

Farm to Head Start in Oregon

Summary

In 2005, Ecotrust's Farm to School program began promoting farm to school programs at the K-12 level to positively influence the school food environment, increase children's access to and consumption of healthy local foods, and stimulate new markets for regional food producers and processors. As this work gained in popularity and started to become institutionalized at local, state, and regional levels, Ecotrust sought to use this momentum to engage in similar work with childcare facilities.

This made sense from a practical programmatic perspective in terms of preparing younger students for the programs they would encounter at the K-12 level. Further, ages 0-5 are a critical time to establish healthy eating habits:

- Attitudes towards foods that are shaped at this time in life are strong determinants of later eating behaviors;
- Preschoolers suffer from high rates of obesity and low consumption of fruits and vegetables;
- Many preschoolers consume the majority of their daily nutrients in childcare; and
- More so than any other age group, they rely on parents and caregivers to create their food and activity environments.

Thus, in 2008–09, in partnership with the Oregon Child Development Coalition (OCDC), Ecotrust piloted one of the first farm to preschool programs in the country. Established in 1971, OCDC is one of the largest early childhood care and education networks in Oregon, administering Head Start and Early Head Start, and is also a state grantee of the federal Migrant Seasonal Head Start program. Each year OCDC serves over 3,000 children and families in need throughout 12 Oregon counties.



Americorps member, teachers, and kids at OCDC's Silverton learning and nutritional garden.

This project aimed to:

- Build relationships between Head Start and local food producers;
- Explore opportunities for local product development to meet Head Start meal program needs;
- Increase Head Start procurement of locally grown and processed foods;
- Promote food and garden-based education to reinforce locally grown foods served as part of the USDA meal program;
- Engage the community in implementing garden-enhanced educational programs. Increase children and caregivers' exposure to and modeling of healthy lifestyle behaviors including fruit and vegetable consumption; and
- Increase children and caregivers' access to locally produced fruits and vegetables.

Outcomes from the project include:

- Farm to preschool programs (including local foods procurement, garden-based education and parental involvement) at three OCDC Head Start sites, with ongoing expansion of the efforts to other sites.
- A replicable model that has been shared locally and nationally (e.g., at the 2009 Farm to Cafeteria Conference in Portland, Oregon).
- Stimulation of new markets for regional food producers and processors in Oregon.



Field trip with OCDC childcare partners to Truitt Brothers processing plant in Salem, Oregon.

Planning

Ecotrust partnered with Head Start for the pilot project for several reasons, including:

- Serves a highly vulnerable student population (i.e., families have income below the poverty line or on public assistance, and Migrant Seasonal Head Start serves a mobile and largely minority population).
- Encourages parental involvement and engages parents both in their children's learning and in program administration – a critical component in helping to sustain farm to school programming in the long-term.
- Utilizes experiential education models, which are a great fit with typical farm to school activities such as garden-based education, sensory exploration, and cooking.
- A visible leader amongst childcare facilities, and thus an excellent model for other models of childcare delivery.

Initially there was interest in the project from several potential partners, but we had difficulty getting the project underway. To drum up interest and secure a commitment from a partner administering Head Start in Oregon we created a Request for Proposals (RFP) with a small amount of funding attached. The (RFP) outlined the project's objectives and activities, as well as partner roles.

Implementation

Ecotrust worked with OCDC to establish pilot farm to school programs at three sites in Cornelius (Washington County), Odell (Hood River County), and Silverton (Marion County).

