaways from each conversation are summarized below:**

Interviews with Kansas, Ohio, Indiana, and Iowa highlighted strategies for **long-term success**. Key themes included **cross-agency collaboration, procurement-focused workgroups, structured planning with steering committees, and integrating farm-to-school into early childcare programs**. All states **leverage school gardens, hold regular coalition meetings, and use USDA grants to fund local initiatives**. **Recognition programs** also encourage schools to strengthen participation.



Successful farm to school programs share several key strategies: building strong cross-agency coalitions with **diverse stakeholders**, forming **dedicated subgroups** to tackle procurement challenges, and developing **formal strategic plans with measurable goals**. **Expanding initiatives to early childhood education and integrating school gardens** enhances experiential learning and local food exposure. **Regular communication, capacity-building efforts, and recognition programs** keep stakeholders engaged, while **leveraging federal and state grants** empowers schools to create localized solutions. **Together, these practices foster collaboration, sustainability, and broaden participation in farm to school efforts.**

Interview and best practice summaries are provided in Appendix A.

ARIZONA-BASED WORKING GROUP INSIGHTS

To ensure this Strategic Plan was informed by a broad range of perspectives and expertise, ADE-HNS invited farm to school stakeholders from across the Arizona to participate in the Arizona Farm to School Working Group. Working Group members collaborated to identify key priority areas in the state's farm to school ecosystem. These priorities helped shape the Strategic Plan by informing best practices, guiding recommendations, and establishing a framework for future initiatives. **ADE-HNS intentionally sought representation from diverse sectors, geographic regions, and lived experiences to ensure a comprehensive understanding of opportunities and challenges across the field**. Members represented federal and state agencies, school nutrition departments, community-based organizations, local producers and K-12 schools.

- For clarity, when "Working Group" is referenced throughout this plan, it refers to the Arizona-based Farm to School Working Group, convened to aid in ADE-HNS's strategic planning process.

Meeting Cadence and Structure

Identifying the most critical areas impacting Arizona farm to school involved a structured, multi-step process. The Working Group met five times from September 2024-December 2024 and gathered between meetings as subgroups to participate in facilitated activities based on their specific area of expertise.

The meetings were organized as follows:

Meeting 1	Formation of subgroups by subject area
Meeting 2	Assessing the current state of farm to school in Arizona and identifying gaps
Meeting 3	Reviewing and gathering evidence and reviewing relevant data, best practices and research by subject area
Meeting 4	Prioritizing initiatives to determine top priorities by subject area
Meeting 5	Refining and presenting top priorities by subject area

This process fostered **stakeholder collaboration**, incorporated **diverse perspectives,** and allowed each subgroup to carefully consider **how to address specific challenges and opportunities**. The group identified **14 critical priority areas** along with supporting evidence for each individual priority.

The priorities identified by each subgroup can be found in Appendix B.

Working Group Ranking of Priorities

The final action of the Working Group was to **rank the 14 critical priorities** identified by the subgroups. From December 5 to 20, 2024, 17 members of the Working Group took the Strategic Plan Priorities Survey. Each subgroup presented the priority areas that they determined to be most critical along with their rationale for each priority.

- **Based on the 14 priorities** identified by the four subgroups, **each member of the Working Group ranked their top 5 priorities.**
- **Each participant was given the opportunity to add a priority** if they felt one was missing. Among the 17 participants, **none submitted a new priority.**
- The prioritization of the tasks was established through a weighted average method. This involved assigning greater weights to the answer options that respondents ranked higher, resulting in **the top-ranked priority receiving the highest score, while the lowest-ranked priority received the lowest score**. This approach allows for a clear identification of the overall preferred priorities.

The following chart shows the ranking of the 14 priorities based on the weighted average scores from high to low.



RANK	PRIORITY	SCORE
1	Dedicated state professionals for farm to school and farm to ECE.	11.35
2	Farm to school programmatic education for the entire school community.	10.41
3	Mandates and funding to support sustainable farm to school programming.	10.18
4	Address existing procurement barriers (streamline procurement).	9.59
5	Tailored support that addresses all three pillars: school garden, nutrition education and local procurement.	9.47
6	Address limited funding (e.g., long term program needs, salaries).	8.24
7	Address existing structural barriers.	8.18
8	ECE is prioritized with dedicated resources, targeted support, and integrated F2S practices.	7.94
9	Fully integrated food curriculum within the CACFP space.	7.18
10	Provide guidance and support intended for producers.	6.88
11	Ensure alignment with existing school structures and agendas.	4.88
12	Provide garden training and professional development.	4.24
13	Address gaps in value and policy.	4.22
14	Develop a strong equity lens for all priorities.	2.24

Working Group Key Insights

The Working Group concluded that the **most critical priority areas in Arizona farm to school and farm to ECE include a need for:**

- **Dedicated state professionals** for farm to school and for farm to ECE.
- **Programmatic farm to school education** for school communities.
- **Mandates and funding** to sustain farm to school programming.
- Solutions to **overcome barriers to local procurement.**
- **Tailored support** addressing all three pillars of farm to school: school gardens, nutrition education and local procurement.



Photograph Features Concodia Charter School Garden
Phoenix, AZ

FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

As a part of the best practice identification process, a focused review of national literature, census data, and case studies was conducted to identify effective models and emerging priorities within the farm to school and farm to ECE movements. This review drew primarily from resources published by the USDA, CDC, FRAC, and NFSN. **By examining national data and federal initiatives, and successful implementation strategies, ADE-HNS gained valuable insight into priority areas and opportunities to strengthen farm to school and farm to ECE efforts at the state level**

The national literature, cooperative agreements and the 2023 USDA Farm to School Census highlight **several key areas where state-level strategies could further support farm to school and farm to ECE implementation.**

Key Insights Support:

- ***Investing in local food procurement support initiatives:*** Ensuring state-specific training, technical assistance and networking opportunities exist for local producers and SFAs to connect. (USDA BTFS, 2023; USDA FNS, 2023; Shelburne Farms, 2023).
- ***Strengthening school food procurement practices:*** Offering training and resources to SFAs on procurement best practices, streamlining district-level processes to encourage small-scale producer engagement (USFA, 2025; FARMWISE, 2023).
- ***Designing programs with equity and cultural relevance in mind:*** Improving program access to farm to school and farm to ECE by ensuring culturally relevant programs are accessible to all children, families and producers and engaging with indigenous communities, communities of color and low-income populations in program planning. (NFSN, 2019; NFSN, 2020; IAC, 2023).
- ***Expanding experiential learning:*** Improving student engagement through the development of curricula and professional development that supports the integration of hands-on garden and farm-based learning in schools as well as aligning education programming with cafeteria experiences. (USDA FNS, 2023, NFSN, 2020).



- ***Implementing effective evaluation strategies:*** Capture both nutrition and education impacts of farm to school and farm to ECE interventions and adjust strategies based on feedback, performance and emerging best practices. (USDA FNS, 2023; NFSN, 2020; FRAC, 2024).
- ***Integrating farm to ECE strategies into CACFP:*** Providing technical assistance, curriculum resources, and funding mechanisms to support providers in implementing gardening, nutrition education, and local procurement. Support statewide evaluation and program continuity by tracking outcomes in ECE settings. (CDC, 2023; FRAC, 2024).
- ***Strengthening state-level coordination:*** Establishing state-level coordination among agriculture, education and health agencies (CDC, 2023; FRAC, 2024).

The complete literature review can be found in the Appendix C.



ARIZONA 2025 FARM TO SCHOOL/ECE COMMUNITY SURVEY

Following the convening of the Arizona-based Farm to School Working Group, the Arizona 2025 Farm to School/ECE Community Survey was created and disseminated to gather input from a wider audience of stakeholders and community members based on the **four subgroup areas**: local procurement and production, school gardens & nutrition education, farm to K-12, and farm to ECE. The Arizona 2025 Farm to School/ECE Community Survey gathered feedback from 195 farm to school stakeholders statewide.

The survey was designed to reach and collect insights from the following audiences:

School Food Authorities:	Food and nutrition departments (e.g., food service directors).
Local Producers:	Farmers, food hubs or cooperatives, suppliers, distributors, including processors and manufacturers who meet SFA's criteria for buying local.
School Administrators:	Principals, directors, school procurement, and other school administrators for K-12 and ECE.
Educators:	Teachers (K-12 and ECE), including curriculum specialists, school garden coordinators, and after-school program leaders, targeting specific members involved with nutrition education/or gardening involved in their programs.
Others:	Parents, community and agency partners, nonprofits, higher education stakeholders involved in farm to school, local foods, school gardens, nutrition education in K-12 schools and ECE.

Survey findings produced insights on participation and awareness, barriers to implementation, current activities taking place by program participants and areas where support is desired. A complete survey analysis is available in Appendix D.

KEY INSIGHTS:

Participation and Awareness	**20%** of school/ECE respondents currently participate in farm to school/ECE activities, while 80% are not currently engaged and **36%** are not aware of the program. However, **nearly half (49%) of non-participants plan to join in the future**, signaling strong potential for growth.
Barriers to Implementation	According to the survey, **the most prevalent challenges across all respondent categories include lack of awareness, staffing shortages, limited funding, vendor availability, procurement complexity, and high costs.** Among schools and ECE organizations that reported experiencing challenges, several barriers emerged as the most common: • ***Availability and product standards:*** Limited local food availability and lack of local options from primary vendors. • ***Procurement and delivery:*** Complex processes and logistical challenges related to ordering and distribution. • ***Cost:*** Local foods often cost more than conventional products.
Activities Among Participants	Schools and ECE organizations that do participate **most commonly engage in school gardens and local food education (85%) followed by taste tests and cooking demos (65%) and purchase of local foods (65%)**. Participants less commonly participate in field trips and hosting farmers or chefs. These results identify **school gardens as a common entry point** for farm to school programming, and there is opportunity for collaborating with other professionals to enhance learning experiences.
Definition of Local	Definitions of "local" varied **considerably** among participating schools, and **15% reported having no definition at all**. This lack of consistency may influence how respondents interpreted procurement-related questions and highlights the need for a more standardized definition.

KEY INSIGHTS:

Desired Support	**Schools** most often request **funding for educational activities and local food procurement, along with additional staff** as a critical first step toward program sustainability. Respondents noted that **training and technical assistance** in sourcing local foods and **managing procurement and delivery** would likely increase participation. **Farmers** emphasized the need for **introductions to schools, support for processing products to meet school requirements, and access to food hubs to streamline distribution.**
Ranking of Working Group Priorities	Survey respondents selected their **top five priorities** for advancing farm to school/ECE programming based on the critical priority areas identified by the Arizona-based Farm to School Working Group. The highest priorities include **policy mandates and funding to support sustainable programs, farm to school education for the entire school community, and tailored support addressing all three pillars (gardens, nutrition education, and local procurement).** When compared to the Working Group's ranking of these priorities, **addressing limited funding ranked at the same level of urgency, while garden training and professional development emerged as a higher priority than the Working Group.** **Lower-ranked**, but still important, priorities include **dedicated state professionals, procurement barrier solutions, and ECE prioritization with integrated practices.** Overall, the data reflects **strong urgency for funding and education, moderate emphasis on structural and staffing support, and consistent recognition of the need for integrated approaches.**

SURVEY LIMITATIONS

1. ***Geographic representation:*** Responses were concentrated in Tucson (23%), Phoenix (12%), and Mesa (8%).
2. ***Producer participation:*** Only 14 farmer/producer responses compared to 127 school-related responses, limiting generalizability of producer challenges.
3. ***Definition variations:*** Lack of a consistent definition of “local” highlights a need for standardization and may have influenced procurement-related responses.



Photograph Features Maryland School Garden in Phoenix, AZ
Washington Elementary District

BEST PRACTICES: CONCLUSION

Collectively, the peer state interviews, Arizona-based Working Group process, literature review, and statewide community survey revealed a consistent set of best practices that informed the development of this Strategic Plan. **These best practices reflect approaches that are proven, scalable, and relevant to Arizona's unique farm to school and farm to ECE landscape:**

- **Invest in dedicated state-level leadership.** Establish and sustain dedicated farm to school and farm to ECE professionals within the state agency to ensure coordination, continuity, and accountability.
- **Secure stable mandates and funding.** Support long-term program sustainability through policy alignment, recurring funding streams, and integration into existing CNP structures.
- **Strengthen cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration.** Formalize partnerships among agriculture, education, health agencies, and community stakeholders to reduce silos and align efforts.
- **Address procurement barriers through targeted support.** Streamline procurement processes, provide technical assistance to SFAs and producers, and improve access to distribution and food hubs.
- **Integrate all three pillars of farm to school.** Design programs that intentionally connect local procurement, nutrition education, and school gardens rather than addressing each in isolation.
- **Expand capacity-building and professional development.** Offer training, education, and technical assistance for school communities, ECE providers, and producers to increase participation and program quality.
- **Prioritize early care and education.** Prioritize early care and education. Embed farm to ECE strategies within CACFP through dedicated resources, aligned curriculum, and tailored technical assistance.
- **Center equity and cultural relevance.** Ensure programs are accessible, culturally responsive, and designed in partnership with diverse communities across Arizona.
- **Implement consistent definitions and evaluation strategies.** Establish shared definitions of "local" and use data-driven evaluation to measure impact and inform continuous improvement.

Together, **these best practices form the foundation of an integrated, evidence-based strategy to expand farm to NSLP and farm to CACFP efforts statewide** and were intentionally applied in the development of the following Strategic Plan.



FARM TO SCHOOL IDENTITY
A FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

Throughout the strategic planning process, **ADE-HNS worked to clarify its place within Arizona's farm to school landscape.** In doing so, the agency considered its historical contributions to the **state's farm to school ecosystem, current ongoing activities, its position within Arizona's existing network, the agency's strengths and resources, and opportunities that would improve program access** for the recipients of the USDA CNPs. Based on this assessment, **ADE-HNS identified strategic priorities that reflect its values, responsibilities, and unique position** as a **capacity builder, connector,** and **convenor**. This understanding guided the development of the Strategic Plan and the priorities it outlines.

ADE-HNS is a CAPACITY BUILDER

ADE-HNS is a CONNECTOR

ADE-HNS is a CONVENOR



Photograph Features Maryland School Garden in Phoenix, AZ
Washington Elementary District

ADE-HNS is a CAPACITY BUILDER

At the federal level, **USDA** serves as the **central funder, technical assistance provider, and data aggregator**. Through programs like the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program, Local Food for Schools, and the Farm to School Census, USDA provides the resources and national frameworks that make farm to school possible. They fund **innovation, support research, and share emerging best practices** across the country.

At the state level, **ADE-HNS** will act as a **capacity builder**, leveraging funding and technical support from USDA. This means **prioritizing procurement systems** that are easier to navigate; **promoting partnerships** between schools, farmers, and early care providers; **building technical capacity** through new tools and grants that may be implemented; and **amplifying the value of farm to school** through tailored support.

ADE-HNS is a CONNECTOR

ADE-HNS is well-positioned to **help stakeholders navigate federal programs, interpret policy guidance, access funding, and find one another** through strategic convenings, networks, and outreach.

As a connector, ADE-HNS will:

- **Clarify state level disseminating guidance and interpretation** of USDA programs to reduce confusion and streamline program implementation.
- **Disseminate guidance documents, toolkits, and training** to improve understanding among school nutrition professionals and early care providers.
- **Serve as a liaison between USDA and local partners,** providing consistent updates and helping stakeholders access available funding opportunities and data sources.

ADE-HNS is a CONVENOR

ADE-HNS is not focused on delivering every farm to school service, but on **strengthening the systems and supporting the people doing the work in Arizona's communities**.

In the role of convenor, ADE-HNS's focus is on creating the conditions in which farm to school efforts can thrive by **helping partners gather, share ideas, and collaborate** through co-convening of the Arizona Farm to School Network and **increasing opportunities to more consistently gather, learn and uplift farm to school initiatives statewide**.

SECTION 4

STRATEGIC PLAN

Priorities, Goals, and Strategies



STRATEGIC PLAN:
PRIORITIES, GOALS, AND STRATEGIES

OVERVIEW

Informed by best practices and a clarified understanding of our role as a capacity builder, connector and convenor in Arizona's farm to school landscape, this Strategic Plan outlines **three overarching priorities**.

1

First, ADE-HNS will **increase the capacity** of schools and early care institutions participating in NSLP and CACFP **to procure local foods by streamlining procurement processes, expanding technical assistance, and supporting relationship-building between producers and program operators**. This includes a comprehensive analysis of Arizona's Try It Local program, targeted vendor support, and coordination between producers and CNP operators to incorporate local products into menus.

2

Second, ADE-HNS aims to **improve access** to local food promotion and nutrition education by **providing tailored support** to schools and ECE providers, **administering funding opportunities, and expanding farm to school and farm to ECE training and resources**.

