



THE PROMISE OF FARM TO PRESCHOOL IN SOUTHWEST COLORADO

A Whole Community Effort to Bring Good Food, Gardens, & Edible Education to our Youngest Children

A REPORT TO PARENTS,
CHILDCARE PROVIDERS,
GOVERNMENTS, SUPPORT
AGENCIES, PRODUCERS,
LOCAL FOOD GROUPS, AND
THE WHOLE COMMUNITY ON
WHY AND HOW WE MUST
GET MORE HEALTHY LOCAL
FOOD AND TIME IN THE
GARDEN TO ALL OUR
CHILDREN.



FARM TO PRESCHOOL:
**Good food, local growers,
engaging gardens, and
innovative “edible
education.”**

The time is right for a community-wide commitment to engage our local farmers and ranchers, school gardens, and innovative “edible education” in the ongoing effort to improve our youngest children’s health and their future. Farm to School has developed well in Southwest Colorado, but certainly needs much more continued support. Farm to **Preschool** has been growing as a movement across the country and recently here in Southwest Colorado. Our youngest children need the best food possible—local foods and education about them are essential. This report aims to explain the concept of Farm to Preschool, why it is so important, and why it is crucial to do well and without delay. The focus and examples relate to La Plata County since we started work here, but are applicable to the whole of Southwest Colorado and beyond.

In short, what is Farm to Preschool?

- The best food, as local as possible, and time in the garden for our youngest children’s health and their future.
- Extending the benefits of K-12 Farm to School programs to our youngest children.
- A movement to make Farm to Preschool an integral part of the overall Farm to School movement.
- Caring enough—as a whole community—for our children to do this right and do it now!

Farm to Preschool is a movement—a concerted effort inspired and supported by interconnected programs across the region and the country. Most people are aware of the Farm to School movement at the K-12 level—connecting schools with local growers for healthy, minimally-processed, fresh foods, and the stories behind that local food, augmented by farm field trips, gardens, and what is called “edible education.” Farm to School has become established at the K-12 level in many areas, including ours, and Farm to Preschool is beginning to spread as well.

Similar, but not the same. Preschool providers consist of early childcare centers and home-based providers that care for ages ranging from infants to the typical three- and four-year-old “preschoolers.” Preschools are more numerous and smaller than K-12 schools, but this smaller size allows individual farmers to more easily meet a preschool’s needs, with more flexibility. Many preschools operate in the summer and can take advantage of the fresh fruit and vegetable growing season. Children of preschool age are largely experiential learners, making gardens, growing food, and edible education activities perfect for them. Parents are, by necessity, more closely involved in these children’s school settings, especially their food. All these factors can help Farm to Preschool to be successful and pave the way for later Farm to School efforts.

Why is it important?

Many of the determinants of a healthy life and healthy relationship with food are established very early.

It all starts early. It could be argued that the Farm to School movement should have started at the preschool level. We know instinctively that the need for the highest quality food and an understanding of how it is produced is critical at the earliest stages of life—yet we sometimes act as if we don’t realize that need. In many cases, an astoundingly high proportion of daily nutrition is obtained in preschool meals and snacks. Perhaps this should not be so, but for now it underscores the importance of making the best food available in preschool settings. Socioeconomic factors make it difficult for some kids to get the proper nutrition at home, so preschools—providing high quality food—can be critical in addressing those inequities, if preschools are accessible and affordable to all in the community.

Not an obstacle; an opportunity. When we look to increase the quality of early childcare, we must not forget about good food. Rather than being considered a financial burden and a set of government requirements to meet, good food should be seen as a key to better behavior and academic performance—and understanding and choosing good food as a critical life skill. Including local food opens a range of opportunities to engage and gain support from the whole community—parents, farmers, ranchers, gardeners, economic development agencies, policymakers, local food groups, environmentalists, and locavores of all sorts. Featuring local food and gardening may be a marketing advantage for preschool providers as well.

Does Southwest Colorado need Farm to Preschool?

Not all is well in the “leanest state.”

