

Executive Summary: Wisconsin Farm to Early Care and Education Provider Survey



What Is Wisconsin Farm to Early Care and Education?

Wisconsin Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) works to build and sustain healthy, empowered communities through meaningful connections and relationships across and within ECE, the food system, and supporting partners. Farm to Early Care and Education offers increased access to local foods, gardening, hands-on learning, and family engagement opportunities to children, families and providers in the early care setting. These activities support the health and educational experience of children aged 0-5 in all types of ECE settings including preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start/Early Head Start, and 4K programs in K-12 school districts. Farm to ECE promotes quality education through four main types of activities, including:

- Cultivating and tending to gardens,
- Buying, preparing, and serving local foods in meals and snacks,
- Facilitating hands-on learning and play in nutrition, food, and agriculture, and
- Engaging families in health and wellness.

The Wisconsin Farm to Early Care and Education Work Group aims to ensure ECE providers and families with young children have access to local foods and to resources to help every child develop lifelong healthy eating habits. The Work Group also aims to ensure that Wisconsin producers have a viable market for their product through collaboration with early childhood and farm to school practitioners. Learn more about Wisconsin Farm to ECE at <http://dpi.wi.gov/community-nutrition/cacfp/farm-2-ece>.

Introduction to the Wisconsin Farm to Early Care and Education Provider Survey

In October 2017, the first Wisconsin Farm to Early Care and Education Provider Survey was conducted in the state. Developed by Community GroundWorks and supported by the Wisconsin Farm to ECE Work Group, the goals of this survey were to:

- Establish baseline data for farm to ECE participation in the state
- Learn about existing farm to ECE activities taking place at sites across the state
- Assess challenges and successes in starting and implementing farm to ECE activities
- Determine trainings, resources, and networking tools to help providers start or grow farm to ECE activities, with a goal of making farm to ECE accessible to all children in Wisconsin

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Survey Reach & Participation

Both the survey participation rate and results indicate a strong foundation of farm to early care activities in the state of Wisconsin. The survey collected responses from 324 Wisconsin early care providers, a much higher response rate than anticipated. Of the responses, 240 providers (74%) indicated participation in farm to ECE activities, and 73 reported (23%) interest in farm to ECE. In general, survey respondents reported multiple benefits to farm to ECE and showed enthusiasm for farm to ECE regardless of their current participation in activities.