3

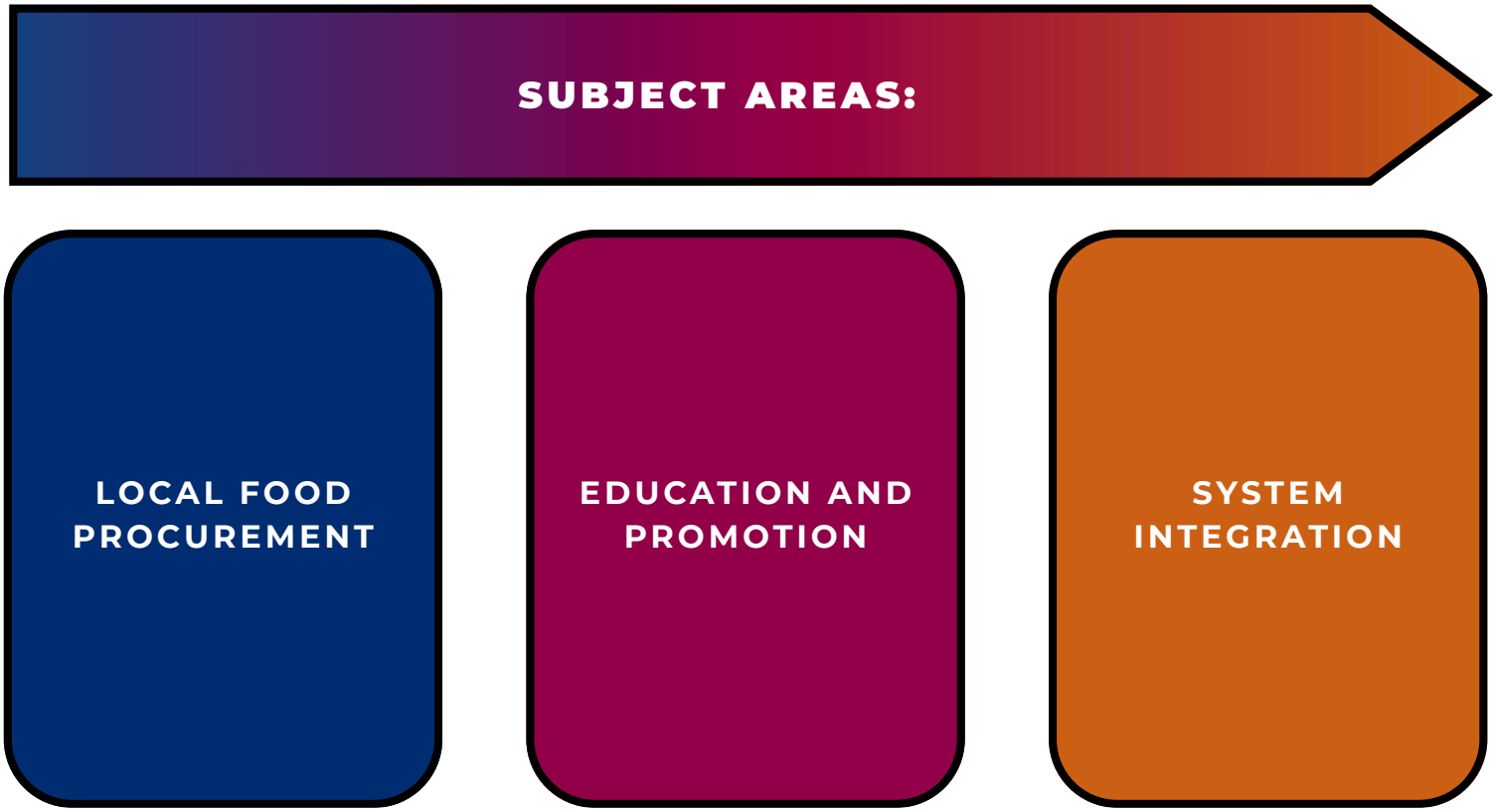
Finally, ADE-HNS will **strengthen statewide coordination and visibility** of farm to school and farm to ECE efforts by **employing dedicated HNS staff, amplifying storytelling, and expanding outreach efforts**.

Collectively, these priorities will drive ADE-HNS's actions in advancing farm to CNPs in Arizona through **targeted capacity-building, improved access to local foods and education, and strengthened statewide coordination**.

PRIORITIES, GOALS AND STRATEGIES

The following priorities, goals and strategies demonstrate ADE-HNS's commitment to empowering schools and childcare centers participating in NSLP and CACFP to **incorporate local foods; promote nutrition, agriculture and food education and local food promotion; and support system-wide advancement of farm to school and farm to ECE in Arizona**. These priorities were largely **informed by the top ten critical priority areas** identified by the Working Group, and the **strategies supported by findings from the literature review, statewide community survey and state interviews**.

The priorities in this plan are not listed in order of importance but instead **organized by subject areas**: local food procurement, education and promotion, and system integration. ADE-HNS will follow an internal roadmap that guides strategy implementation.



PRIORITY 1:
Local Food Procurement

Increase the capacity of Arizona schools and early care institutions operating the NSLP and/or CACFP to procure local foods.

Goal 1: Strengthen Arizona's local food system by supporting schools and early care sites' ability to purchase and serve locally grown food.

Objective:	Simplify and standardize procurement processes for NSLP schools, CACFP operating organizations, and producers.
Strategies:	• Conduct a comprehensive analysis of Arizona's Try it Local program and create an Arizona-specific guidebook highlighting best practices and approaches for local procurement in schools. • Fund and/or host facilitated gatherings to support relationship-building between farmers, schools, and ECE organizations. • Utilize the Farm to School Census to analyze trends of locally grown foods within Arizona.
Performance Measures:	• Complete the Try it Local analysis and publish the guidebook and best practices in 2026. • Collect evaluations after each gathering. Use participant feedback to identify strengths and areas of improvement, with a goal of fostering strong engagement and satisfaction among participants over time.

PRIORITY 1:
Local Food Procurement

Increase the capacity of Arizona schools and early care institutions operating the NSLP and/or CACFP to procure local foods.

Goal 2: Address structural barriers to local procurement.

Objective:	Simplify and standardize procurement processes for NSLP schools, CACFP operating organizations, and producers.
Strategies:	• Continue local procurement assistance initiatives offered by HNS that were developed through Try It Local for producers and NSLP operators and expand initiatives to CACFP operators. • Work with existing partners to determine the next steps for establishing and maintaining a statewide consolidated vendor list that is accessible and responsive to the needs of schools and ECE providers. • Issue guidance and share best practices to help School Food Authorities (SFAs) design solicitations accessible to smaller/local vendors. • Facilitate communication, share resources, and promote funding opportunities. • Gather annual feedback from program operators surrounding local procurement assistance initiatives.
Performance Measures:	• Finalize a partner-informed implementation plan for a statewide consolidated vendor list for schools and ECE procurement. • Track engagement and utilization of the consolidated vendor list. • Track feedback from annual outreach to inform future local procurement support needs.

PRIORITY 1:
Local Food Procurement

Increase the capacity of Arizona schools and early care institutions operating the NSLP and/or CACFP to procure local foods.

Goal 3: Increase producer accessibility to food programs.

Objective:	Support producers' local product accessibility for schools and childcare centers.
Strategies:	• Collaborate with partner organizations to develop and implement a support plan for local producers to build awareness of institutional food program opportunities. This may include training and resources that build producer capacity to participate in school food programs. • Utilize knowledge gained from the comprehensive analysis of Arizona's Try it Local program to determine where gaps in accessibility to the school market may exist and develop and execute an outreach plan intended to address gaps. • Support coordination between producers and NSLP and CACFP-operating entities to incorporate local products into menus.
Performance Measures:	• Create a support plan for local producers. • Develop and implement an outreach plan. • Track feedback from annual outreach activities to inform future needs in farm to school specifically regarding producers' ability to engage with schools and ECE organizations.

PRIORITY 2:
Education and Promotion

Improve access to local food promotional activities and nutrition and agriculture education opportunities for children participating in USDA Child Nutrition Programs.

Goal 1: Provide tailored support to NSLP schools and CACFP organizations interested in increasing "farm-to" activities within their learning environments.

Objective:	Provide targeted guidance and resources to help schools and ECE organizations expand farm to school activities. In a similar way that USDA leverages external expertise through their cooperative agreements, ADE-HNS hopes to initiate similar agreements at the state-level so that future work is informed by models that are proven effective in the areas of tailored technical support and assistance.
Strategies:	• Issue solicitations to fund organizations to carry out farm to NSLP and/or CACFP projects reaching multiple schools and childcare organizations across Arizona. • Identify and document Arizona state agency goals, objectives, and resource needs related to farm to school and farm to early care and education and consider strategic support of partnerships through Interagency Service Agreements (ISAs). • Leverage available data to determine which NSLP and CACFP operators are engaged in "farm-to" activities to inform where program access barriers exist and where additional support is needed.
Performance Measures:	• During School Year 2025-26 issue a Request for Grant Applications (RFGA) to fund organizations to carry out farm to school projects across Arizona.

PRIORITY 2:
Education and Promotion

Improve access to local food promotional activities and nutrition and agriculture education opportunities for children participating in USDA Child Nutrition Programs.

Goal 1: Provide tailored support to NSLP schools and CACFP organizations interested in increasing "farm-to" activities within their learning environments.

Performance Measures:

- Compile data on current NSLP and CACFP operators' "farm-to" activities and share publicly.
- Collect and share data and outcomes for projects funded through solicitations and ISAs, which can include metrics related to intervention effectiveness and overall impact within school and ECE environments.



PRIORITY 2:
Education and Promotion

Improve access to local food promotional activities and nutrition and agriculture education opportunities for children participating in USDA Child Nutrition Programs.

Goal 2: Enhance CACFP operators' ability to initiate farm to ECE activities by ensuring tangible resources exist and are tailored to the needs of Arizona operators.

Objective:	Support CACFP operators in launching farm to ECE activities by providing tailored, accessible resources.
Strategies:	• Assess resource needs through collaborative participation in Arizona's Early Childhood Nutrition Policy Team. • Survey CACFP operators to better understand farm to ECE knowledge, barriers and current activities. • Update and share CACFP guidance, training, and resources to include farm to ECE best practices.
Performance Measures:	• Create and disseminate a CACFP operator survey. • Compile findings from CACFP operators and partners. • Publish updated Arizona farm to CACFP guidance and resources.

PRIORITY 2:
Education and Promotion

Improve access to local food promotional activities and nutrition and agriculture education opportunities for children participating in USDA Child Nutrition Programs.

Goal 3: Improve accessibility of “farm-to" education for children in Arizona.

Objective:	Align farm to ECE garden and education activities with CACFP to expand “farm-to” access for children in early care and education institutions across Arizona.
Strategies:	• Support CACFP operators with initiating nutrition and agriculture education and garden activities that align with the CACFP meal pattern. • Partner with organizations working directly with ECE organizations to explore the creation of an Arizona-specific farm to ECE education.
Performance Measures:	• Identify and promote at least three model sites implementing farm to ECE education. • Collaborate with partners that deliver nutrition education to co-develop and disseminate farm to ECE resources.

PRIORITY 3:
System Integration

Strengthen connections and integration of farm to school and farm to ECE activities statewide.

Goal 1: Build internal capacity to lead and coordinate farm to NSLP and farm to CACFP efforts through dedicated staffing within ADE-HNS.

Objective:	Ensure dedicated staff focused on farm to school and farm to ECE integration are in place within ADE-HNS to ensure program operators, partners, and stakeholders have a designated point of contact.
Strategies:	• Ensure a farm to NSLP point of contact is in place to support connections, develop partnerships and enhance collaboration between ADE-HNS and farm to school partners. • Ensure a farm to CACFP point of contact is in place to support connections, develop partnerships and enhance collaboration between ADE-HNS and farm to school partners.
Performance Measures:	• Post and fill a Health and Nutrition Services specialist position to focus on farm to NSLP initiatives. • Develop internal guidance to outline roles and responsibilities within ADE-HNS.

PRIORITY 3:
System Integration

Strengthen connections and integration of farm to school and farm to ECE activities statewide.

Goal 2: Support organizations' ability to influence decision makers about the benefits of farm to school and farm to ECE programming.

Objective:	Increase awareness and understanding of the value of farm to school and farm to ECE programming through storytelling and strategic communication.
Strategies:	• Collect content for storytelling from NSLP and CACFP operators successfully integrating “farm-to” programming to highlight the benefits of farm to school and ECE to parents/guardians, school/ECE administrations, and state-level decision makers. • Provide direct support and strategic messaging to SFAs and CACFP operators wishing to approach their administration and/or organization decision-makers about investing resources in farm to school/ECE.
Performance Measures:	• Gather and share examples of successful farm to school and farm to ECE implementation from program operators across the state. • Develop a sustainable tool and successful models to share with partners.

PRIORITY 3:
System Integration

Strengthen connections and integration of farm to school and farm to ECE activities statewide.

Goal 3: Work to address barriers to farm to school/ECE expansion in Arizona related to mandates, funding and food sovereignty.

Objective:	Support farm to school and ECE growth in Arizona by tackling key barriers within the scope of USDA guidance and allowable activities.
Strategies:	• Incorporate food sovereignty principles into "farm to" initiatives while supporting community-led efforts, particularly in Indigenous communities. • Issue solicitations to fund projects supporting the growth and expansion of the Arizona Farm to School Network. • Identify opportunities to align Arizona state agency goals, objectives and resources related to farm to school and farm to early care and education and consider the use of Interagency Service Agreements (ISAs) to support coordinated, statewide partnerships and initiatives. • Consult the ADE legislative team in order to define advocacy roles within Arizona farm to school/ECE.
Performance Measures:	• Collect and share data and outcomes for projects funded through solicitations and/or ISAs, which can include metrics related to community engagement and impact. • Define advocacy roles/allowability within farm to school.

AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY

This Strategic Plan establishes a strong foundation for advancing farm to CNPs in Arizona. During the planning process, several areas for continued growth, alignment, and investment were identified that are either outside the direct scope of this plan or warrant deeper, sustained attention over time. While progress has occurred in some of these areas since the development of this plan, they remain important considerations for long-term systems change.

LOCAL PRODUCTION AND PROCUREMENT

Stakeholders emphasized the **ongoing need to better align policy, program goals, and on-the-ground practices related to local production and procurement. Gaps remain in understanding which federal and state mechanisms are most meaningful** to organizations and agencies leading farm to school efforts in Arizona, **and how those mechanisms can be more effectively leveraged** in service of local producers and CNPs.

Producers and intermediaries identified a **continued need for clear guidance, technical assistance, and market-specific resources** to support participation in school and ECE markets. These needs include **assistance related to procurement processes, demand forecasting, supply chain coordination, and agricultural practices that support resilience and climate-smart production**. Since the initial drafting of this plan, actions have begun in this area, demonstrating progress toward addressing these gaps. **Continued attention and coordination will remain essential** to strengthening local food systems that are both accessible to CNPs and viable for Arizona producers.



Lincoln Elementary Garden
Prescott, AZ

FARM TO SCHOOL IN K-12 AND FARM TO ECE

Stakeholders representing K-12 systems consistently **identified sustainable funding and stronger policy integration as critical to advancing farm to school programming**. In particular, stakeholders noted the opportunity to **more intentionally align farm to school activities with required components of existing education, health, and nutrition initiatives, strengthening long-term commitment and amplifying documented educational, nutritional, and behavioral benefits**.

In ECE settings, stakeholders underscored the importance of **continued advocacy to elevate farm to ECE as a statewide priority**. Opportunities remain to address inequities in grant access, support policy changes that recognize the capacity of ECE providers, and secure dedicated funding streams that enable sustained participation across diverse ECE settings.

SCHOOL GARDENS

School garden stakeholders identified **alignment with school structures, capacity, and priorities as a persistent challenge.** When garden programs rely primarily on classroom teachers without dedicated staffing or institutional support, programs are vulnerable to educator burnout and inconsistent implementation. Expanding models that include **dedicated coordination or formal integration into school operations may improve program durability and educator engagement**.

There is also a **continued need to expand locally available training and technical assistance related to school gardens and food education**. Stakeholders emphasized professional development that is **trauma-informed, culturally relevant, and accessible to a broad range of school staff**, including educators, administrators, food service professionals, and facilities teams. While the strategies in this plan direct funding towards farm to school initiatives, **limited and short-term funding continues to present challenges** for the long-term sustainability of school garden programming.



Photographs Feature Arizona Desert School Garden - Gadsden Elementary District San Luis, AZ

PROGRAM ACCESS AND EQUITY

Stakeholders and literature both emphasize the need to **ensure programs are designed with equity and cultural relevance in mind**, and highlight the importance of **engaging with indigenous communities, communities of color and low-income populations in program planning**. This is particularly relevant to Arizona's demographic and geographic landscape.

Peer reviewed literature reinforces the importance of culturally responsive and community-centered approaches to program design.

- A systemic review in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics emphasized that **programs are most successful in improving dietary behavior when they are adopted to reflect the cultural values, foods, and community structures of the populations they serve** (Savoie-Roskos et al., 2017).
- Similarly, **programs that elevate local food traditions, particularly Indigenous and regional crops, foster greater participation and relevance in Native communities** (Lopes et al., 2024).
- The USDA's Farm to School Census and program evaluations repeatedly note **disparities in access, particularly for ECE settings and schools in geographically isolated areas**.
- One USDA-funded case study from southern Arizona described how **schools in low income, rural communities lacked sufficient cold storage, had fewer staff available for sourcing and prepping fresh foods, and often needed additional training on procurement and menu planning** (Nolte & Spaccarotella, 2022).

These barriers highlight why **funding alone is not enough for program success and reinforce the need for technical assistance, infrastructure support, and culturally responsive outreach**. This strategic plan aligns with national best practices and commits to nutrition and systemic inclusion by **prioritizing farm to ECE engagement, elevating the voices of CACFP operators, and embedding equitable, statewide access into grant design and program outreach.** There is, however, more opportunity to advance this work and expand access so that more children across Arizona can benefit from farm to school and farm to ECE programming.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Arizona currently lacks a universal evaluation framework to measure the impacts of farm to school and farm to ECE initiatives statewide. **This plan includes metrics for measuring success for farm to CNP strategies; however, numerous activities exist outside of the work outlined in this plan, and establishing shared metrics and reporting systems requires collaboration and consensus across multiple entities.** Since the initial writing of this plan, positive steps toward greater evaluation alignment have occurred. As the USDA defines farm to school as a "policy, systems, and environmental change," integrated leadership is required for success. **Continued advancement of these frameworks has the potential to propel action, strengthen program quality, support advocacy efforts, and improve competitiveness for future funding opportunities.**






Photographs Feature School Gardens at Osborn School District in Phoenix, AZ

LIMITATIONS

While the planning process for this Strategic Plan was extensive and yielded valuable qualitative and quantitative insights into Arizona's farm to school and farm to ECE landscape, several limitations related to reach and representation should be acknowledged.