Activities included:

- Facilitating farm to school program design via meetings with the Nutrition Services Director (responsible for food procurement) and Lead Education Specialist (responsible for curriculum development) and by inviting OCDC staff participation in farm to school conferences and events.
- Helping childcare facilities to make connections with local food suppliers to begin purchasing more local products by:
 - Evaluating current meals and menu planning tools and facilitating conversations about local procurement with OCDC's current wholesaler;
 - Facilitating field trips to regionally appropriate farms and food processors.
- Promoting food- and garden-based education by identifying existing resources and curricular activities to support the inclusion of garden-based education into Head Start program areas. Ecotrust identified existing food and garden-based education resources for preschoolers for OCDC's review. OCDC selected the curriculum *Early Sprouts: Gardening and Nutrition Experiences for the Young Child* (www.earllysprouts.org) as the best fit for their educational requirements. It addresses young children's inherent fear of new foods through multiple exposures to target fruits and vegetables in activities such as sensory exploration, tasting sessions, cooking activities, and family recipe kits.

Spurred on by success implementing simple garden-based activities in the classroom, when the pilot project culminated, OCDC forged ahead, constructing raised beds at each pilot site to support garden-based education and increase the ability of its students, teachers, and parents to make the connection between the food they eat and the land it comes from. OCDC has continued to move forward with its work, installing more gardens and working to establish a full-fledged farm to school program. You can read about their progress on their blog: ocdcgardens.blogspot.com.

Ecotrust has shared this story via workshops at events such as the 4th National Farm to Cafeteria Conference and the Oregon Head Start Association's Annual Meeting and via documents and presentations posted to our website: <http://www.ecotrust.org/farmtoschool/>. Ecotrust is currently working to grow farm to school programs at childcare centers in the region via the online tool FoodHub (www.food-hub.org). Ecotrust also facilitates networking by professionals who are involved in or wish to become involved with this work, continues to consult and advise with child care providers about how to incorporate farm to school concepts into their programs, and recently joined with partners to develop a Farm to Preschool Subcommittee for the National Farm to School Network.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned about farm to childcare include:

- Differs significantly from farm to school in the K-12 setting given that it must address many diverse models of childcare delivery.
- Presents a huge opportunity. There is significant and growing interest from communities and parents, and logistically childcare centers may be easier to work with than K-12 schools (e.g., higher budgets, fewer regulations, more parental involvement, and more flexibility with programming).
- Project documentation and evaluation are critical, both in terms of collecting evidence on the impacts of programming as well as sharing models of success.

Lessons learned about successful program implementation include:

- If securing a commitment from potential partners is a challenge, the process may be eased via a formal RFP with some funding attached.
- Do not underestimate the impact of a small financial investment (in this case, a few thousand dollars) and some hands on facilitation with partners (e.g., sitting with food service staff and looking through menus, taking field trips to local farms).
- It is best to meet partners where they are and see what they need to move forward (i.e., be flexible with program design and activities).
- It is beneficial to explore where farm to school and school garden concepts will fit most naturally into pre-existing programs (e.g., OCDC used one curriculum that was a natural fit because it required instruction about nutrition twice per week).
- It is important to ensure that program design and materials are culturally relevant (e.g., OCDC created Spanish translations of many of the materials they used for garden-based education).

- There are many different ways for community partners to be engaged and many resources that may be tapped into to maximize program implementation (e.g., OCDC hired an AmeriCorps member to sustain their gardens after the pilot project ended).

About Ecotrust

Ecotrust is a regional conservation non-profit founded in 1991 that works on the Pacific Coast from Alaska to California. Ecotrust's mission is to inspire fresh thinking that creates economic opportunity, social equity and environmental well-being. Ecotrust is headquartered in Portland and is a unique organization; it integrates public and private purpose and for-profit and non-profit structures: <http://www.ecotrust.org/about/>.

Resources

- Ecotrust's Farm to School webpage: <http://www.ecotrust.org/farmtoschool/> (scroll down to *Farm to Childcare* to find two presentations for download – Farm to Preschool 101, Farm to Preschool Curriculum, and a PDF with Farm to School Tips for Family Childcare Providers).
- National Farm to School Network: www.farmtoschool.org



For more information contact:

Stacey A. Sobell

Farm to School Program Manager, Ecotrust

Western Regional Lead Agency for the National Farm to School Network

ssobell@ecotrust.org | 503-467-0751 | Portland, Oregon