Good, but troubling on closer look. Southwest Coloradoans may be tempted to feel a little complacent about the needs here. After all, Colorado is often called the “leanest state in the nation.” However, more than half of adults in Colorado are overweight or obese, and one in four children are overweight or obese.³ Even more troubling,



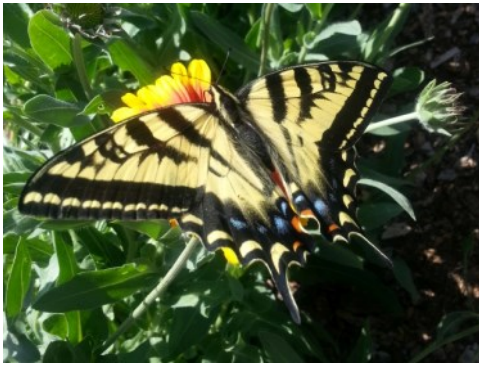
Up to 80% of children’s nutrition is obtained in the preschool setting.¹



Farm to School programs have been shown to result in children consuming from 1 to 1.3 more servings of fruits and vegetables per day—as well as better academics, self-esteem, and behavior!²



Numerous studies have shown an average 5% increase in farmer income from selling to schools.⁵



Gardens and associated activities may be the single most important factor in kids accepting and choosing good foods, and one of the easiest, most straightforward, and lasting ways to increase their chances of a healthy life.

"...school gardening, especially when used to enhance nutrition education programs, is associated with increased intake of fruits and vegetables among students."⁶

Colorado has one of the fastest growing childhood obesity rates of any state.⁴ The case for addressing childhood obesity starting in early childhood is clear.

What is so special about local food?

Fresh, whole, and knowable.

It's better food. Food grown for local consumption is much more likely to be delivered whole, fresh, minimally processed, and accompanied by information on how it was produced—allowing much greater confidence in its quality. Few farmers markets have a high-fructose-corn-syrup vendor, few CSA baskets include pop tarts, and few direct marketing farmers can keep from explaining why they are proud of their products.

It's better for the economy and environment. Local food also helps the whole community with more viable agriculture, jobs for local farmers, ranchers, processors, and distributors, and more money kept in the local economy. Tapping into the local food movement can bring much needed community support to Farm to School and Preschool. La Plata County schools invested almost \$60,000 on local/regional foods for their kids this past school year—fewer food miles, more sustainable production, less environmental impact.

How do we get kids to know and eat healthy foods?

Gardens are key.

Growing is growing. One of the most exciting parts of the Farm to School movement—including locally—has been the rise of school gardens, especially when linked to other “edible education” activities such as indoor seed starting, cooking, and tasting activities. Gardens and associated activities are growing in preschool settings as well. Much of the education in these settings is experiential, so the potential for hands-on growing and working with real whole local foods is enormous. Time outside in gardens can help young children establish a healthy relationship not only with food, but with the biological environment around them. With many preschools operating through the summer, there is less disconnect between gardens and the school year as well.

What is “Good Food?”

Good for the kids, for their community, and for their future.

Good Food = healthy, local, green, fair, and affordable. Nutrition is key, but so is accessibility and affordability so that preschools can provide this high quality food for children of all income levels, and still pay the farmer a fair price to stay in business. Food produced locally and sustainably—with care for water, air, wildlife, farm workers, farm animals, and climate—is essential for the health of the world our children live in now and will inherit. Studies have begun to show what

we have known all along: sustainable and organic production methods and healthy soils tend to produce more nutritious food and less risk of chemical contamination.

How common is Farm to Preschool now?

Hundreds of programs across the U.S. and it's already happening here!

The Nation. Over 40,000 K-12 schools report Farm to School activities across the country, while hundreds of preschools are involved in Farm to Preschool activities. Many more preschool providers may be using local foods, running school gardens, or doing edible education without calling it "Farm to Preschool." With all these innovators, the chances are that someone has found a solution to a problem faced here or has great ideas as to how to get started. The National Farm to Preschool website⁷, as well as the Farm to School website⁸, has a wealth of inspiring program examples, resources, and keys to success.

SW Colorado. K-12 schools across our region have been using local foods and school gardens for years, but in La Plata County, the concerted movement started in about 2005. The time was right and the movement has become well established in several parts of the region since that time. Similarly, efforts at the preschool level have been starting, but only recently has it gained notice as a movement. Healthy Community Food Systems (HCFS) staff was involved in a scan of preschools and home-based childcare providers across southern and western Colorado in 2013 under a state contract to assess access to healthier and local foods. A number of excellent but isolated cases of local food use and gardening were found.

What is the HCFS Farm to Preschool Project finding?

High interest, notable innovations, & many opportunities.