Limited Producer Participation in Community Survey	Producer participation in the community survey and other engagement activities was limited compared to other stakeholder groups, meaning the perspectives of small, mid-sized, tribal, and rural producers may not be fully reflected. Because producers face distinct operational, market, and logistical challenges that differ from those of institutional food buyers, deeper engagement will be critical to informing future procurement policies, training, and support strategies that are responsive to their needs.
Limited Educator and Early Care Provider Representation in Community Survey	Educators and early care providers were also underrepresented in survey responses and Working Group discussions. While some insight was provided by partners who work closely with these populations, the findings may not fully capture the day-to-day realities, capacity constraints, and operational challenges experienced by educators and ECE providers themselves.
Limited Representation of Rural and Remote Communities, Northern Arizona, Tribal Nations, Migrant-Serving Organizations, and Smaller Childcare Centers in Community Survey	Additionally, survey participation varied across regions, with lower representation from rural and remote communities, northern Arizona, tribal nations, migrant-serving organizations, and smaller childcare centers. As a result, while the data offers a valuable statewide snapshot, it does not fully reflect the diversity of Arizona's farm to school and farm to ECE community and highlights opportunities to broaden outreach and deepen representation in future efforts.

CONCLUSION

This Strategic Plan reflects insights gained through the review of successful initiatives in other states, a thorough analysis of national literature guiding farm to school efforts, and a comprehensive assessment of Arizona's current landscape. It captures consistent themes that emerged throughout the planning process: the need for stronger partnerships, clearer guidance, more accessible resources, and support that meets people where they are. These insights informed priorities that are responsive to the needs and perspectives of Arizona's farm to school and farm to ECE community.

Moving forward, ADE-HNS's will focus its efforts where it can have the greatest impact by serving as a capacity builder, connector, and convenor. At the same time, this plan recognizes the success of farm to school and farm to ECE depends on the leadership, expertise, and collaboration of partners across Arizona. ADE-HNS is committed to supporting and elevating the work already underway while fostering new opportunites for collaboration and innovation.

This Strategic Plan provides a flexible framework to guide implementation and decision-making in the years ahead. **As needs, partnerships, and opportunities evolve, ADE-HNS will continue to adapt its approach while remaning committed to expanding access to farm to school and farm to ECE opportunities across Arizona.**



Rover Elementary Garden



Concordia Charter School



Lincoln Elementary

SECTION 5

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ADE-HNS extends **deep appreciation** to the many individuals and organizations who contributed to the development of the Strategic Plan to Expand Farm to Child Nutrition Programs in Arizona.

This plan reflects the shared vision, commitment, and expertise of numerous partners dedicated to advancing farm to school and farm to ECE efforts across Arizona. It was informed by the voices of educators, school nutrition professionals, community-based organizations, state agency collaborators, producers, farmers, and advocates who participated in working groups, surveys, and planning sessions.

A special thank you to the Arizona-based Farm to School Working Group, whose time, insights, and collaboration were critical in identifying the top priorities outlined in this plan. Their collective leadership and collaboration were instrumental in shaping this Strategic Plan and strengthening the future of farm to CNP efforts in Arizona.

The Arizona-based Farm to School Working Group Members are listed by name and organization on the following page.

Arizona-based Farm to School Working Group Members

- **Adri Koslan** – Arizona Department of Health Services
- **Andy LaFrate** – Painted Desert Demonstration Project (The STAR School)
- **Ashley Schimke** – USDA Regional Food Business Center – Southwest
- **Barbara Halden** – Hedberg Garden Group
- **Cesar Ruiz** – Espiritu Development Corp., Farm to School Procurement Consulting
- **Charleen Badman** – Blue Watermelon Project
- **Cristina Konnecke**- AZ Health Zone
- **Cindy Gentry** – Sun Produce Co-op
- **Dionne Washington** – Project Roots
- **Erin Fang** – Blue Watermelon Project
- **Erin Raczynski** – Arizona Department of Health Services, Office of Community Innovations
- **Jackie Rybin** – Arizona Department of Health Services
- **Jilliann Sunberg** – Blue Watermelon Project
- **Kayla LaLone** – Blue Watermelon Project
- **Kathryn Faull** – Arizona Department of Health Services
- **Lou Rodarte** – Blue Watermelon Project
- **Melisha Alhambra** – AZ Health Zone
- **Paige Mollen** – Mollen Foundation
- **Rachel Gomez-Acosta** – Pinnacle Prevention
- **Raevyn Xavier** – Mollen Foundation
- **Sara Pederson** – Desert Mission Lincoln Learning Center, Honor Health
- **Savannah Sandlin** – AZ Health Zone
- **Shannon Gleave** – School Nutrition Association, Glendale Elementary School District
- **Steven Zuiker** – Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University
- **Tami Hitt Wyant** – ASPIN/Mohave Cooperative
- **Taylor La Ravia** – Southwest Regional Food Business Center, Local First Arizona

SECTION 6

APPENDICES



APPENDIX A

State Interviews - Common Themes and Best Practices

Across all four states, several distinct patterns emerged. Success relied on the following best practices:

Strong Cross-Agency Collaboration	All four states have found some degree of success through collaboration between multiple state agencies (Departments of Education, Health, and Agriculture) and external partners (nonprofits, universities and local extension services). By sharing responsibilities and resources across these sectors, they ensure that expertise is available for different components of the program. **Best Practice:** Build a diverse coalition of stakeholders from various sectors to ensure comprehensive support and expertise across farm to school initiatives.
Focus on Local Procurement Subgroups	Indiana, Iowa, and Kansas all highlight the success of procurement-focused subgroups or workgroups that connect farmers with schools directly. These subgroups allow for targeted discussions on procurement challenges and opportunities, focusing on local sourcing and logistics. Indiana's development of a local producers' directory is a practical tool for food service directors and includes an interactive map and description of each producer. **Best Practice:** Form dedicated subgroups to focus on specific issues such as procurement, with concrete resources like local food guides or producer directories to facilitate partnerships between schools and farmers.
Clear Strategic Planning and Goal Setting	Indiana and Kansas use structured strategic planning processes, with steering committees and smaller working groups that focus on achieving actionable goals. Indiana emphasizes action items for each meeting to ensure progress. Leverage data collected through surveys, interviews, Farm to School Census, etc. **Best Practice:** Develop a formal strategic plan with measurable goals, regular review sessions, and action items to ensure accountability and progress.

Integration of Early Childhood Education	Iowa and Indiana have successfully integrated farm to school into early childcare programs by merging farm to ECE and farm to school coalitions. This expands the farm to school reach beyond K-12 to younger age groups, fostering early exposure to local food education. **Best Practice:** Extend farm to school programs to ECE settings, incorporating local food education to build healthy food habits from an early age.
School Gardens as Hands-On Learning Tools	All four states leverage school gardens as educational tools. These programs encourage hands-on learning and integrate gardening into the curriculum. Kansas' "leafy green farms" initiative incorporates hydroponics in all 105 counties. **Best Practice:** Integrate school gardens into the educational curriculum, encouraging hands-on learning about food production. Include innovative methods like hydroponics to expand growing possibilities and participation from local farmers and producers.
Regular Communication and Capacity Building	All four states hold regular coalition meetings that include listening sessions to ensure diverse voices are acknowledged. During these gatherings, updates are shared, and members collaborate on statewide projects. They conduct capacity assessments regularly and ensure coalition members participate effectively. Communications (newsletters, blogs, and social media) are used throughout the year. **Best Practice:** Conduct regular meetings (listening sessions) and capacity assessments to ensure that members stay engaged and can contribute effectively to program goals.
Use of Grants to Empower Local Programs	States successfully utilize USDA Farm to School and other grants (e.g., Team Nutrition) to provide subgrants to individual schools and districts. The funds are used to create localized initiatives such as school garden programs or procurement of local foods, helping to decentralize the program's impact. **Best Practice:** Leverage federal and state grants to provide sub grants to create localized, customized Farm to School initiatives, which encourages local ownership and innovation.

Implementation of Recognition Programs	Kansas developed a "Kansans Can" recognition program that acknowledges schools excelling in local food procurement. This recognition encourages schools to go the extra mile in supporting the program. **Best Practice:** Implement recognition or award programs that highlight successful schools or districts, motivating broader participation and excellence in farm to school initiatives.



APPENDIX B

Arizona-Based Farm to School Working Group - Critical Priorities by Subgroup

To promote focused discussions, foster specialized knowledge, and guarantee thorough coverage of all pertinent topics, **the subgroups convened three times to identify essential priority areas for farm to school and farm to ECE initiatives in Arizona**. The subgroups covered **four subject categories**: Early Care and Education, K-12 School Champions, Local Production and Procurement, and School Gardens and Food Education.

Early Care and Education

This subgroup focused on "farm-to" opportunities in ECE settings. The group consisted of representatives from **state agencies, local non-profits, and early care and education centers**.

The group identified **three critical priority areas** and provided the following rationale and recommendations:

1. Ensure dedicated state professionals *exist for farm to school and farm to ECE.*

- There is a lack of sufficient evidence or standardized data to comprehensively understand the needs, challenges, and opportunities across the state which indicate a need for dedicated state professionals specializing in both farm to school and farm to ECE.
- Dedicated farm to ECE professionals could make efforts to gather and analyze data through activities such as:
  - conducting comprehensive assessments;
  - building evidence to better inform strategies, funding, and policy;
  - identifying existing gaps, opportunities, and key stakeholders.

2. Create an integrated food curriculum*, which is needed within the CACFP space and should include frequent cooking demonstrations and tastings that foster familiarity and interest in healthy foods. Suggest gathering feedback from children, parents, and others to refine and adapt curriculum content.*

- Cooking demonstrations and tastings align directly with CACFP objectives to improve nutritional quality and encourage healthier food choices among children in early care settings.
- Multimedia tools like videos or apps can support state-wide implementation and effectively supplement in-person food education.

3. Prioritize ECE *with dedicated resources, targeted support, and a strong focus on integrating "farm-to" practices. This would include robust partnerships with local farmers and producers, comprehensive nutrition and food education programs, comprehensive training for ECE centers, and strong advocacy for equitable grant distribution to ECE centers.*

Rationale:

- Resource exists to guide planning, implementation, research, evaluation, and reporting efforts for farm to ECE with an emphasis on metrics related to equity and funding: Farm to Early Care and Education Shared Metrics (National Farm to School Network, 2022).

Advocate for policy chages at the state and local levels to allocate specific funding for farm to ECE initiatives.

- Utilize metrics from existing evaluation tools to assess and track program impact.

K-12 School Champions

This subgroup focused on **challenges associated with implementing farm to school strategies in the K-12 education setting**. The group consisted of **school administrators, nutrition specialists, food service directors, and state agency representatives**.

The group identified **three critical priority areas** and provided the following rationale and recommendations:

1. Implement farm to school programmatic education. *This is essential for the entire school community: educators, administrators, legislators, school boards, teachers, etc.*

- School sites are lacking information and knowledge about the benefits of farm to school programming and how to comprehensively implement and meet school needs.

- Teachers should understand how they can connect farm to school with their curriculum.
- Education involves storytelling. Create comprehensive programming that can be used in the classroom.
- This would require integrated evaluation and research.

2. Provide tailored support to schools *to help meet unique needs and address power dynamics. Technical assistance should address all three pillars of farm to school: school gardens, nutrition education, and procurement, aimed at avoiding silos within the school environment.*

- Schools need technical assistance or consultation for how to implement and adapt their programming, but it is also needed for expanding staff capacity. To be able to provide tailored support, there is a need to align the three pillars.
- Support should focus on alignment of existing programs and include integrated evaluation.
- Implementing school teams with adequate support will help to prevent silos at the site level.

3. Implement policies related to mandates and funding *which are essential in supporting sustainable farm to school programming.*

- Integrating current initiatives and enhancing access to farm to school programs through nutrition education supports the connection between improved educational and behavioral outcomes.
- This top-down approach would be impactful without the need to be “big policy.”
- State level administrative policies are crucial to support expanded capacity and commitment of farm to school in the K-12 setting.

Local Production and Procurement

This subgroup focused on **challenges with promoting and purchasing local foods for school meals.** It consisted of representatives from **federal and state-level government agencies, producers, school food service departments, community non-profit organizations, and cooperative purchasing organizations.**

Four critical priority areas were identified with the following rationale and recommendations:

1. Address existing structural barriers that exist in current systems. *It is difficult to break through structural barriers to engage in farm to school. Solutions could look like:*

- Mentoring opportunities or guidance and training from the state agency for schools/ECEs to help them overcome the fear of local procurement.
- A consolidated vendor list. This would lower the barrier of entry for schools.
  - The list could be housed with the Arizona Farm to School Network if challenges exist at State Agency level.
  - Additional funding would be required.
- Exploring options for informal procurement processes to facilitate buying from small-scale local farmers, especially for larger districts.

2. Address existing procurement barriers *by streamlining the procurement process for local foods. Solutions could look like:*

- Supply chain coordination to facilitate buying from small-scale local farmers, especially for larger districts.
- Facilitation of relationship-building between school/district and producer.
- A cooperative that can support school districts with contract language and regulations to alleviate the burden of local procurement.

3. Provide guidance and support for producers *that would ensure resource availability for local farmers. Strategies could include:*

- Establish education curricula and guidance to help local producers engage with and supply products to school food programs.

- Addressing gaps in supply chain and promoting climate-smart agricultural practices.
- Helping farmers meet specific requirements of the school market, including procurement processes and understanding of demand.

4. Address gaps in value and policy: *Bridging the gap between value and policy of local production and procurement in farm to school programs.*

- Ensuring alignment and coherence of objectives and practices.
- Identify the USDA Food and Nutrition Services Cooperative Agreements perceived as meaningful by organizations or state agencies that lead farm to school initiatives in Arizona.

School Gardens and Food Education

This subgroup focused on **the engagement of students in educational activities related to agriculture, food, health, and nutrition, including hands-on learning through gardening. The group was composed of individuals from garden groups, non-profit organizations, state agencies, and academic institutions.**

The group identified **four critical priority areas** and provided the following rationale and recommendations:

1. Address limited funding*, especially for long-term program needs (e.g., staff and labor).*

- Funding sources are a leading topic of discussion in Arizona Farm to School Network Communities and annual gatherings.
- The 2022 Farm to School Educator Survey supports the effectiveness of funding for long-term programs (Zuiker, 2023).
- Specific allocation in state budget to support farm to school is lacking, making it difficult to fund needs like staff salaries.
- There is a need for more education on the long-term costs of operating sustainable farm to school programs, emphasizing the value and importance of a school garden coordinator. and why they're so important to fund.

2. Improve access to garden training/professional development *for (a) district and school administrators, (b) teachers (c) food service and maintenance staff alike, (d) trauma-informed, (e) culturally relevant awareness/approaches.*

- Field reports highlight stories from educators citing how much professional development programs help to facilitate overall comprehension involved with the process and organization needed to begin farm to school programs.
- There are requests for trauma-informed and culturally relevant farm to school resources but few that are Arizona-specific exist. There is also a lack of professional development focused on resource utilization.
- Numerous training courses exist, but many are out of state and inaccessible.
- There should be an emphasis on building training for the next generation of garden teachers and coordinators.

3. Address the lack of alignment with school structures/agendas. *This hinders the ability to maintain or expand programs, raising the risk of turnover and burnout.*

- Putting the ownership on already taxed teachers to run the programs, or pick up where a full-time coordinator left off, is unrealistic and unsustainable, and results in a low attendance and engagement of educators in farm to school activities.
- High turnover rates exist in Arizona schools, causing programs to shut down because teachers are overwhelmed with various tasks to “fill in” for vacant roles.
- Narratives show that staff turnover highly affects sustainability of school garden efforts. Usually, one teacher is passionate about the garden and when that teacher leaves, no one else picks up the effort.

4. Develop a strong equity lens *for all priorities increasing access and opportunity across districts.*

- There is a lack of a public equity lens, action plans, and commitment for AZ farm to school efforts.

APPENDIX C

Literature Review

USDA PATRICK LEAHY FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAM

The Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program, administered by the USDA Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA), provides funding, technical assistance and research to support local procurement activities and agricultural education and community engagement within CNPs. FNA supports states and tribal entities in the expansion of farm to school activities across the NSLP, School Breakfast Program, Summer Food Service Program, and CACFP (USDA, 2025b).

This program grounds many of the USDA's current efforts, including the establishment of cooperative agreements designed to build capacity, expand technical assistance, and test various implementation models. A review of these agreements allowed for an increased understanding of national interests in farm to school and farm to ECE. The following agreements were active during the writing of this plan.

NATIONAL PRIORITIES

Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program Cooperative Agreements

Under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, **The Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program awards cooperative agreements to organizations that have a proven history of meaningful collaboration across food system sectors. Through these partnerships, USDA leverages external expertise to develop models, training, resources, and implementation frameworks that can be replicated by states and territories.** (USDA, 2025a)



A review of the agreements in place shines a light on the **national priorities for farm to school**, which include **efforts to combat local procurement barriers by supporting producers and reimagining school procurement systems; promoting equitable participation; and expanding farm to school in early care settings.**

Bringing the Farm to School Training Program

In partnership with the National Center for Appropriate Technology and the NFSN, FNS demonstrates continued investment in expanding the **Bringing the Farm to School (BTFS) Training Program. BTFS provides technical assistance, training and producer-buyer networking events that build a producer's capacity to engage with institutional markets, navigate school procurement, and meet the unique requirements of schools buyers** including food safety and distribution. **Case studies** from Nebraska, Montana, and Florida **support the program's ability to transform market access** for farmers and producers (National Farm to School Network, 2023; USDA, 2023a).

Farm to School Institute Adaptation Program

The Farm to School Institute Adaptation Program cooperative agreement is based on the successful learning model created by the Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day) project and delivered by Shelburne Farms Institute for Sustainable Schools. The program **supports state teams in the adaption, development, and launch of a Farm to School Institute program in their state.** State Farm to School Institute programs will **help whole-school teams grow sustainable farm to school programs through action planning, coaching, peer networking, and skill building** (USDA, 2023b).

