

## Evaluation of a Farm-to-Preschool and Families program

Despite recent decreases among preschool-aged children, child obesity is still an important public health concern. Community-based programs that focus on increasing fruit and vegetable intake is one way to address this issue. Although there is a strong case in favor of fruit and vegetable consumption and the many associated benefits, most children are not getting adequate amounts of these important foods.

For children between the ages of 2 and 8, the current recommendation is 1 to 1 ½ cups each of fruit and vegetables every day. But, for almost all Americans aged 2 and older, usual vegetable intake falls below this amount. And, although most 2 to 3 year-olds in the U.S. eat the recommended amount of fruit, those aged 4 years and older do not.

One way to increase fruit and vegetable intake and at the same time support sustainability in local communities, and help reduce overweight and obesity among school-aged children is through farm-to-school programs. These programs are being put in place across the United States to unite local farmers with local school districts. Farm-to-school is defined as "efforts that bring locally or regionally produced foods into school cafeterias; hands-on learning activities such as school gardening, farm visits, and [cooking] classes; and the integration of food related education into the regular, standards based classroom curriculum." While the importance of these programs has attracted national attention, there is limited information in the literature on farm-to-school programs generally and even less on farm-to-preschool programs in particular.

Given these gaps, the purpose of this evaluation, was to: (a) identify specific factors that helped promote development of a Farm-to-Preschool and Families (F2P) program in Springfield, MA; and (b) provide general recommendations and guidelines for the successful operation of F2P programs.

Four preschools representing a range of involvement in F2P programs took part in the evaluation. Three schools were actively participating in a F2P program in some way; the fourth school was the comparison site and served mostly canned and frozen fruits and vegetables.

Using a combination of classroom observations of preschoolers, teacher and food service interviews, and administrator surveys, five major issues were identified:

1) *Ways to increase fruit and vegetable intake* – engagement (such as getting kids actively involved in food preparation) and encouragement (like taste testing and games) were the two most common strategies to increase children’s fruit and vegetable intake.

2) *Program facilitators* - administrative support and support from families emerged as the most important factors needed to sustain a F2P program.

3) *Importance of infrastructure support* - having strong organizational support for the use of fresh

and local fruits and vegetables was recognized as key in the success of a F2P program. This included adequate staffing, space and equipment for food preparation and storage.

4) *Benefits of F2P programs* – the main benefits mentioned by all sites were cost and buying power, which was made possible through shared purchasing agreements with other sites.

5) *Challenges of F2P programs* – while some viewed cost as a benefit, some saw it as a challenge. Other challenges included lack of time and space, especially for smaller sites.

So, what does this all come down to? For anyone interested in starting or further developing a Farm-to-School program in a preschool, we suggest specific attention be paid to:

Providing training and technical assistance for teachers and food service staff.

Making sure there is a solid organizational infrastructure in place.

Having strong social and structural support up front (including buy-in from key stakeholders such as parents, staff, teachers and administrators).

There are also many online tools and resources available to help get you started.

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## **Publication**

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