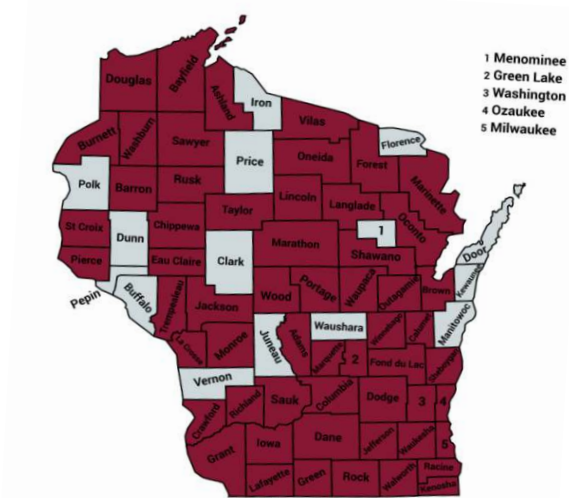
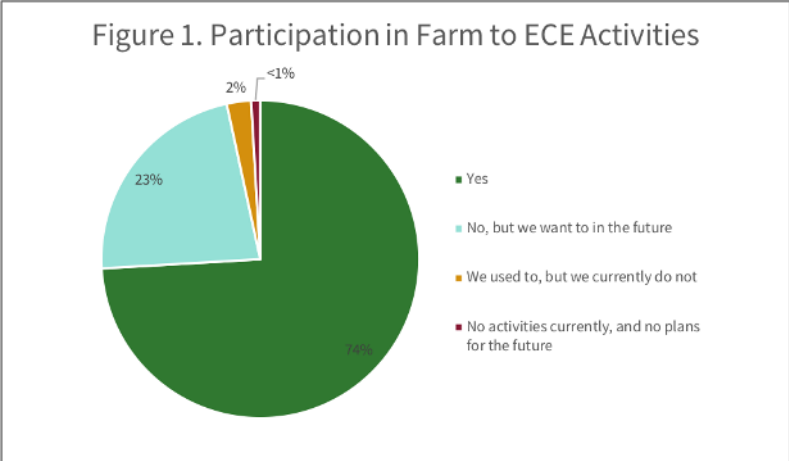
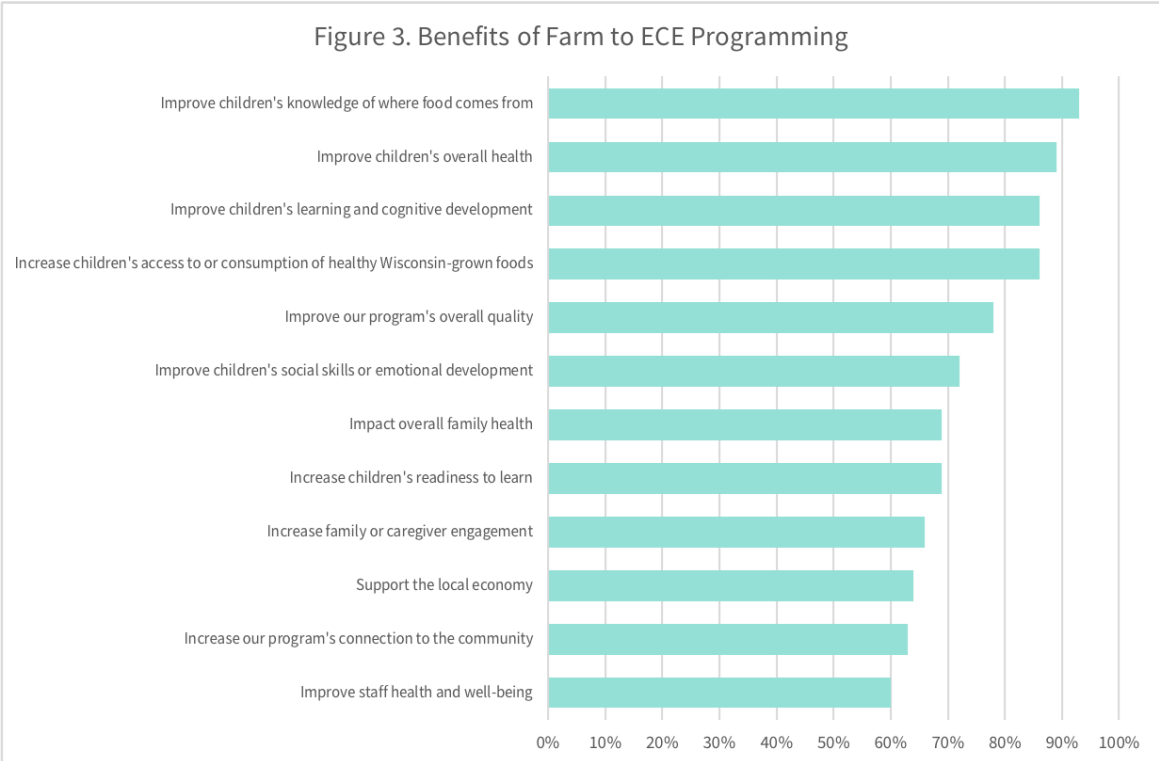


Figure 2. Map of Participation by County

Before this survey there was limited existing reporting of farm to ECE participation in Wisconsin, and a function of this survey was to establish a baseline. The closest existing data is from *Results from the 2015 National Survey of Early Care and Education Providers* (NFSN, 2016) indicating at least 113 Wisconsin survey responses, and a survey-wide 54.4% of respondents engaged in farm to ECE activities.

Another marker of enthusiasm is the 23% of respondents who report they currently do not currently engage in farm to ECE, but would like to in the future. This suggests there are still audiences who are unfamiliar with farm to ECE practices who can benefit from entry-level training and resources. Further, of these 73 providers, open-ended survey responses suggest some *currently* implement farm to ECE activities, but do not recognize or label them as such, or they do not see themselves as participating in a Wisconsin Farm to ECE “program”. This information will help the Wisconsin Farm to ECE Work Group to modify messaging to better reflect the inclusivity of farm to ECE with the goal of helping providers better access resources, professional development offerings, and opportunities for peer learning that could support their efforts.

All survey participants were asked about the perceived benefits of farm to ECE. The highest ranked responses refer to benefits experienced by children. Additional benefits include overall site quality improvement, benefits to families, communities, and center staff.