The HCFS Farm to Preschool Project. HCFS started its Farm to Preschool project in 2014 by meeting with several of the 30 childcare centers and 20 home-based childcare providers (serving over 1,100 children) in La Plata County. We began by explaining the concept, listening to what aspects are already happening, and exploring how best to move forward. We have started mainly in La Plata County with in-depth discussions and technical assistance, but have also received funding to spread the concept, lessons learned so far, and available resources to preschools and local food groups throughout Southwest Colorado. Many of the resources compiled and developed so far can be found on our website: www.hcfs.org. We welcome suggestions, leads, and assistance in this project.

A good start locally. So far, we have found several preschool providers using local food from produce to meat and cheese, and 20 in La Plata County alone have access to a garden for the kids to learn first-hand about food. These are truly Farm to Preschool activities, even if not called that until now, and a great start on a local movement. One bridge between Farm to School at the K-12 and the preschool level is that some



NOTABLE INNOVATIONS

*Found to-date
in La Plata County*

- Serving local veggies, cheese, & meat.
- Joining a CSA to get a weekly variety of local produce.
- Growing vegetables in a portable raised bed.
- Educating and involving parents to make sure healthy eating extends to home as well.
- Cooking and serving SW Colorado pinto beans.
- Making local food & gardening a program priority.



preschools and Head Start programs are based at K-12 schools with existing Farm to School programs, so these younger children are already getting local foods and often have gardens available.

What's the bigger picture?

A healthy, fair, and sustainable food system.

The Farm to Preschool movement can help us build the healthy local food system that it ultimately depends upon.



It takes a healthy local food system. As HCFS began the preschool project, we recognized that a robust program of locally produced food in meals and snacks and garden-based food education requires a strong local food system. In fact, since the public tends to understand the Farm to School concept better than that of the “food system,” developing Farm to School and Preschool is an effective way of building the very food system that its full implementation ultimately depends upon. It entails more local production and processing, vibrant local markets, fair prices to producers, sustainability of production, wise food choices, and access to these healthy local foods for all community members—in the school setting and throughout the community. Thus, establishing a strong Farm to School and Preschool program has the wider benefit of helping build the community’s food system as a whole.

Deeper issues. We also realized that some of the same underlying impediments we encountered at the K-12 level must be addressed so that Farm to School at all levels could realize its full potential. The Farm to Preschool promise cannot be fulfilled without increased local production. Local farmers and ranchers can’t provide local products if the prices aren’t sufficient for them to make a living, yet those prices must be affordable to buyers of all sorts. Buyers—preschools, K-12, and others—must have both the ability and the willingness to pay fair prices. Livable wages and adequate school and preschool funding are needed. Even more basic, people must demonstrate their care for others—children, all socioeconomic groups, and future generations. Luckily, the best care for our youngest children is such a clear, fundamental, urgent, and forward-looking need that attention to their basic food system needs and underlying issues can’t be easily avoided.

HCFS has launched a project in Southwest Colorado to help communities look at this bigger picture—the concept is explained in [Setting a Green Table](#).



What could Farm to Preschool look like in Southwest Colorado?

A community-wide effort to improve the well-being and future of our children.

Vibrant, widespread, and integrated into the whole community. A strong, well-connected Farm to Preschool movement in this part of Colorado would reach all corners of the region, serve all socioeconomic groups, and be sustained by peer support, community partners, governments, and parents. Local food, gardens, and edible education activities would be integrated into the whole school, with broad involvement of staff. Ultimately, the whole community would be involved in this effort. As much of the work of K-12 Farm to School has been institutionalized into the schools, our expectation and goal is to

similarly make Farm to Preschool a normal expectation of parents, preschool providers, and the institutions that serve them.

Small steps to start, but no time to waste. Farm to Preschool, as in K-12 settings, starts with small but meaningful steps, and is always well publicized, part of a strategic plan aimed at maximum impact over time, and implemented without unnecessary delay.

Getting Involved and Learning More

There are roles for everyone in the community to help in this effort. You should be able to see yourself in one or more of the roles in the two attached scenarios, or “challenges.” Contact your local preschool or us at HCFS to get started or learn how to do more.

To learn more, go to <http://healthycommunityfoodsystems.org> for:

- Background on Farm to Preschool across the country.
- Project materials from the local HCFS Farm to Preschool project.
- Sign up for the Farm to Preschool eNewsletter.
- Much more on many local food system topics.

