Growing Farm to Preschool in your state

A How-To Guide
A state-level approach to farm to preschool is key to bringing local food and garden education to child care centers nationally. At Ecotrust, we lead farm to school projects at a range of levels—national, regional, state, and local—that are upstream, innovative, and likely to have far-reaching and long-lasting impacts. In 2008, we launched one of the country’s first farm to preschool pilot programs, connecting young children to local food through meals, snacks, education, and activities.

In part as a result of that work, in 2011 Ecotrust partnered with several other organizations to launch a national farm to preschool initiative on behalf of the National Farm to School Network (NFSN).

Today, the farm to preschool movement is flourishing at grassroots and national levels. In evaluating approaches for how best to provide resources for these efforts, we noticed a gap in support at the state level that gained significance as we learned more about the field of early child care. Child care meal programs are regulated through state agencies; licensing requirements are determined at the state level; and child care providers frequently share resources through state-level affiliations.

We also knew that many states have working farm to school networks or coalitions and state-specific resources for those interested in purchasing local food or educating children about food and farms. Every state has a Farm to School State Lead for NFSN, and some states even have dedicated staff in state agencies that can support farm to school programs. Working at the state level, we wagered, would be an effective and efficient strategy for building support for farm to preschool.

To explore what state-level collaboration could accomplish, Ecotrust convened the Oregon Farm to Preschool Coalition in 2012. What transpired was an ideal partnership, leveraging our farm to school knowledge with the influence and enthusiasm of well-established statewide child care networks. Over the past two years, our group has tapped into existing expertise, nurtured farm to preschool leadership within these networks, and developed Oregon-specific farm to preschool resources. A vibrant farm to preschool movement has blossomed in our state.

Like Oregon, Georgia recently began developing a statewide initiative, hosting the first ever farm to preschool statewide summit and developing several instructional training videos.

We’d love to see these state-based initiatives proliferate. We’re sharing the building blocks we used to form our coalition with the hope that we can help build support for farm to preschool state by state.
CONSTRUCTING A STATE-LEVEL FARM TO PRESCHOOL COALITION

1 Get the right players on board.

The Oregon Farm to Preschool Coalition is made up of approximately 30 members from diverse sectors, including leaders from the field of early child care and long-standing farm to school partners.

Make a list of everyone you want to reach out to. We recommend including the following voices in any statewide farm to preschool effort:

- Organizations in the fields of agriculture, public health, early child care, and/or garden-based education
- Relevant state agencies, such as your state departments of education, agriculture, public health, and human services
- Community colleges and universities, especially those conducting relevant research or trainings
- Child Care Resource and Referral agency contacts (CCRR is a national organization organized in county and state chapters)
- Head Start and other on-the-ground child care programs

Think about asking these same partners for recommendations of whom to reach out to from other organizations or agencies.

2 Work together to define the group’s mission and roles.

In Oregon, we held our first meeting in person. We believe that having a face-to-face kick-off meeting is critical for building group cohesion.

Ask your group: Where do we want to be in five years? What do we want to accomplish? From your conversations, draft a mission statement. A perfectly crafted statement is not your goal. Instead, focus on making sure the group feels inspired and agrees on the core tenets.

We recommend identifying who you will need to influence, and which attitudes, knowledge, and operations will need to shift to accomplish your mission. This is key to determining which on-the-ground activities to pursue, measuring progress, and keeping coalition members on the same page.

Talk about the roles and responsibilities expected of members. The Oregon coalition has agreed that members will participate on a voluntary basis. Some serve in an advisory role, while others, especially those who regularly work with child care providers, are actively implementing coalition activities, such as farm to preschool trainings, resource development, and information sharing.

We’ve found that participation is often mutually beneficial: our activities help coalition members reach their own goals, and their work helps propel the farm to preschool movement forward.

3 Choose your activities.

We recommend having a brainstorming session broadly exploring potential activities that will help you reach your shared vision. Then, ask your coalition membership what the priorities of their organizations or agencies are and what work they are currently undertaking. Take note of areas of overlap and look for shared priorities among members.

Winnow your list of potential activities by creating a list of top priorities. In Oregon, the coalition prioritizes activities based on whether they serve children with the greatest need and have statewide benefit. The primary activities we selected in Oregon include: resource development and dissemination (including fliers that address how to procure local foods, how to start a preschool garden, and how to host a preschool farm field trip), and statewide trainings for child care staff.

Focus your energy on a few of the priority activities that you identify, and set aside others for future consideration.

4 Choose consistent modes of communication.

Since statewide coalitions will often involve members across a vast geography, it’s important to establish ways for the coalition to communicate at a distance. Think about establishing regular phone calls and creating systems for sharing periodic updates, publications, working drafts, photos, and other documents.

In Oregon, we host monthly conference calls. We choose a different focus each month so coalition members can carve out the time based on their interest. For example, one month’s call might focus on edible gardens and the next, on local food procurement. We share information and make occasional requests for response via an email listserv, and we share meeting notes and materials via the online sharing platform Dropbox.

5 Seek funding to sustain a primary convener.

Establish funding so that at minimum, the coalition’s primary convener is able to take responsibility for the basic tasks that will keep the coalition moving forward together.

Look for funding opportunities that reward intentional collaboration and strong partnerships. Also look for opportunities to leverage any existing statewide farm to school funding or efforts, in case farm to preschool can be gracefully included.

In Oregon, grant funding has made it possible for Ecotrust to convene the Farm to Preschool Coalition since 2012. As a result, responsibility falls primarily to Ecotrust to facilitate meetings, maintain group cohesion, and execute on projects. We’ve found that it’s critical to have at least one organization with funding to drive the ship, but the coalition as a whole stays together because individual members see value in their participation and can co-create opportunities for the larger group to advance their organizations’ missions.
Recommended Reading on Coalition Building

- Working Together: A Toolkit for Cooperative Efforts, Networks, and Coalitions
  The Institute for Conservation Leadership

- Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight Step Guide
  Prevention Institute

Oregon Farm to Preschool Resources

- Farm to Preschool in Oregon
  General overview of farm to preschool in Oregon

- Local Procurement Tips for Early Care
  How to purchase local foods

- Starting a Preschool Garden
  A menu of options for different ways to garden in early care

- Preschool Farm Field Trips
  How to coordinate a farm field trip

At the Portland, Oregon-based nonprofit Ecotrust, we work to build a resilient food system that offers fresh, healthy food to all residents, living wages and expanded opportunities for farmers, producers, and food workers, and methods of food production that renew our resources. Ecotrust is the Western Regional Lead of the National Farm to School Network and leads its national farm to preschool initiative and the Oregon Farm to Preschool Coalition. Learn more: ecotrust.org and farmtoschool.org.

Photos by Shawn Linehan, shawnlinehan.com