Notes by Activity Area

The 240 survey respondents who reported engaging in farm to ECE were asked additional questions about their activities, needed resources, and challenges in each of the four farm to ECE activity areas: gardens; finding, buying and using local foods; curriculum and experiential education, and family and caregiver engagement. A summary of each activity area is below. A full report of activities, challenges, and helpful resources can be found in the full survey summary document.

Gardens: The survey results demonstrate that farm to ECE providers are very familiar with the concept of gardening or growing food with children, engage in a wide variety of activities in this area, and perceive many benefits in these activities. A top barrier limiting participation in gardens is “limited outdoor space”. This suggests new resources can work to broaden the definitions of ‘gardens’ to include smaller outdoor areas, indoor growing activities or field trips to off-site gardens that are beneficial for children. Many of the challenges named by ECE providers are addressed in the Wisconsin Farm to ECE resources developed by Community GroundWorks and available online.

“We have been maintaining several gardens at our preschool over the years. They include a vegetable, flower, pizza, herb, sensory rock-wall and fairy gardens. The children and staff enjoy them all and we are always interested in new ideas to share with our children out in nature.” -Private Preschool

Finding, Buying, & Using Local Foods: Most providers indicate they already incorporate local foods, especially in meals and snacks (79%). The highest ranked challenge associated with finding, buying, and using local foods is the perceived higher cost of local foods. This provides an excellent opportunity to provide education about the competitive prices of local foods, especially when purchased in season.

Currently, 83% of respondents report the onsite preparation of meals and snacks using “scratch or fresh cooking”, “heat-and-serve” foods, or a combination of both. This suggests the strongest opportunity for increasing the use of local foods in the ECE environment is to focus on promotion, support, and trainings to providers directly to these providers, staff, and cooks who have direct control over menu planning, food purchasing, and meal preparation.

It appears, especially for providers preparing meals onsite, the biggest challenge is the capacity to actually purchase local foods. The burden is almost palpable as providers, in many cases, drive personal vehicles to purchase food, dairy items, and supplies at grocery stores, warehouse stores, or other locations. Many report this process already

consumes significant time, and are wary or unable, to make extra stops to purchase additional local items. This suggests opportunities to 1) educate providers about how to identify healthy Wisconsin-grown items at the places they currently shop, 2) support providers in incorporating nearby local food options like farm stands or farmers' markets, and/or 3) to continue to develop successful models that bring local foods to the ECE site like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares, farmer deliveries, through existing distributors, or similar.

"We have always served organic vegetables from our membership in an area CSA. We also plant a garden and use all home grown vegetables from area farmers, including beef and pork. This is not new to us, it has been our practice for 15+ years."
-Licensed Group Child Care Center

It is important to note the significant differences between farm to ECE and

farm to school, and that the former is not just a 'scaled down' version of the latter. Children ages 0-5 have very different needs than those in the K-12 setting, and the infrastructure of administration and food preparation facilities in each setting differ as well. This is especially apparent in the purchase and food preparation practices and facilities in the ECE setting. Unlike K-12 schools, which purchase food through broadline distributors, produce distributors, dairy vendors, and farm deliveries, ECE providers report purchasing food from grocery stores or co-ops (76%) and large retail warehouse stores (45%), which requires providers conduct weekly trips (if not more frequent) to a store to purchase items. Further, ECE sites purchase smaller volumes of food, may have limited (or no) storage capacity for bulk storage, and/or prepare food in a manner more similar to a home kitchen than a commercial kitchen familiar to K-12 schools.

Open ended survey responses suggest additional resources and education are needed to clarify the meaning of "locally grown food items" and to support identification of local items at a variety of different retail and wholesale venues in the state. Clarification may be needed between '*purchasing items grown or made in Wisconsin*' and '*buying items at a nearby store*' and highlighting the economic impacts to Wisconsin's agricultural community associated with the former.