In Arizona, this transition model will be tested by the Mollen Foundation and made possible through their award of the 2024 Patrick Leahy Farm to School Implementation Grant. **Plans for Arizona's adaptation includes place-based action plans rooted in Cafeteria, Classroom and Community. Teams will be recruited from regional areas throughout Arizona, and each team will be paired with a coach and together will support planning their farm to school work.** Throughout the year, the **school teams will be invited to participate in a retreat, attend workshops, serve on or attend expert panels and receive ongoing technical assistance.**

FARMWISE: Farm to CACFP Institute and Learning Collaboratives

Administered by the Association of State Public Health Nutritionists (ASPHN), **FARMWISE will launch the first Farm to CACFP Institute and Learning Collaborative.** This agreement aims to **advance Farm to CACFP efforts through training, tools and community learning structures.** The model highlights the USDA's recognition that Farm to School principles must also extend into early childhood settings to achieve lifelong impact (USDA, 2025a).

Urban School Food Alliance

Building on its findings from the 'Feeding the Nation's Children: Challenges and Opportunities Related to School Food Procurement Regulations', the Urban School Food Alliance (USFA) cooperative agreement **addresses procurement reform**. It **supports innovation for school districts of all sizes in both rural and urban areas. Efforts to redesign the procurement process to increase efficiency, transparency and accessibility will be the cornerstone of this approach**. Training and business process improvements for school nutrition program administrators will support the reinvention of how school meal markets do business (Urban School Food Alliance, 2022; USDA, 2025a).

Intertribal Agriculture Council

The cooperative agreement with the Intertribal Agriculture Council reflects **USDA's commitment to advancing Indigenous Food Sovereignty through farm to school**. The partnership **focus will be on collecting perspectives from American Indian/Alaskan Native youth, parents and producers on traditional foodways and farm to school** (USDA, 2025c).

In summary, these cooperative agreements emphasize USDA's focus on:

- Producer engagement and capacity building
- Institutional change and professional learning
- Equity and cultural relevance

Literature highlights the disruption of traditional Indigenous foodways as a catalyst for adverse health conditions. These disruptions also affect individuals' connections to traditional foods. Research shows that experiential learning can help restore knowledge of traditional Indigenous food pathways . Farm to school activities tailored to Indigenous food pathways can support this reconnection.



USDA FARM TO SCHOOL CENSUS - ARIZONA INSIGHTS

Data from the 2023 USDA Farm to School Census, covering school year 2022-23, provides valuable insight into the status of farm to school both nationally and within Arizona. These insights are important context for identifying best practices and guiding statewide strategy development.

At a national level, many SFAs are relatively new to farm to school efforts; **about half of those that participate began their programs within the last three years**. Nationwide, **62.7% of SFAs participating in farm to school activities report serving local food in their CNP meals, reaching more than 74,000 schools**. In addition, **48.3% of SFAs nationally report offering educational farm to school activities, including taste tests, field trips to farms, and farmer visits**.

According to the Census, **63.4% of SFAs in Arizona reported participating in at least one farm to school activity**, with local food procurement identified as a core component of that engagement. **Arizona schools reported sourcing local products such as milk, poultry, apples and salad mix.** Education components of the farm to school programming were also embraced, with **32% of Arizona SFA's providing food, nutrition, and agricultural education**. However, participation in school garden activities remains comparatively low, with **only 8.9% of SFAs reporting that schools within their jurisdiction maintain edible gardens**.

When assessing the impact of farm to school in Arizona, the Census reveals several positive outcomes. **Fifty-three percent of SFAs reported improved staff perceptions of meal quality, while 38% reported an increase in access to high-quality foods and 38% observed meaningful improvements in student fruit and vegetable consumption**. At the same time, the Census highlights a continuing **data gap related to ECE participation, underscoring the need for more comprehensive inclusion of farm to ECE programs**.

Overall, the **findings** from the 2023 Census **demonstrate that farm to school efforts in Arizona are growing. Strengths including expanding local procurement and engagement in nutrition and garden-based education, while opportunities for improvement remain in school garden sustainability and farm to ECE participation**. Although Arizona's overall participation rate is slightly below the national average, the state has established a solid foundation for farm to school programming and continues to strengthen connections between schools, local food systems and food system education (USDA, 2023a)



NATIONAL FARM TO SCHOOL NETWORK
RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

Benefits of Farm to School Programming	NFSN's Benefits of Farm to School Programming factsheet highlights research demonstrating the **advantages of farm to school initiatives for students, parents, schools, communities and producers**. The factsheet presents research **supporting the importance of programs that promote local procurement, agriculture education, and experiential learning to improve nutrition, strengthen economies and boost community collaboration and engagement** (National Farm to School Network, 2020).
Strategic Plan and Theory of Change	NFSN also emphasizes **equity** as an **essential component to farm to school success**. It spotlights research that reveals equity to be a **necessary condition for ensuring all children, families, and producers benefit from farm to school initiatives**. The advancement of racial and social equity emerged as a key priority in their 2017-2019 Strategic Plan and Theory of Change. As a result, in 2020 the national network launched their Call to Action: **100% of communities will hold power in a racially just food system.** The **Racial and Social Equity Assessment Tool** developed by the National Farm to School Network highlights that **centering equity strengthens program impact, fosters community ownership, and ensures that resources are distributed where they are most needed.** This national perspective underscores that **equitable farm to school systems are more effective in advancing health, economic vitality, and environmental resilience across diverse communities** (National Farm to School Network, 2019).

FARM TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION GUIDANCE

Arizona farm to school stakeholders emphasize the **importance of early exposure of "farm-to" programs in the development of healthy eating habits**. National guidance from the CDC and FRAC provides models for integrating farm to ECE into existing systems.

Center for Disease Control "Farm to ECE: Getting Started"

The CDC's Farm to ECE: Getting Started resource emphasizes the importance of building effective coalitions and aligning agency efforts using the Spectrum of Opportunities framework to connect Farm to ECE with other public health initiatives (Centers for Disease Control, 2023).

Food Research and Action Center Report

The 2024 FRAC report, Leveraging CACFP for Farm to ECE, links participation in CACFP with greater engagement in the three pillars of farm to school: local procurement, gardening and nutrition education for early care participants.

Key barriers to successful implementation are discussed and include:

- Limited provider awareness
- Insufficient technical assistance
- Distribution challenges

The report recommends that farm to ECE initiatives be embedded into pre-existing CACFP administration structures and highlights State Administrative Expense funds as a method for funding this implementation and coordination (Food Research & Action Center, 2024).



APPENDIX D

Arizona 2025 Farm to School/ECE Community Survey Analysis - Results by Audience

LOCAL PRODUCERS

While **survey results from local farmers and producers** are based on a relatively small number of responses, the results **provide insight into the producers' current role in farm to school/ECE in Arizona**.

Results indicate that 57.4% have not sold to a K-12 school (Figure 1) and 79% have never sold to an ECE (Figure 2) citing reasons such as **lack of relationships, limited interest from school buyers, challenges with guaranteeing product quantities, seasonality conflicts, too many regulations, restrictive school contracts, pricing issues, food safety requirements, and lack of time and energy to research school markets** (Figure 3).

Figure 1:

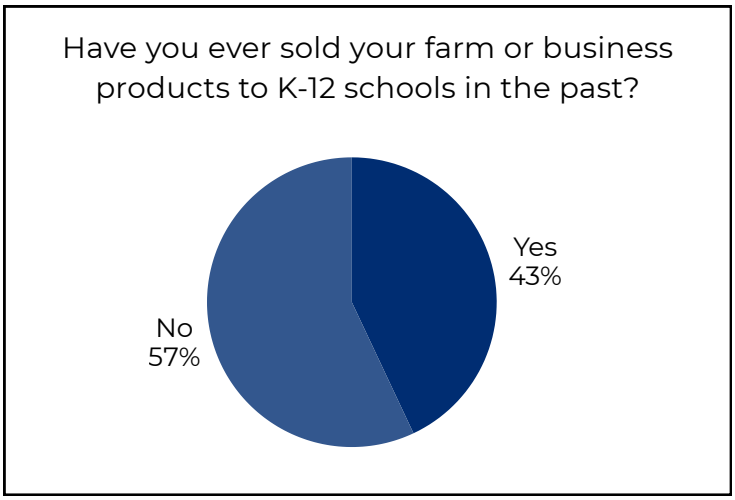


Figure 2:

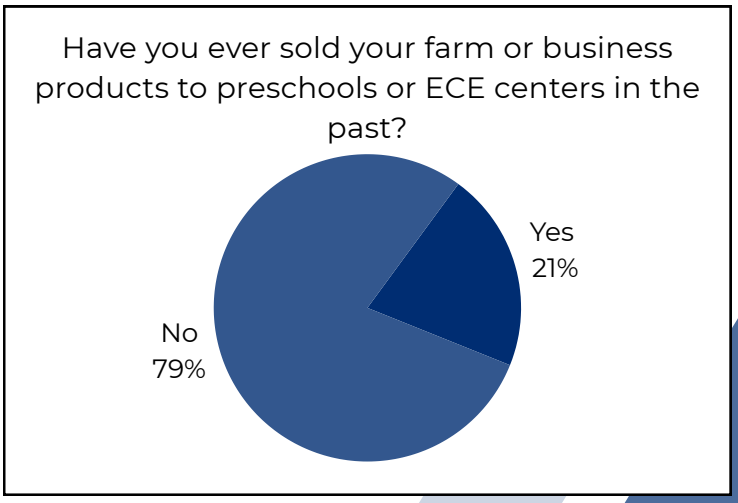
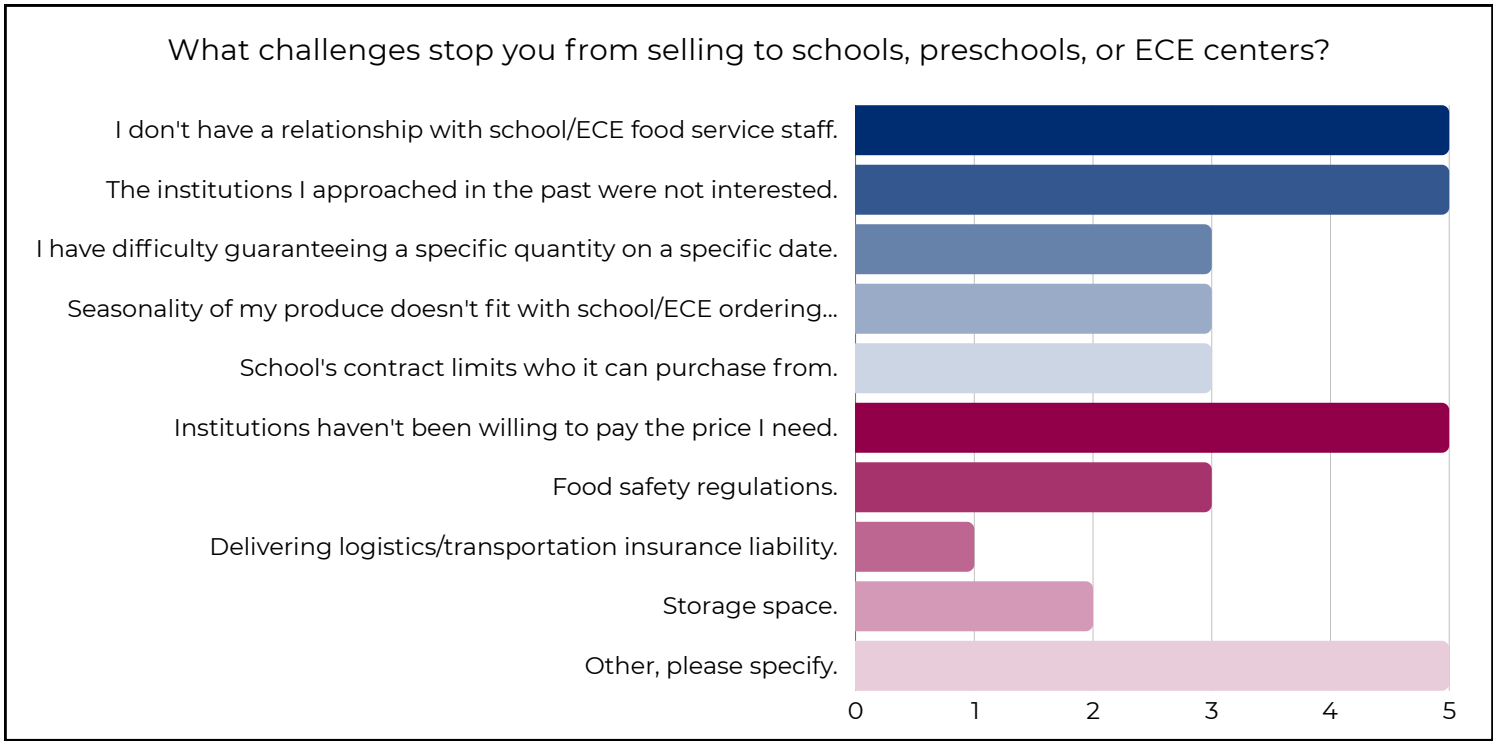


Figure 3:



Producers and distributors that have sold to schools reported the following challenges:

- Difficulty guaranteeing specific product quantities
- Challenges with product seasonality
- Pricing/high cost of local foods
- Food safety
- Insufficient storage space
- Meeting quantity/case sizes needed
- Obstacles with the bid process not allowing local purchases

However, **some have been successful selling to schools through cooperatives, with two producers naming Sun Produce Cooperative** as crucial to their success:

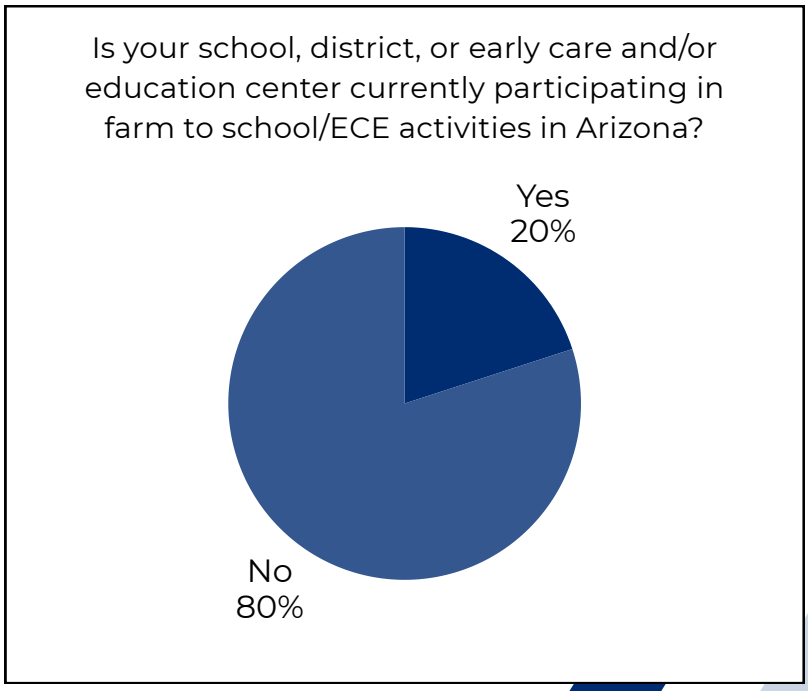
- *"We have sold our produce to schools independently and through Sun Produce Cooperative. Sun Produce is the best distribution method for selling to schools, this allows the district to purchase products from multiple farms with one stop shop and invoicing."*
- *"All of these issues for the smaller grower are rectified by going through Sun Produce. As we grow, we can collaborate to meet the demands. I believe that contracting with "Sun" to grow out a number of specific items and quantity will help solidify the small grower."*

When asked what support is needed to sell to schools, respondents frequently mentioned the **need for additional funding for institutions to purchase from local producers**, indicating limited awareness of LFS/Try It Local. Other suggestions included **assistance with grant writing, more information about the Try It Local program, opportunities for in-person connections between foodservice professionals and farmers, partial payments prior to delivery, and improved access to key district personnel responsible for local purchasing.**

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, DIRECTORS, AND EDUCATORS

Of the respondents that self-reported an association with a school or ECE, only 20.47% reported participating in farm to school/ECE at the time of this survey. Of those that responded that they do not participate, more than half said that they do not plan to participate (Figure 4).

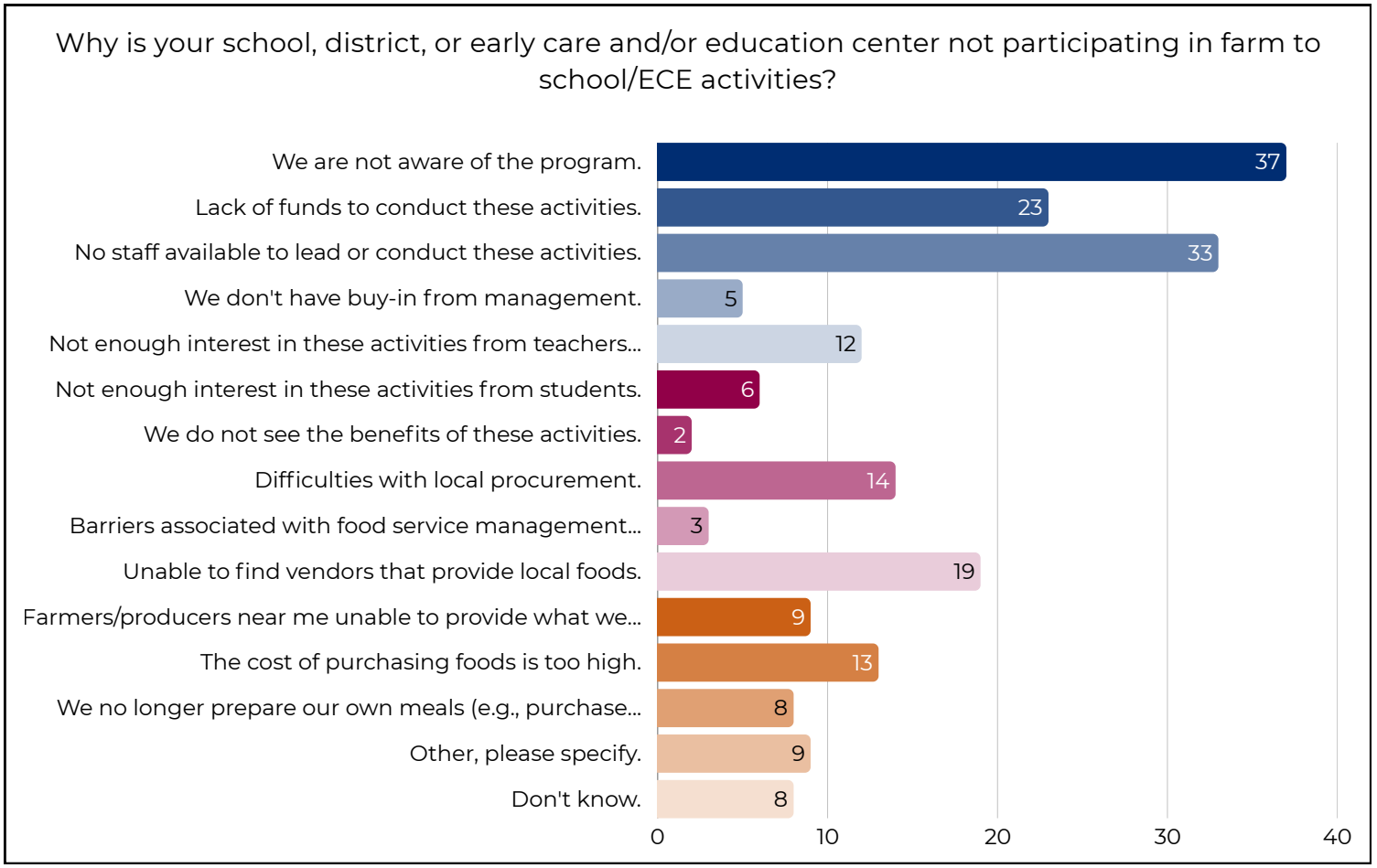
Figure 4:





Of those that do not participate (80%), the main reasons cited were lack of awareness, lack of staff to execute farm to school/ECE activities, and lack of funds to conduct activities (Figure 5).

