SUMMARY: THE STRATEGIC PLAN TO

# EXPAND FARM TO CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS IN ARIZONA



ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
HEALTH AND NUTRITION SERVICES
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# INTRODUCTION

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.



## 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.

# 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**.

# 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. |
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## 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.

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