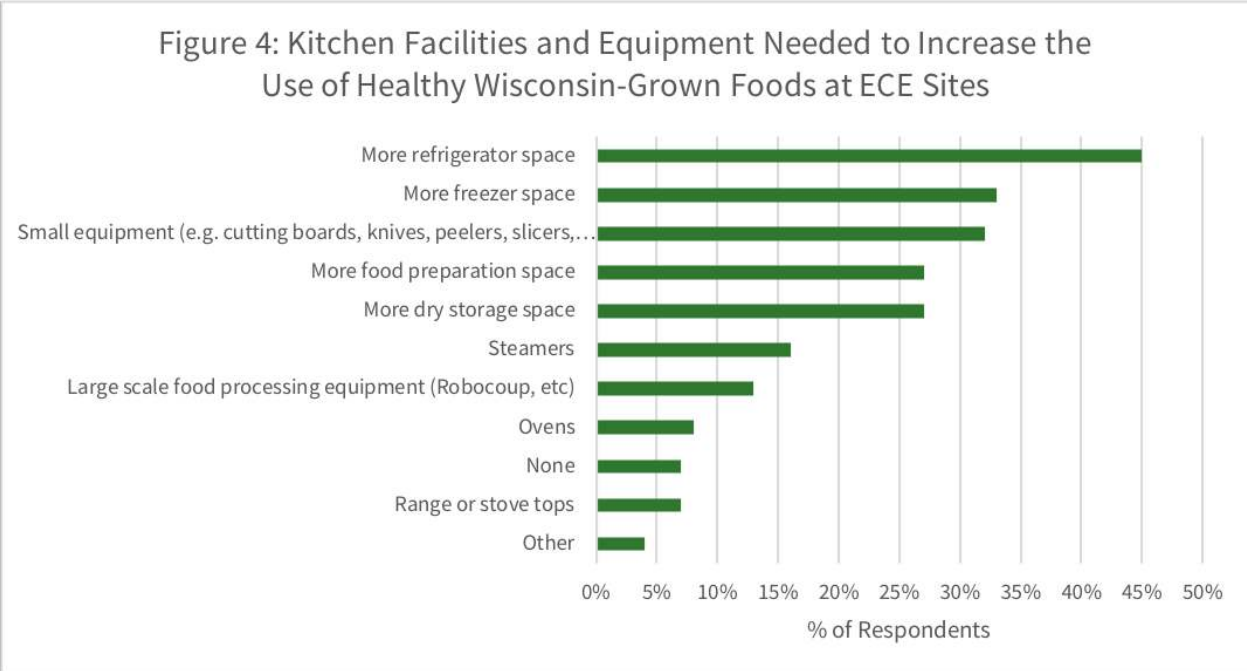
A minority of sites (10%) report food preparation taking place 'offsite', limiting direct control over foods used in meals and snacks. Most often these are meals prepared and provided by the larger institution in which the ECE sites sits (e.g. hospital or university), or meals vended by a caterer or third-party. This may provide an opportunity for an ECE program to serve as catalyst for greater farm to institution efforts on a campus, or to query vendors about their inclusion of local foods.

The survey only asked providers about “onsite” and “offsite” food preparation, and did not include an option for food provided by parents or sites that serve no food. At least 8% of sites rely on meals or snacks provided by families, furthering the importance of family and caregiver engagement around farm to ECE and nutritious meal and snack opportunities. Future surveys will include foods provided by families.

As “America’s Dairyland,” the Wisconsin Farm to ECE Work Group has a specific interest in connecting ECE sites with Wisconsin-raised fluid milk, cheese, yogurt, and other dairy products. Understanding how ECE providers procure dairy products (grocery store 76%, large retail warehouse store 32%, distributor 28%, convenience store 23%) will help advance strategies for promoting Wisconsin-raised dairy products.

“Children can help in almost every aspect of ECE activities and love to participate and learn about new foods if you start doing these activities from infancy.” - Licensed Family Child Care

Lastly, understanding that a lack of kitchen and storage space is a barrier to using local foods, and knowing which facilities or equipment would be most helpful to ECE providers, can help develop guidance for including farm to ECE in YoungStar Quality Improvement Plans and using the YoungStar Micro Grant program for kitchen equipment to support local foods and/or gardens.



Curriculum & Experiential Education: ECE providers currently include a wide variety of farm to ECE activities in their curriculum and experiential education programming:

from cooking activities, to chef visits, to the Great Lakes Great Apple Crunch. The predominate barrier to these activities is finding appropriate curriculum or lesson ideas to implement. This demonstrates the opportunity for Wisconsin Farm to ECE Work Group partners to highlight the existing farm to ECE curricula and resources specific to the early care setting to save providers time in their planning. As providers appear to lean heavily on both informal resources (Pinterest, blogs) and formal resources (YoungStar trainings), any opportunity to streamline access to appropriate curriculum materials, and their connections to learning standards, is beneficial.