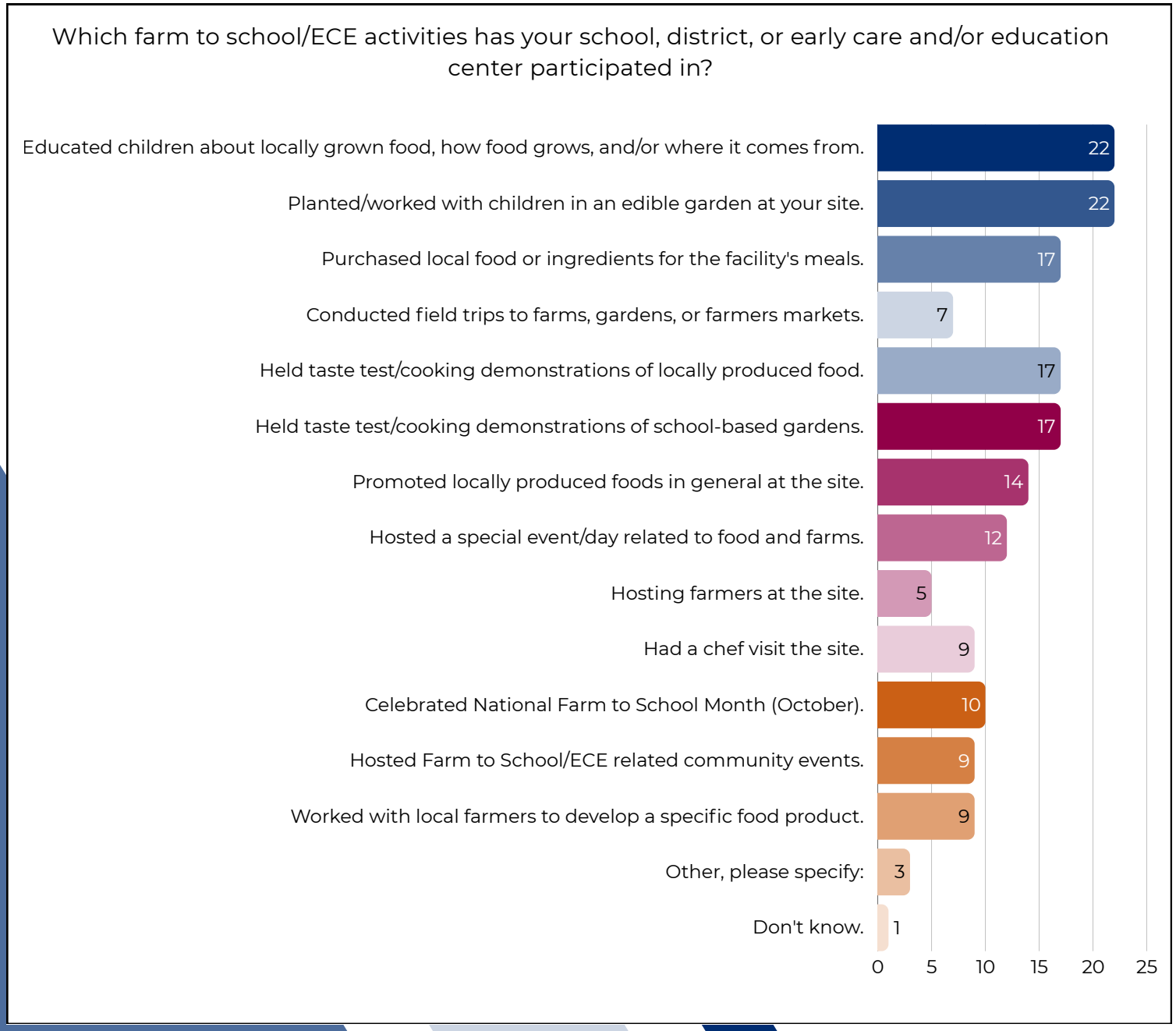
Figure 5:





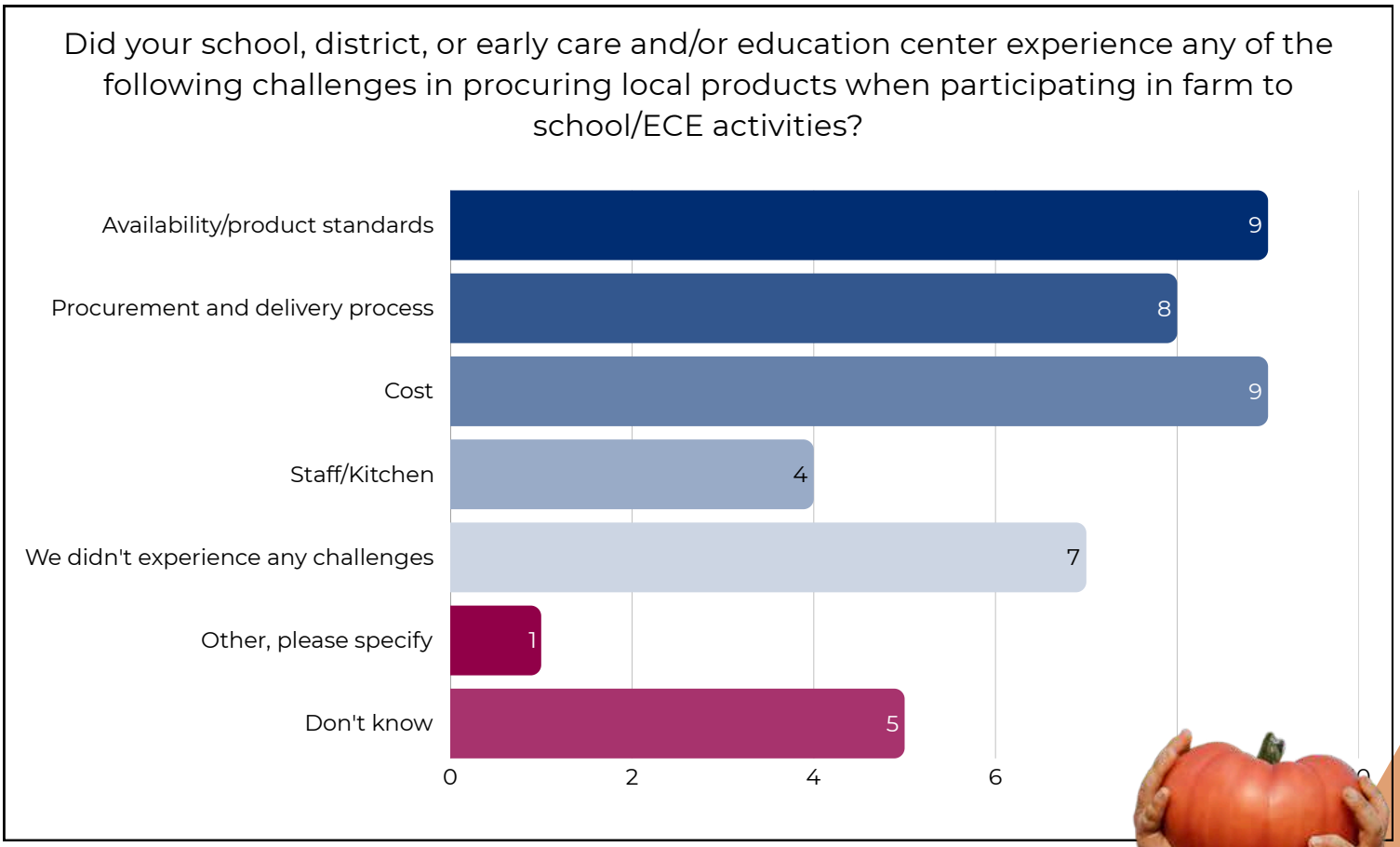
Of those that do participate (20%), the most common farm to school/ECE activities consisted of educating children about locally grown food and working with children in a school/ECE garden (Figure 6).

Figure 6:



When asked **what challenges**, if any, **participants faced when procuring local foods, the most common responses were availability and product standards, cost, and logistics related to procurement and food delivery** (Figure 7).

Figure 7:



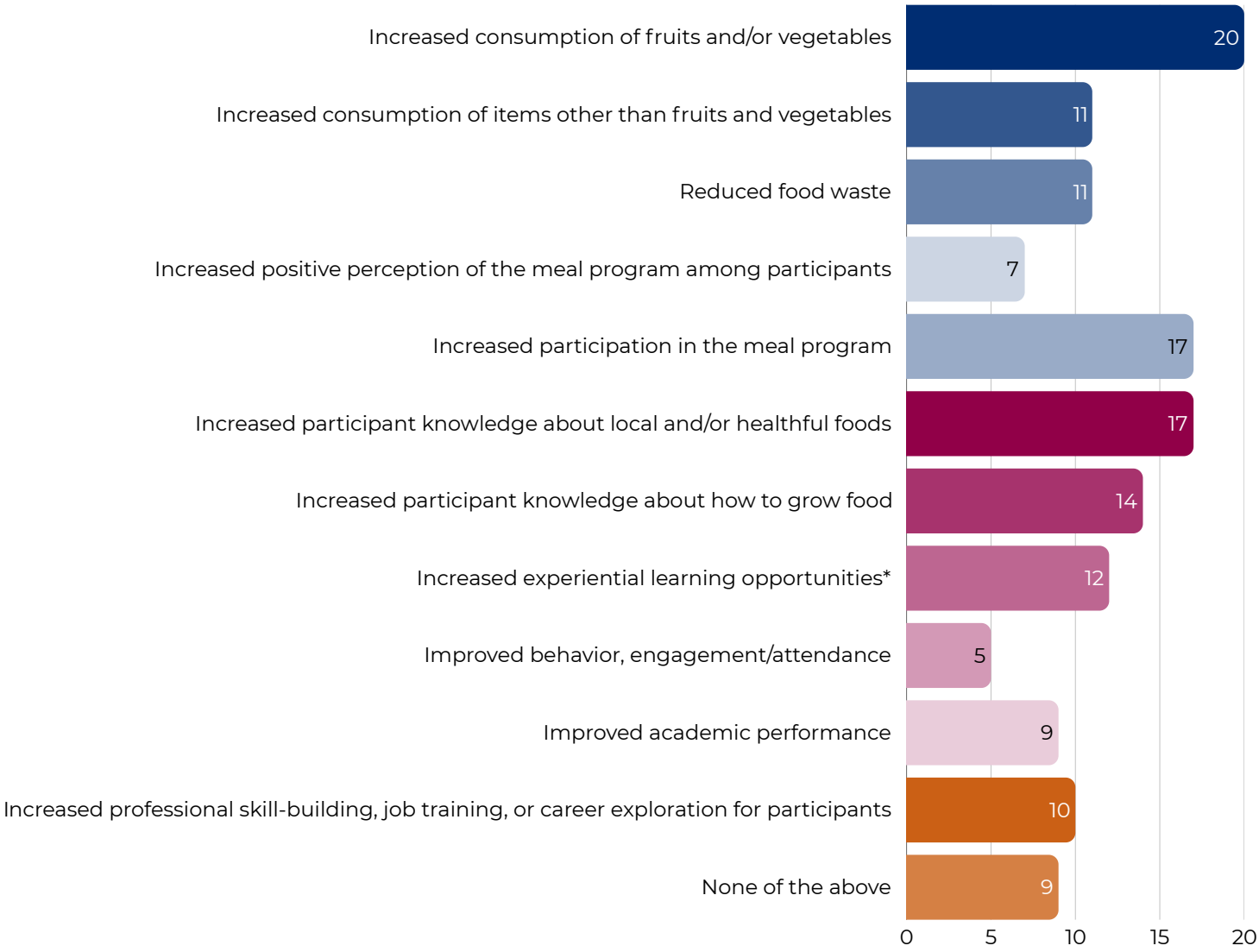
When asked **what challenges**, if any, **participants faced when procuring local foods, the most common responses were availability and product standards, cost, and logistics related to procurement and food delivery** (Figure 7).

- Increased participant knowledge about how to grow food
- Increased consumption of fruits and/or vegetables
- Increased positive perception of meal programs
- Increased knowledge about local/healthful foods
- Increased experiential learning opportunities as the most common outcomes (Figure 8).



Figure 8:

Which of the following program participant outcomes have resulted from your school, district, or early care and/or education center participation in farm to school/ECE activities?

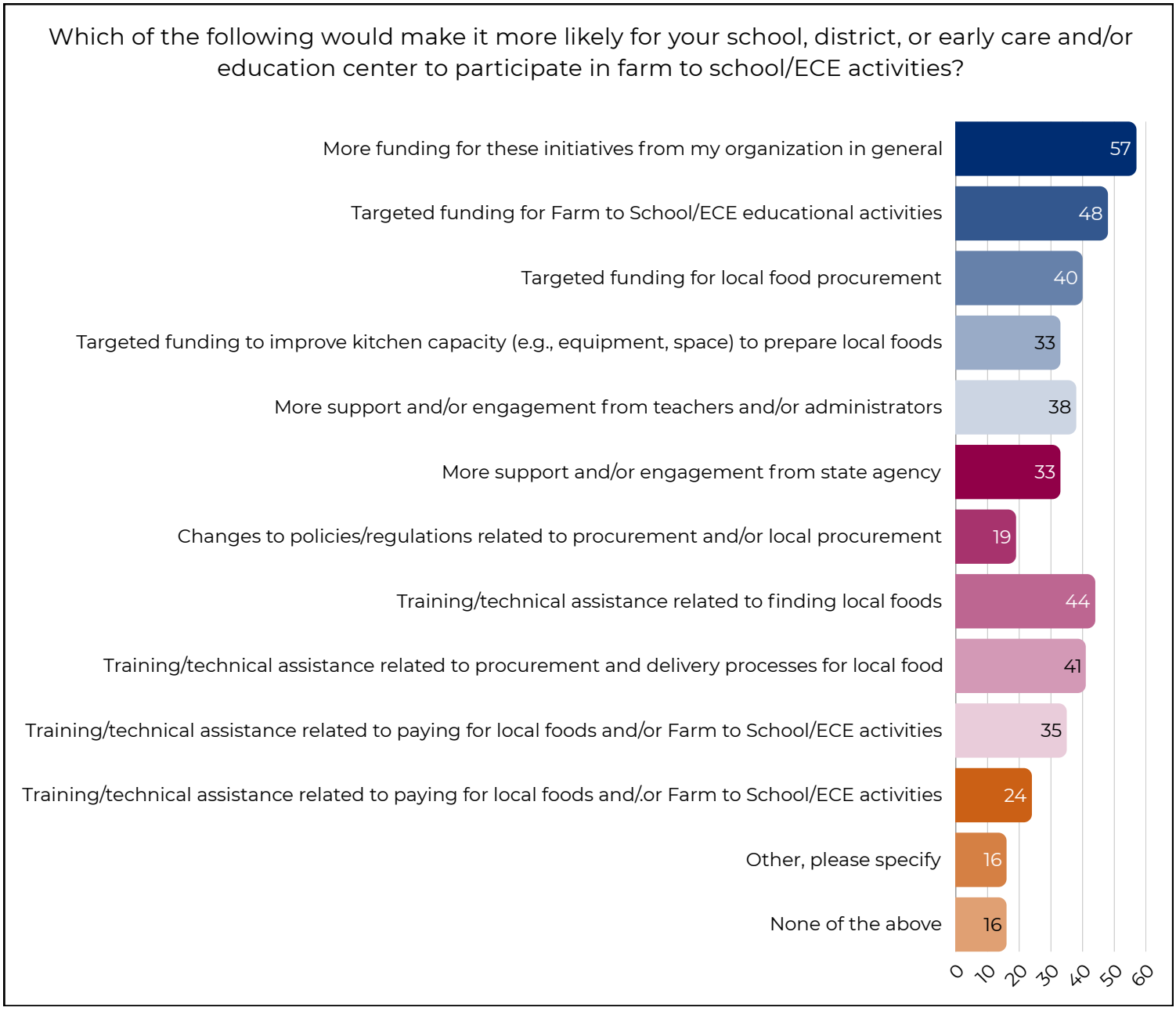


*Experiential learning opportunities may include, but are not limited to, classes in the garden, visits to a farm, cooking classes, and taste tests.