Please let us know about your efforts, how we can help you, or if you have any suggestions: jadyer@frontier.net

*What if we cared enough for our children
to do this right and do it now?*

REFERENCES

- 1 <https://www.health.ny.gov/prevention/nutrition/cacfp/policymemo/no132c.htm>
- 2 <http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/the-benefits-of-farm-to-school>
- 3 <http://livewellcolorado.org/livewells-commitment/about-livewell/why-obesity>
- 4 <http://livewellcolorado.org/childhoodobesity/>
- 5 <http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/the-benefits-of-farm-to-school>
- 6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Strategies to Prevent Obesity and Other Chronic Diseases: The CDC Guide to Strategies to Increase the Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2011, p. 44.
- 7 <http://www.farmtopreschool.org>
- 8 <http://www.farmtoschool.org/>



LET'S GET SERIOUS ABOUT FARM TO PRESCHOOL

CHALLENGE #1

What if we decided, as a community, to provide 20% (to start) of our preschoolers' snacks and meals locally?

- We know that our youngest children need the healthiest food possible.
- We know that food from local farms and ranches can be some of the healthiest food.
- We know that this can also support our local producers, community, and environment.

It's probably around 2% or less now—similar to local food use in most communities as a whole, ours included. This would be a ten-fold increase requiring some serious, but very worthwhile effort on the part of several sectors of our community:



Do you see yourself in any of these roles?

- Producers willing and able to grow the food.
- Preschool buyers willing and able to buy and serve it.
- Kids willing to eat it.
- Parents willing to pay for high quality food, and governments willing to assist those who cannot pay.
- Voters and taxpayers willing to support policies that support beginning farmers and ranchers, local direct marketing, distribution, livable wages, and preschools.

A Modest Proposal: What if we actually started looking at what it would take to provide food in these quantities here in this area? This 20% could represent an all local meal once a week or a higher percentage of some of the more feasible products: local produce, meats, dry beans. What about a product grown and marketed here now, with superb resource-efficient storability through the year, and excellent nutritional qualities?

TAKE CARROTS FOR EXAMPLE.

Is it possible to provide enough carrots for a serving a week for all the preschoolers in La Plata County for 50 weeks per year? How many farmers, how much land? The estimate below begins to show that this is well within the realm of possibility—if we really tried.

A “back-of-the-envelope” rough estimation of how much land would it take for one 3 oz serving of carrots per week for all La Plata County preschoolers year-round:

$$0.19\# \text{ carrots/serving} \times 1000 \text{ preschoolers} \times 1 \text{ serving/week} \times 50 \text{ weeks/yr} = 9,500\# \text{ of carrots}$$
$$9,500\# \text{ carrots} \div \text{an average } 16,000\# \text{ carrots/acre} = \mathbf{0.6 \text{ acres needed}}$$

Way less than an acre!

Two servings a week, 1.2 acres. Five servings a week, 3 acres.

SURELY we could do this!



LET'S GET SERIOUS ABOUT FARM TO PRESCHOOL

CHALLENGE #2

What if we decided, as a community, to make sure every preschool child has a chance to learn about growing food in a garden?

- We know that one of the best ways to get a child to try a new food is to help grow it.
- We know that preschool children learn best experientially.
- We know that indoor growing is a valuable learning option, but that outdoor growing provides the best understanding of how most of our food is grown, and how sustainable food production depends on real-world biological processes.
- We know that not every preschool may be set up for a garden at present, but often there are, or there could be, school or community gardens nearby for them to visit. (Perhaps preschools should be planned, over time, with gardens in mind.)
- We know that there must be a depth of commitment that extends beyond one or two teachers or volunteers to keep the garden going.
- We know that kids must see that people care about their gardens.

A Modest Proposal: What if partners throughout the community were involved in establishing and keeping preschool (and K-12) gardens running? The depth of involvement would depend on the size of the preschool, but they could use help from:

Do you see yourself in any of these roles?

- Parents and grandparents.
- Farmers and ranchers, especially those selling to schools.
- College and High School students—interns, service learning, or volunteers.
- Summer youth groups.
- Young people willing to help as a summer job & willing employers.
- Garden clubs, Master Gardeners, local food groups.
- Local experts in horticulture, agronomy, biology, soil science, etc.
- Neighboring school, backyard, and community gardeners.
- Funders, financial donors, garden materials donors.
- Voters and taxpayers supporting governments, in turn supporting community gardens.



NO CHILD WITHOUT A GARDEN!