Family & Caregiver Engagement: This activity area may be the most effective for extending the nutritional and educational benefits of farm to ECE beyond the childcare setting. However, family and caregiver engagement appears to be the least implemented strategy, with 22% of farm to ECE practitioners indicating they conduct no family engagement activities. This may simply be because sites do not think of

extending farm to ECE activities to families, or they lack ideas and resources for family engagement. By far, the most highly requested resource to support this activity area is “a list of activities and events appropriate for families and caretakers “(85%).

“We have special food days using specifically grown foods, and a ‘Friendship Feast’ where everyone brings and shares.” -Licensed Family Child Care

Challenges & Barriers

Of the 240 survey respondents engaged in farm to ECE activities, there are common themes about the barriers and challenges faced in starting or increasing activities across the four farm to ECE activity areas. Primarily, lack of staff time, capacity, or interest ranks highly among all four activity types. Barriers relating to funding, costs, supplies, or space also rank within the top five barriers for each activity type. This class of challenges— funding, time, and space—are likely common to the ECE environment in general, and may not be specific to farm to ECE activities.

However, “lack of support from site decision-makers or program administrators” is not a significant barrier to farm to ECE implementation, with less than 5% of respondents identifying this as a challenge among different activity areas. Similarly, lack of knowledge about potential garden, local food, or education activities is a very low ranking barrier. A much larger number of respondents indicate they did not know of, or consider, including parents and caregivers in farm to ECE activities, indicating this may be an easy area for training and outreach.

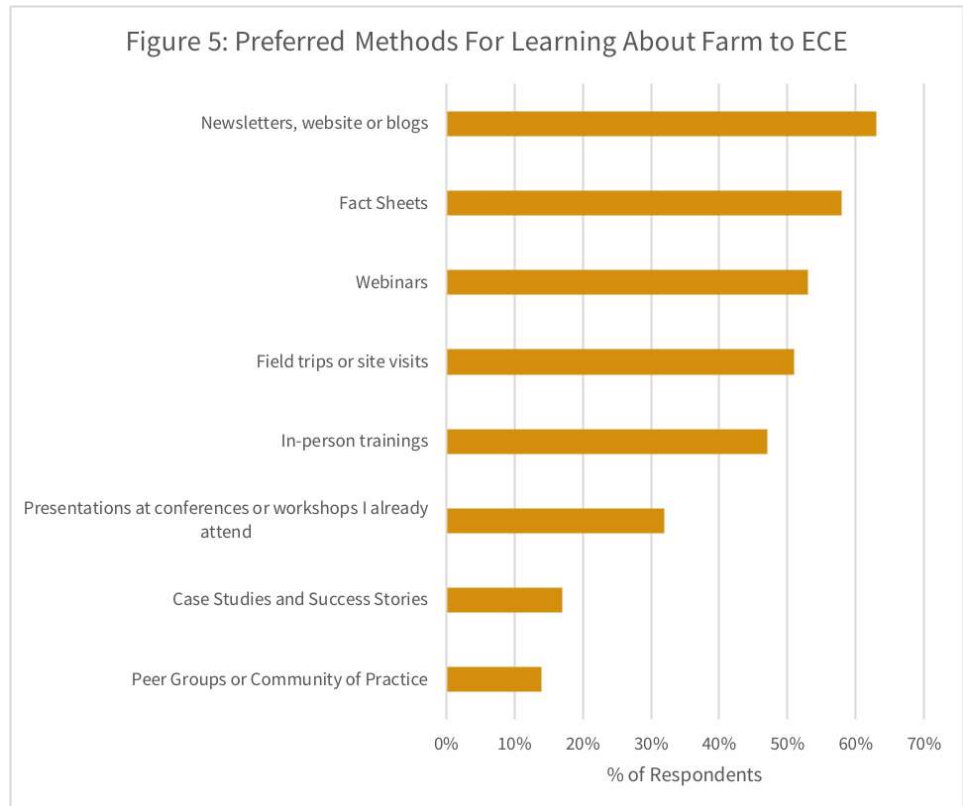
Training & Resource Dissemination

Survey respondents, regardless of current participation in farm to ECE, were queried about their preferred ways to learn about farm to ECE in Wisconsin. The top two responses, online materials and fact sheets, were not surprising and further emphasize the need to provide flexible training opportunities and easy-access resources for busy

providers. Responses support the use of the Wisconsin Farm to School and Farm to ECE Newsletter and development of simple fact sheets available both online and in print. Webinars ranked highly as a preferred tool for learning about farm to ECE, likely for their ability to be archived and viewed at any time, while also providing professional development credits.