When asked to **rate the importance of farm to school/ECE programming on a scale of 1 to 5**, respondents ranked **teaching children about where food comes from and how it is grown (4.69), supporting the local economy and community (4.62), providing fresher and higher-quality food (4.54), and improving children's health (4.50) as the most important** followed by support for local farmers (4.46), lowering meal costs (3.54), and appealing to parents/guardians (3.50).

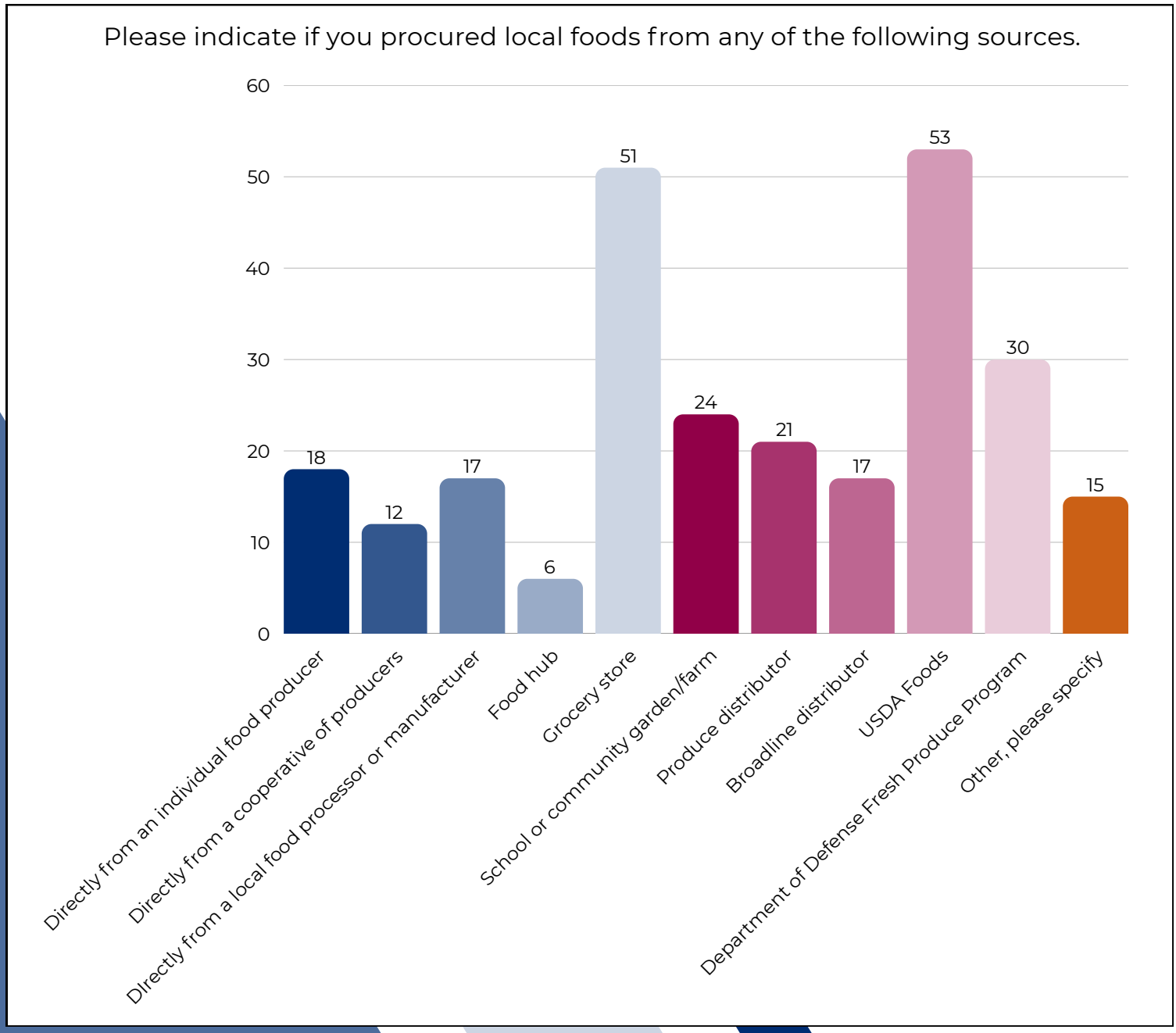
For those not participating in farm to school/ECE, many reported that they would be more likely to participate if more funding were available, and if training and technical assistance related to finding, procuring and transporting local foods (Figure 9).

Figure 9:



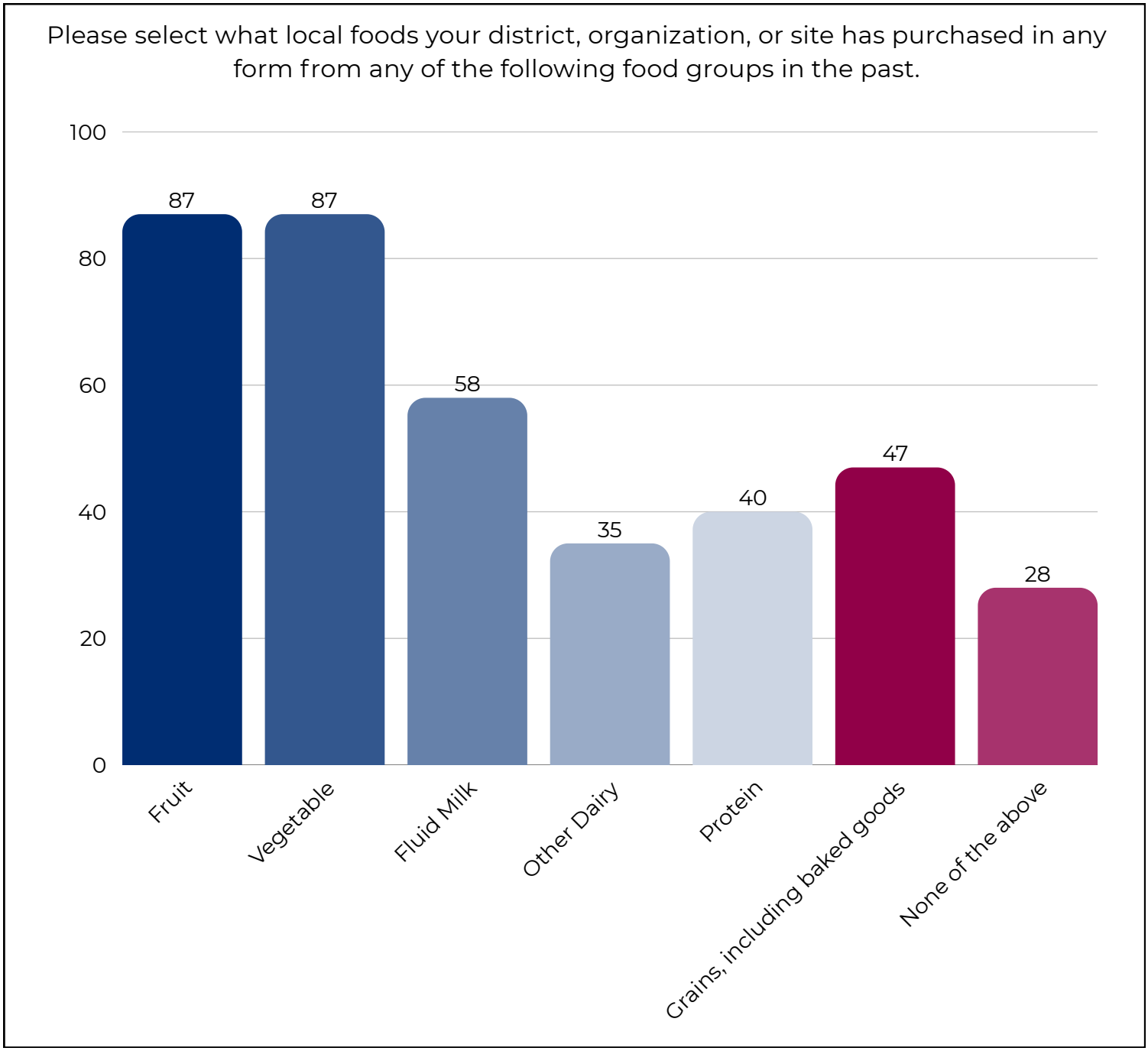
All respondents reported as being associated with a school or ECE were asked to provide insight into **where they are currently procuring local foods. USDA Foods and grocery store purchases were the most common responses** (Figure 10).

Figure 10:



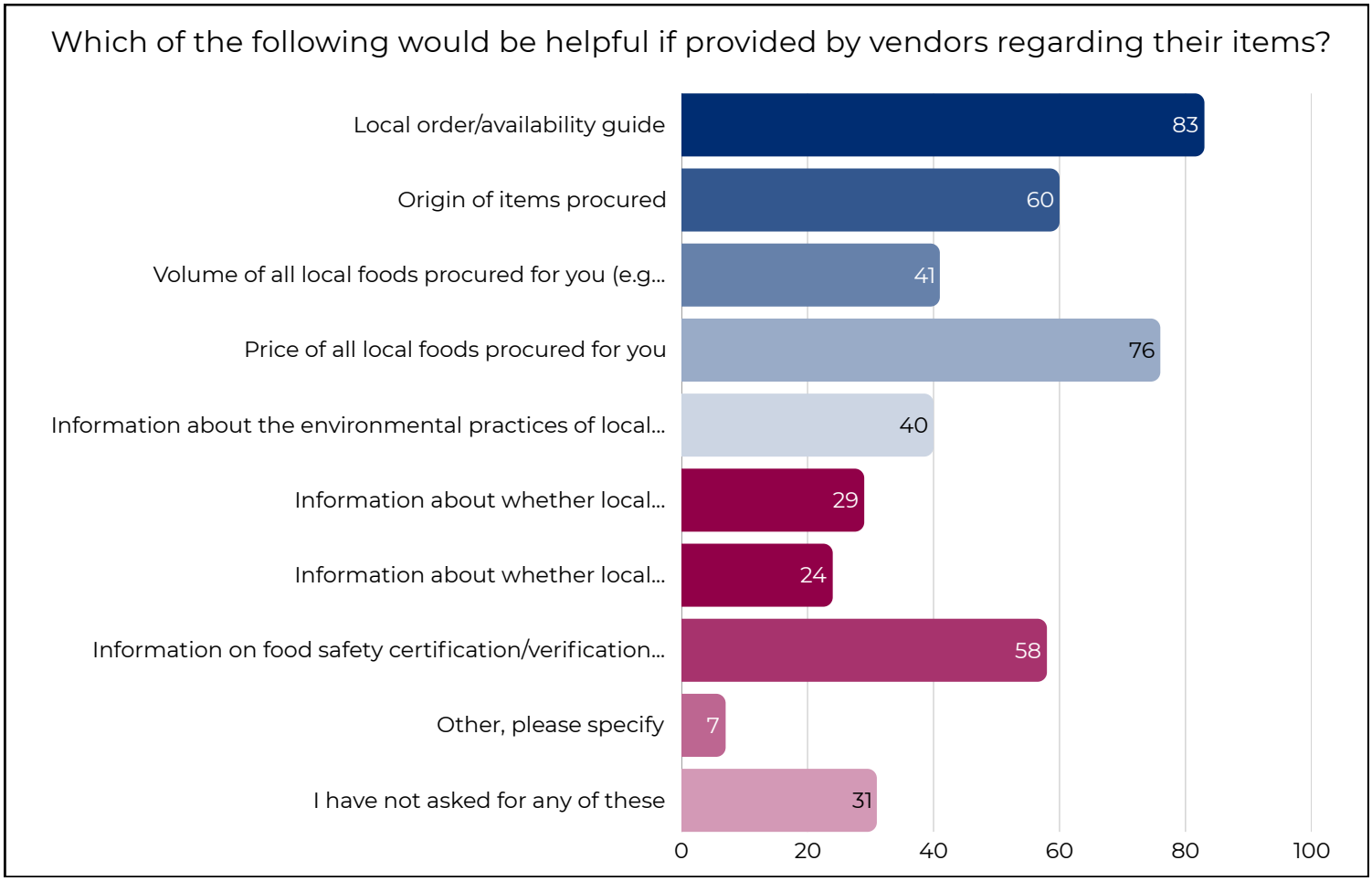
For those that have purchased locally, most of those purchases were fruits and vegetables with fluid milk as the third most purchased category (Figure 11).

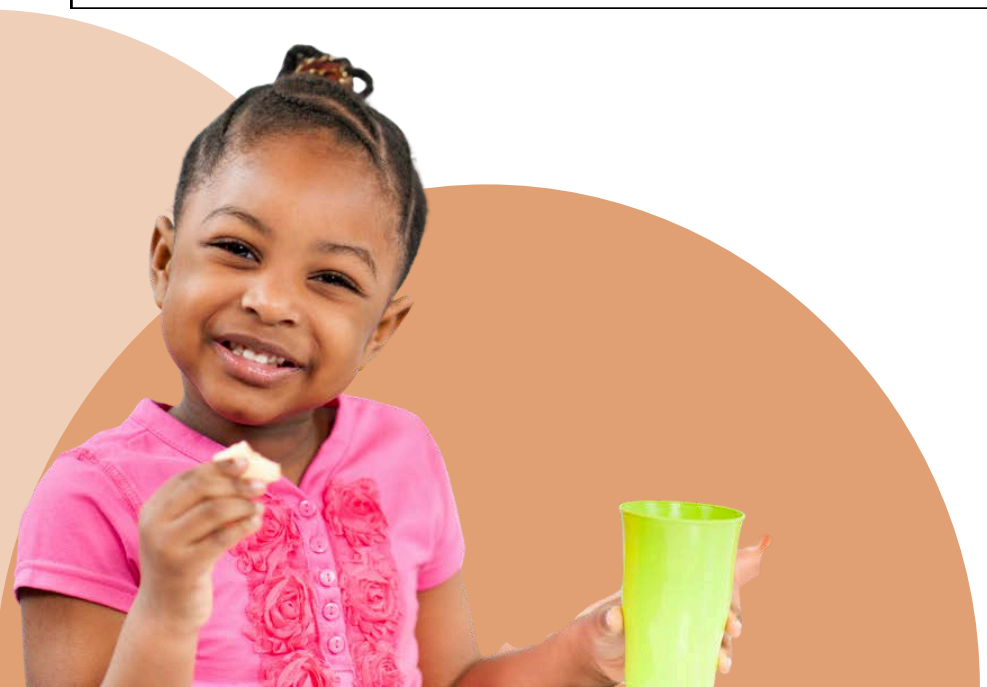
Figure 11:



Respondents indicated that **a local order/availability guide, information about the price of local items, origin of items procured and information on food safety/certification would be helpful if provided by local food vendors** (Figure 12).

Figure 12:





Of those that responded and self-indicated association with a school or ECE, only 30% reported having a garden (Figure 13).

Of those that maintain a garden at their site, most use it as a part of their curriculum and/or serving their harvest as a part of taste tests or cooking demonstrations (Figure 14).

Figure 13:

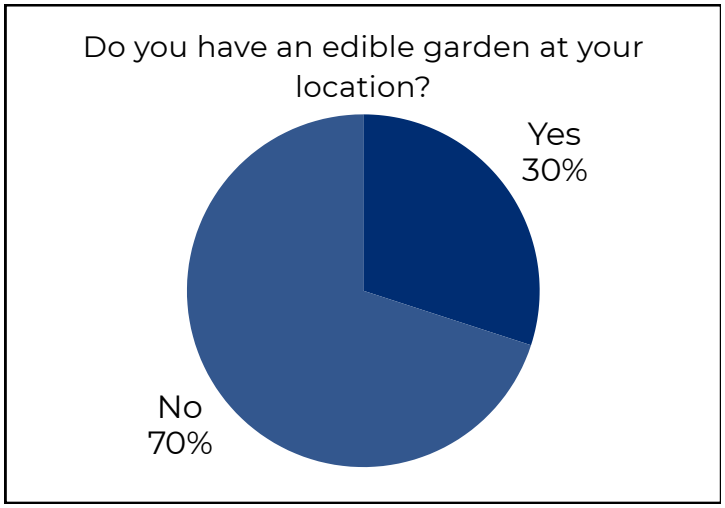
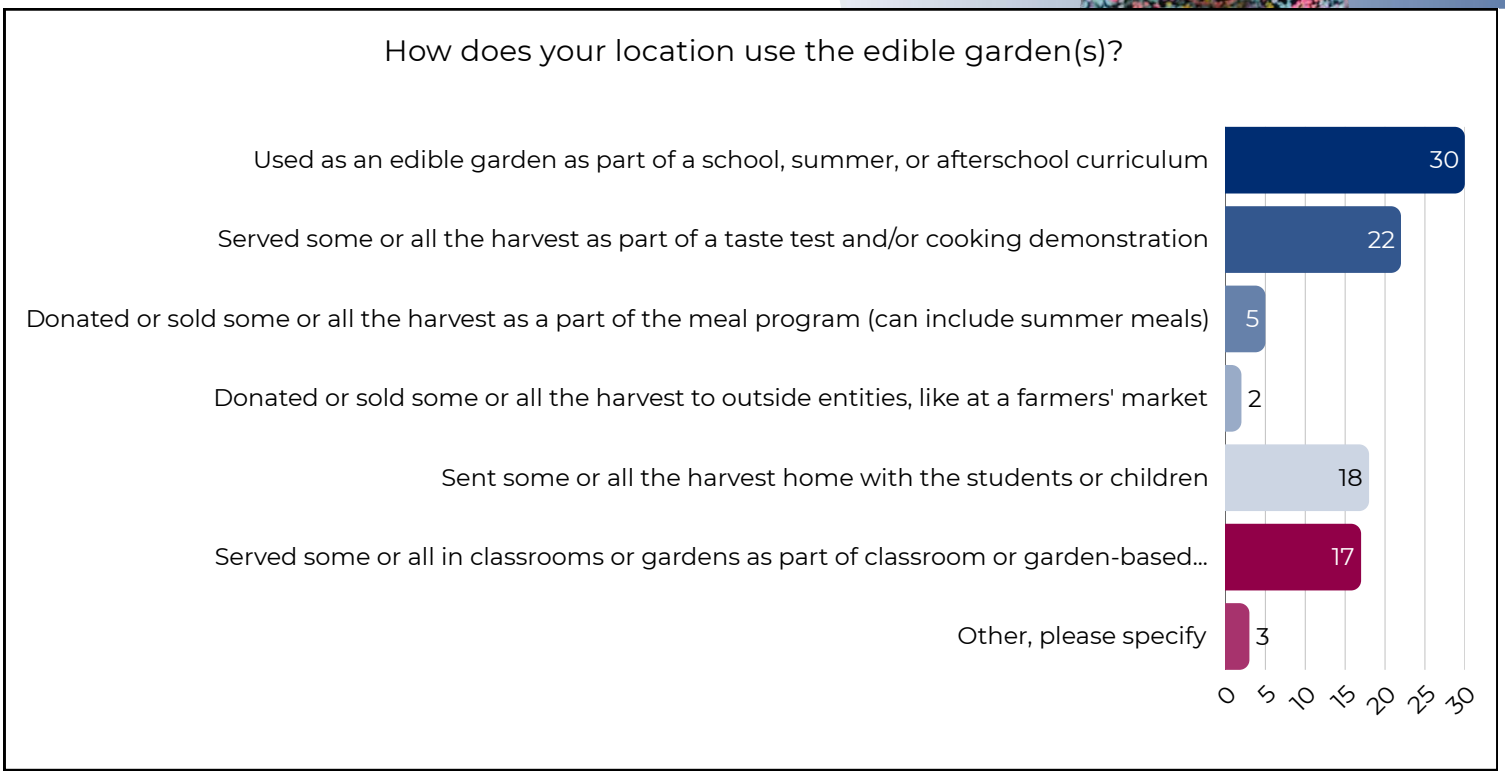




Figure 14:



PARENTS

While parent responses are limited, representing 24 out of 195 survey responses, **the results offer insight into how parents perceive farm to school/ECE programming**. Findings reveal that **many have not heard about any farm to school and/or farm to ECE activities taking place in their child's school or early care site.** These findings align with the percentage of schools and ECEs that indicate participating in "farm-to" activities. **83% of parents believe serving local foods is especially important (Figure 15) but 71% are unaware of current initiatives in the state (Figure 16).**

Figure 15

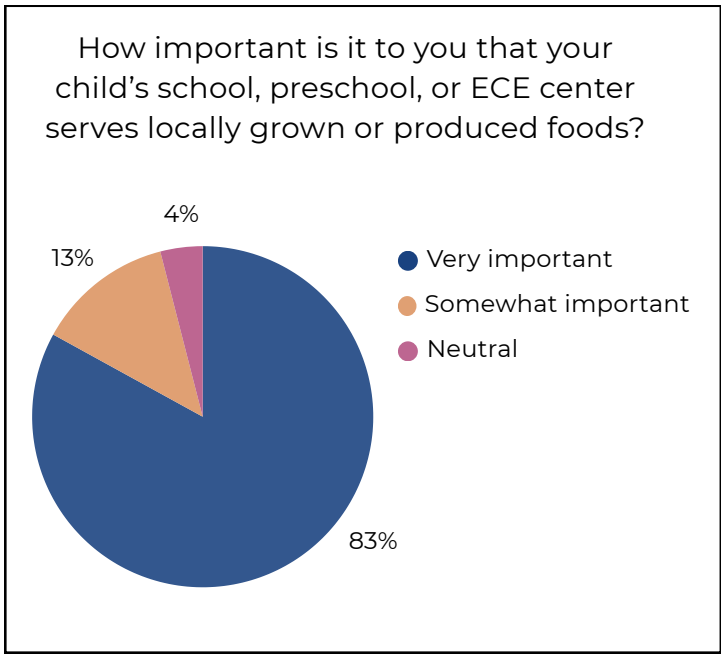
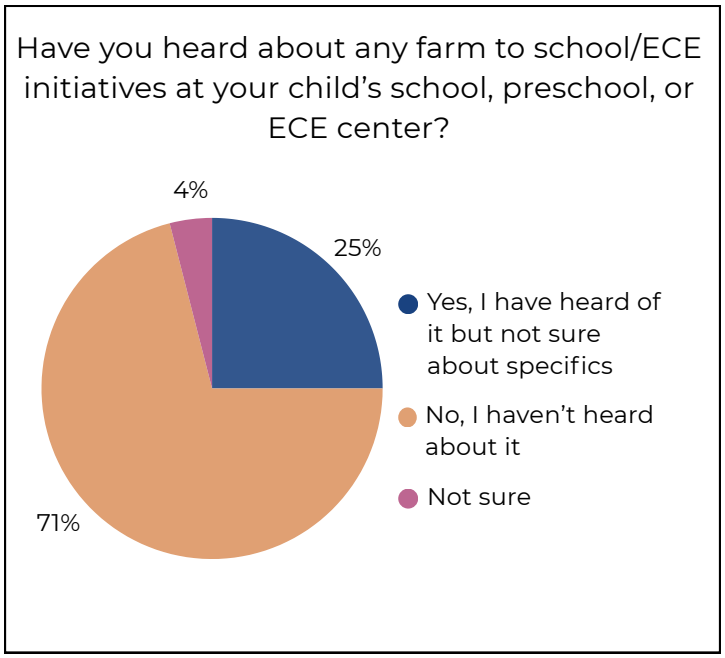


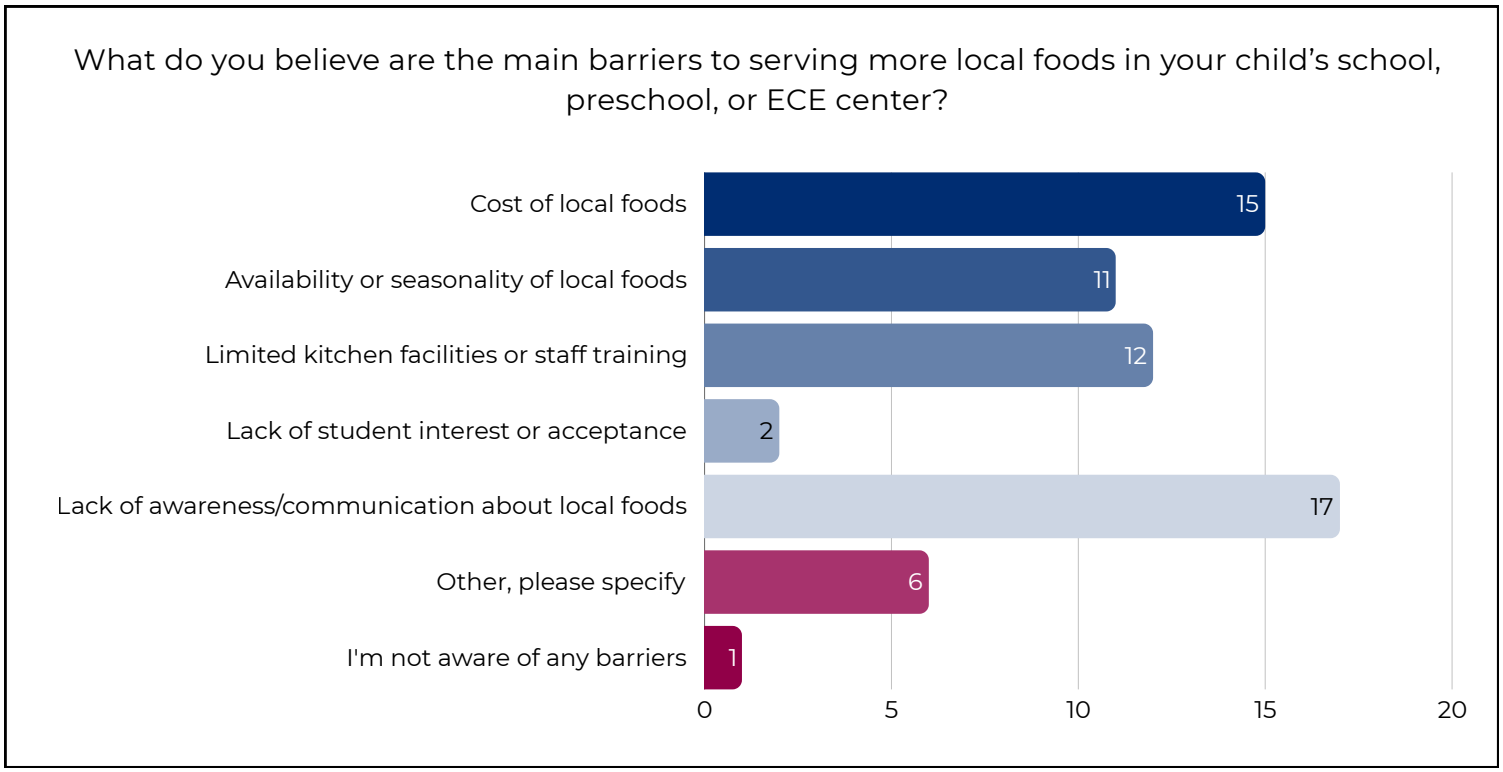
Figure 16:





When asked to indicate the **main barriers they believe prevent schools and ECE organizations from serving locally produced food, parents cited a lack of awareness about local foods and cost as the main obstacles** (Figure 17).

Figure 17:



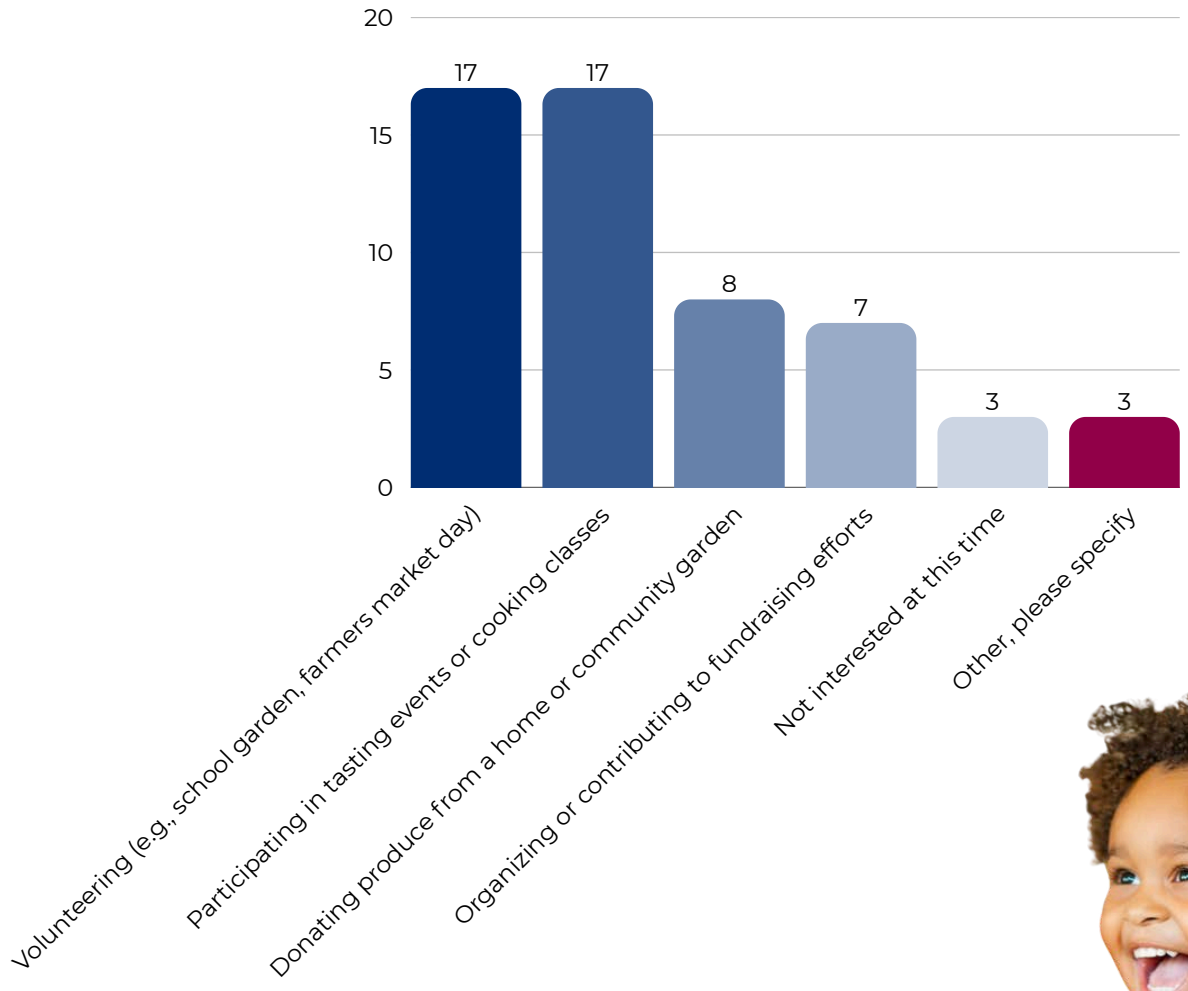
Parents expressed **strong interest in increasing the visibility and availability of local foods in school meals**. Suggestions included **highlighting local items or producers on menus, designating a weekly "local spotlight," and improving communication about food sources**. Respondents emphasized the importance of **fresh, local produce, reducing processed foods, and incorporating nutrition education and lessons on where food comes from. Farm visits, school gardens, and partnerships with local growers and ranchers to deepen student engagement are desired activities for their children.** Additional priorities included **funding to support these programs, more detailed menus for parents, and opportunities to connect school meals with healthy home cooking. Overall, local food sourcing was reported as vital for children's health, sustainability, and community economic support.**



Lastly, parents appear willing to support implementation of local food initiatives with many responding with an **interest in volunteering and participating in farm to school-related events** (Figure 18).

Figure 18:

Would you be interested in any of the following activities to support local food initiatives at your child's school, preschool, or ECE center?

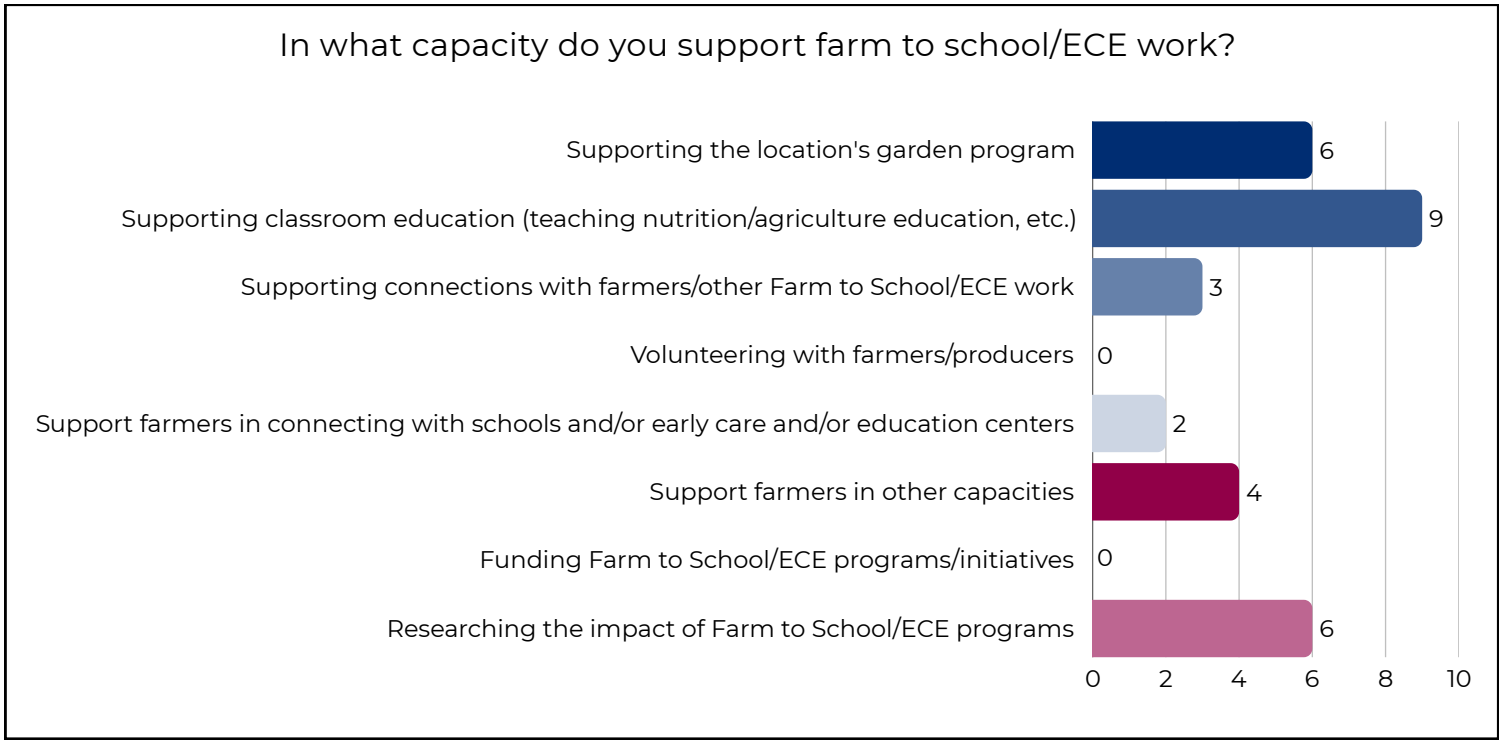




OTHER PARTNERS

State agency representatives, nonprofits, local organizations, and higher education professionals were categorized as community partners as each plays distinct roles in supporting farm to school and ECE programs at the community level. The most common respondent contributions in this category include classroom education (30%), garden programs (20%), and research on program impact (20%), with smaller percentages supporting farmer connections and other capacities (Figure 19).