The Wisconsin Farm

to School Network currently offers quarterly webinars for farm to school and farm to ECE, but this suggests targeted webinars for an ECE audience may be beneficial. Most surprisingly, training field trips and site visits for ECE provider ranked highly as a preferred educational tool. Currently these opportunities do not exist in Wisconsin, but because of the peer-to-peer nature and ability to experience farm to ECE first hand, this may be an activity to pilot.



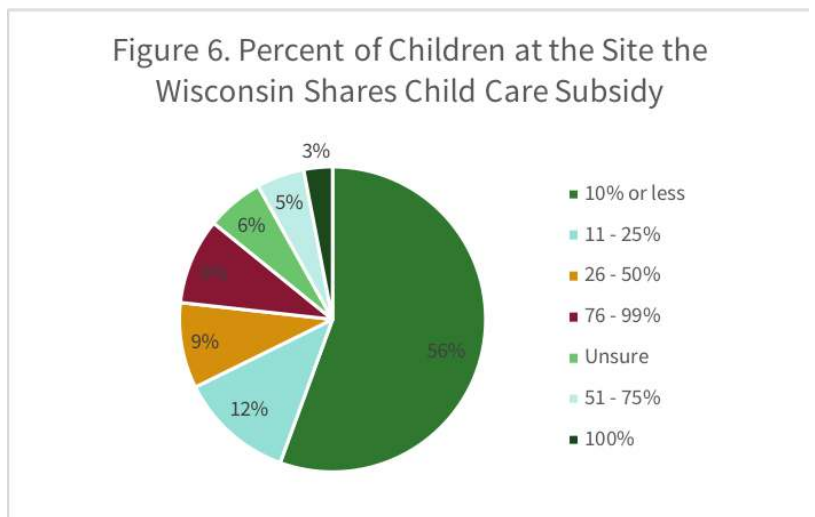
Racial and Social Equity & Access

Wisconsin Farm to ECE aims to promote racial and social equity and ensure all Wisconsin's children have access to high quality education and nutritious foods. One goal of the survey was to assess access to farm to ECE activities, and the associated benefits, by all children in Wisconsin.

YoungStar is Wisconsin’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), and was developed with the goal to improve the quality of child care available for children in the state. Connected to this is the Wisconsin Shares Child Care Subsidy Program (Wisconsin Shares) which supports the cost of child care for low-income families while they are working or preparing to enter the workforce. Wisconsin Shares is implemented locally by 71 Wisconsin counties and 9 tribes. Child care sites must participate in the YoungStar program to be eligible to accept Wisconsin Shares subsidy payments for child care. Not only does YoungStar develop and administer a standard for measuring quality childcare, it also creates incentives for providers to improve the quality of services with an emphasis on care for low-income children by tying higher-quality care to a higher Wisconsin Shares subsidy rate. YoungStar also offers professional development, microgrants, and technical assistance to support site improvement, which can be connected to farm to ECE. According to annual reports from the Wisconsin Division of Early Care and Education, 76% of the state’s regulated child care programs participate in YoungStar. Comparatively, 81% of the Survey respondents, and 81% of sites engaged in farm to ECE activities, participate in YoungStar, both rates above the state average.

Throughout 2017, Wisconsin Shares supported care for 38,862 families and an average of 39,336 children per month. In 2017, 75% of child care sites participating in

YoungStar provided care for a child through Wisconsin Shares. It is difficult to compare this data to survey results, which summarize what percentage of children at a site access care through Wisconsin Shares. Future surveys will align data collection with metrics already reported at the state level. Currently, just over half of survey respondents (55%) report providing care to 10% or fewer children served by Wisconsin Shares. Future Wisconsin Farm to ECE Surveys will better align survey questions to metrics collected at the state level.



Sources Referenced:

Results from the 2015 National Survey of Early Care and Education Providers: Local Procurement, Gardening, and Food and Farm Education. Stephens, L, Oberholtzer, L. National Farm to School Network. 2016.

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