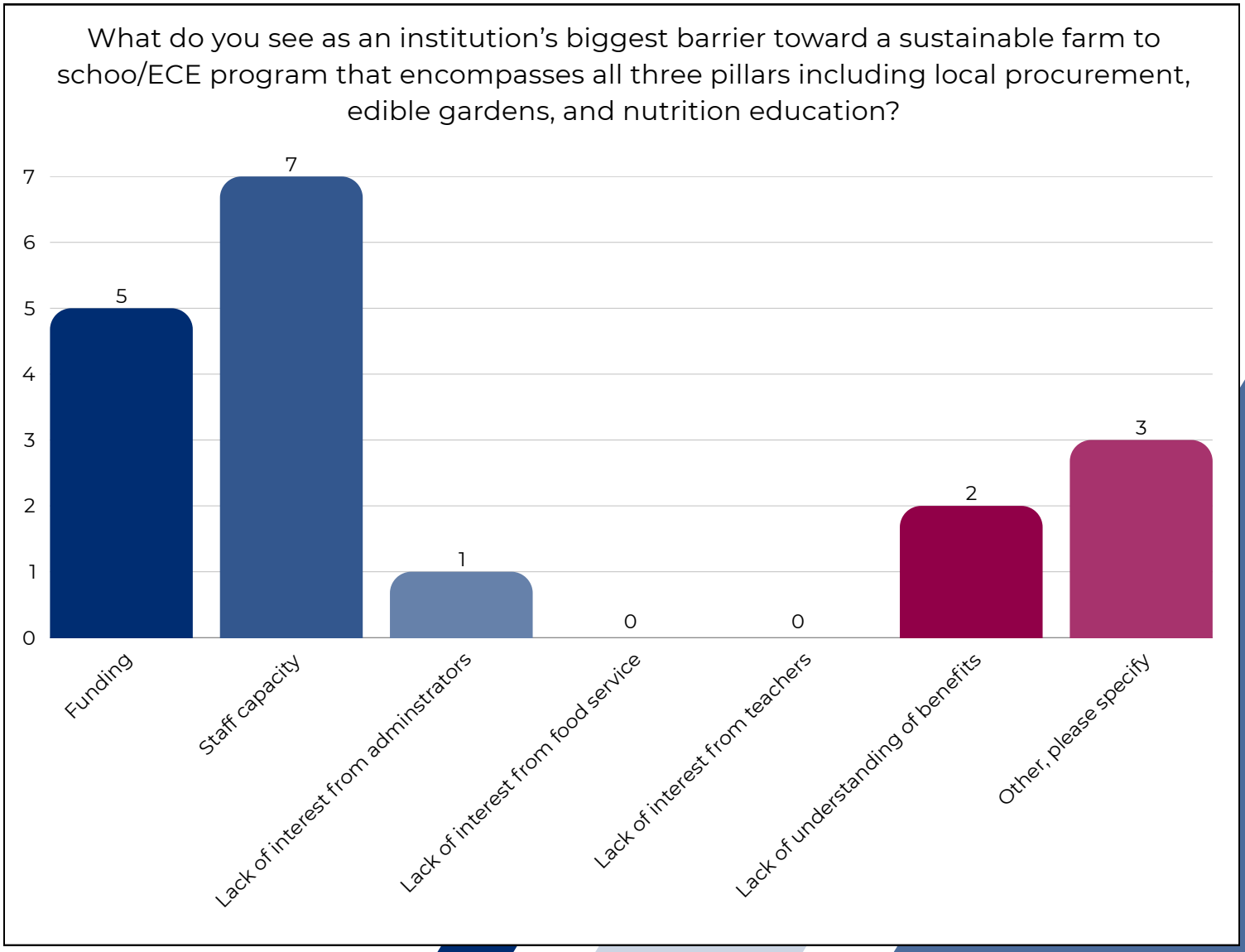
Figure 19:





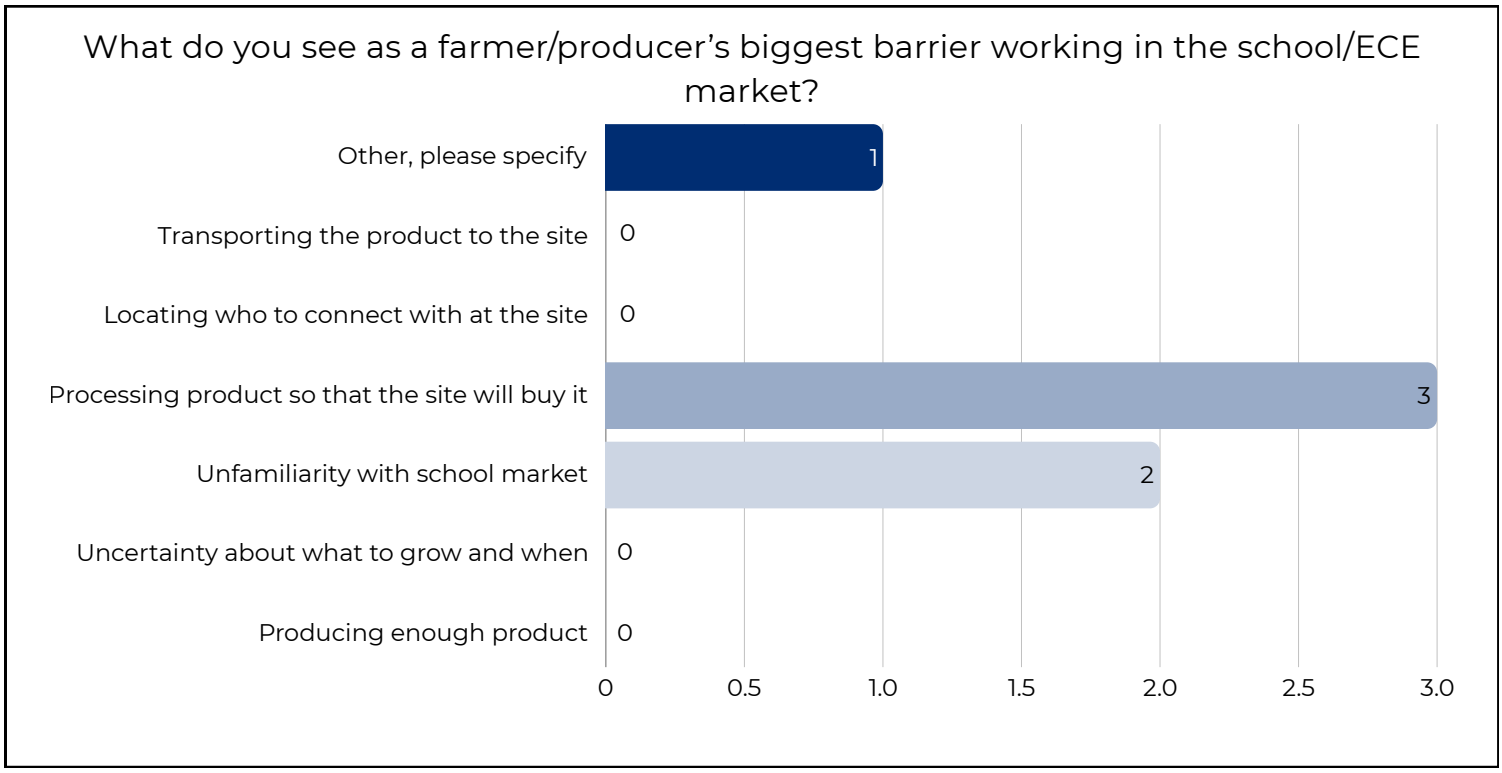
Those that work to support schools and ECE organizations report that the **biggest barriers institutions face in sustaining comprehensive programs are staff capacity (39%) and funding (28%).** Beyond addressing funding and staffing challenges, respondents who selected "Other, please specify" emphasized the importance of **policy support in strengthening program sustainability and achieving successful implementation** (Figure 20).

Figure 20:



Partners that work in support of producers report the greatest obstacles are processing products to meet school requirements (50%) and unfamiliarity with the school market (33%). **Suggested solutions** include facilitating introductions to school contacts, assisting with product processing, and establishing food hubs to simplify distribution and meet institutional needs (Figure 21).

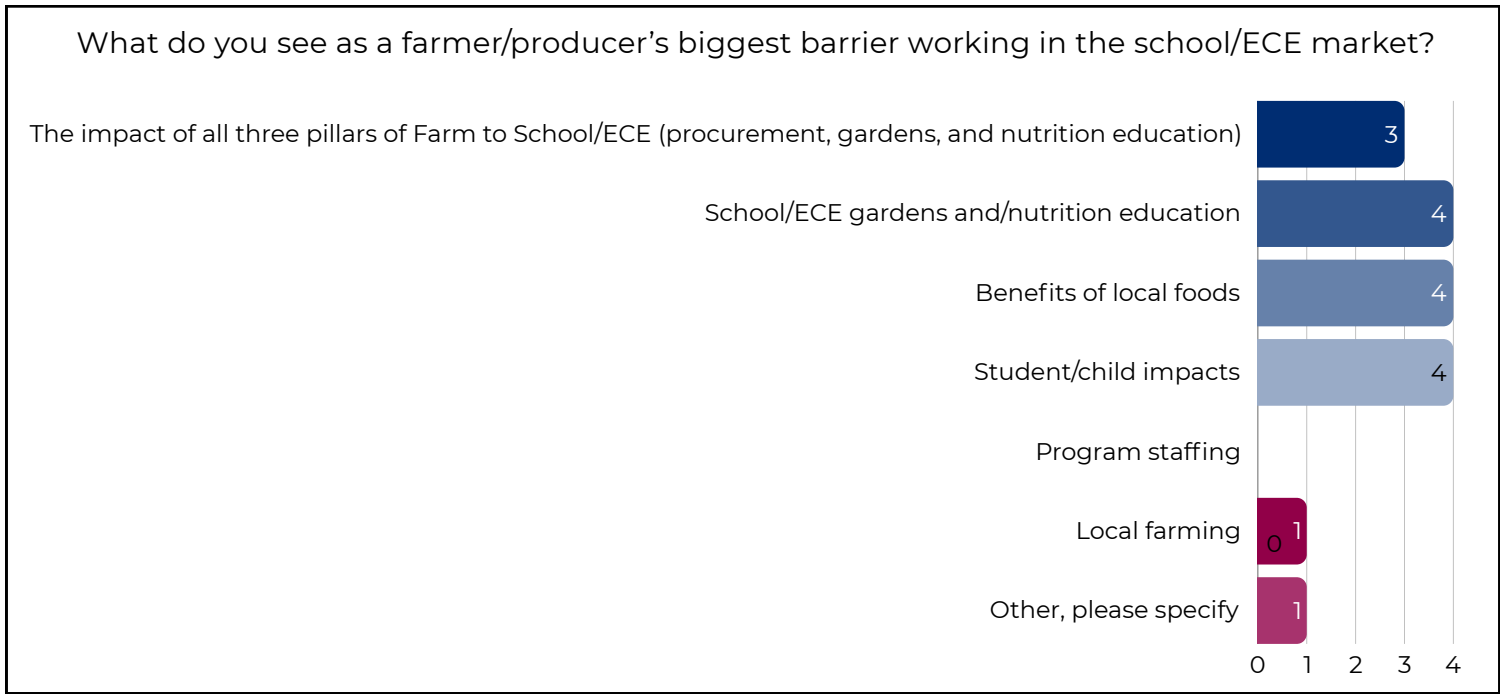
Figure 21:





Respondents engaged in **farm to school research** reported that their research primarily focuses on school gardens, nutrition education, benefits of local foods, and student impacts, while many identified a need for additional research examining the combined impact of all three farm to school pillars (Figure 22). Respondents also described several **barriers to conducting and applying research, including limited time due to competing responsibilities, inconsistent data quality and availability issues** (particularly related to the Farm to School Census), **policy decisions that do not fully reflect existing evidence, and funding structures that favor siloed approaches.** One respondent noted that farm to school initiatives span multiple sectors and contribute to sustainability and well-being, yet funding opportunities often require research to focus on narrow topics. Respondents suggested that greater support for transdisciplinary research teams and more flexible funding aligned with broader outcomes would strengthen the evidence base.

Figure 22:



Community partners *overwhelmingly* see the value of farm to school/ECE programs; 77% believe these initiatives have a positive impact. **Those that work with schools** want more **support for nutrition and sustainable agriculture education,** including hands-on learning through gardens, as well as family engagement, equitable access to resources, and environmental literacy. **Those supporting farmers and producers** report needs for **funding and grants, technical training, market access, and distribution, along with stronger connections to schools and policy advocacy. Both groups** emphasize the need for **holistic funding with less bureaucracy and consistent systems for collaboration**. The results clearly identify areas of need related to **more funding, more staff and stronger farmer-school partnerships.**

RANKING OF PRIORITIES

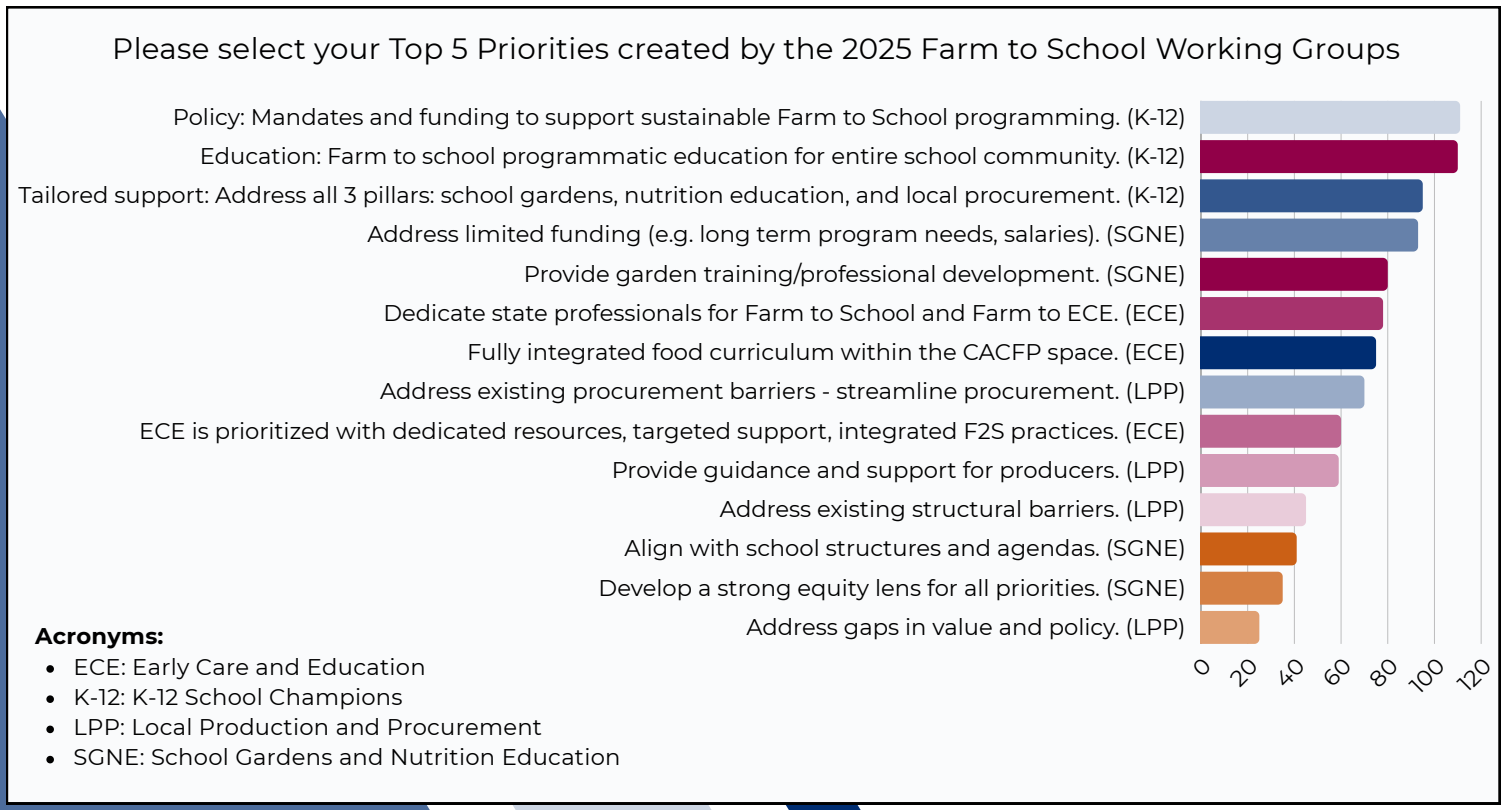
Survey respondents selected their **top five priorities** for advancing farm to school/ECE programming based on the critical priority areas identified by the Arizona-based Farm to School Working Group (Figure 23).

- The **highest priorities** include **policy mandates and funding to support sustainable programs, farm to school education for the entire school community, and tailored support addressing all three pillars** (gardens, nutrition education, and local procurement). When compared to the Working Group's ranking of these priorities, addressing limited funding ranked at the same level of urgency, while garden training and professional development emerged as higher priorities than the Working Group's ranking.

- **Lower-ranked**, but still important, priorities include **dedicated state professionals, procurement barrier solutions, and ECE prioritization with integrated practices**.

Overall, the survey data reflects **strong urgency** for funding and education, moderate emphasis on structural and staffing support, and consistent recognition of the need for integrated approaches.

Figure 23:



APPENDIX E

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APPENDIX F

Acronyms Glossary

ACRONYM	TERM
ADE	Arizona Department of Education
ASPHN	Association of State Public Health Nutritionists
AZ F2SN	Arizona Farm to School Network
BTFS	Bringing the Farm to School
CACFP	Child and Adult Care Food Program
CNP	Child Nutrition Programs
DoD	Department of Defense
ECE	Early Care and Education or Early Childhood Education
FNA	Food and Nutrition Administration
FRAC	Food Research and Action Center
HNS	Health and Nutrition Services
ISA	Interagency Service Agreement
LEA	Local Education Agency
LFPA	Local Food Purchase Agreement
LFS	Local Food for Schools
NFSN	National Farm to School Network
NSLP	National School Lunch Program
RFGA	Request For Grant Application
SFA	School Food Authority
SFSP	Summer Food Service Program
upLIFT	*A styled name for an ADE initiative providing child nutrition professionals with resources to* LEARN, INSPIRE, FEED, and TEACH.
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

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