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# Farm to Early Care and Education in Vermont

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## Introduction

Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) is a program of the National Farm to School Network that aims to extend the core elements of Farm to School into ECE settings (e.g., preschools, childcare programs) with the goal of improving the health of children ages zero to five and enhancing their educational experience with food and nutrition. Farm to ECE involves food-based learning activities, school gardens, and the use of local foods in meals and snacks to accomplish this goal. Farm to ECE is still in its early stages of development nationwide, including Vermont. The purpose of this project was to gather baseline Farm to ECE data for the state of Vermont to assess the extent to which Farm to ECE is already being implemented statewide, and to identify areas for improvement and future Farm to ECE research.



## Methods

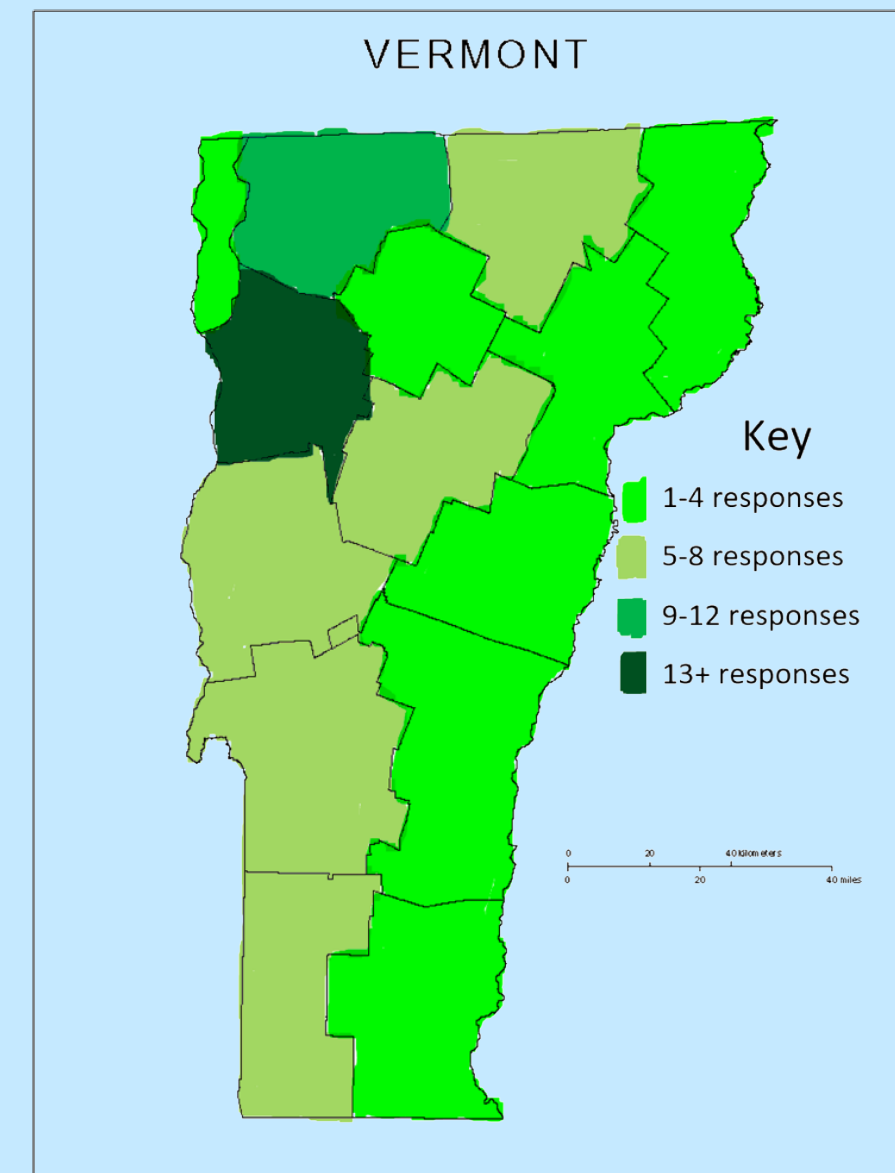
A 23-question survey was created based off of the 2015 National Survey of Early Care and Education Providers administered by the National Farm to School Network.

The survey was built with SurveyMonkey and distributed through the Vermont Child Development Division to over 600 recipients. Multiple choice and yes/no questions explored attitudes towards food system education, access to local foods, and barriers to Farm to ECE.

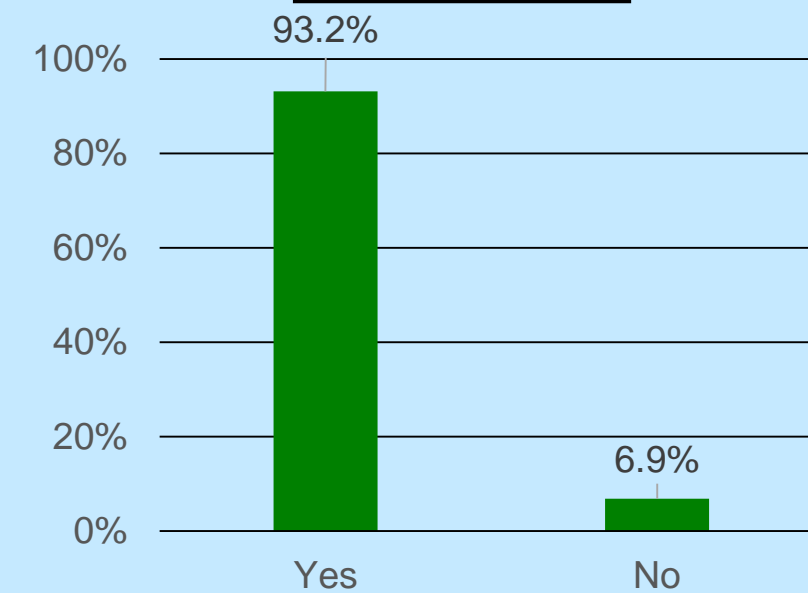
Questions on demographics assessed number of children in each program, level of government support, and location.

Results were evaluated by SurveyMonkey and analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods.

**Figure 1: Respondents by County**



**Figure 2: Does your program serve meals?**

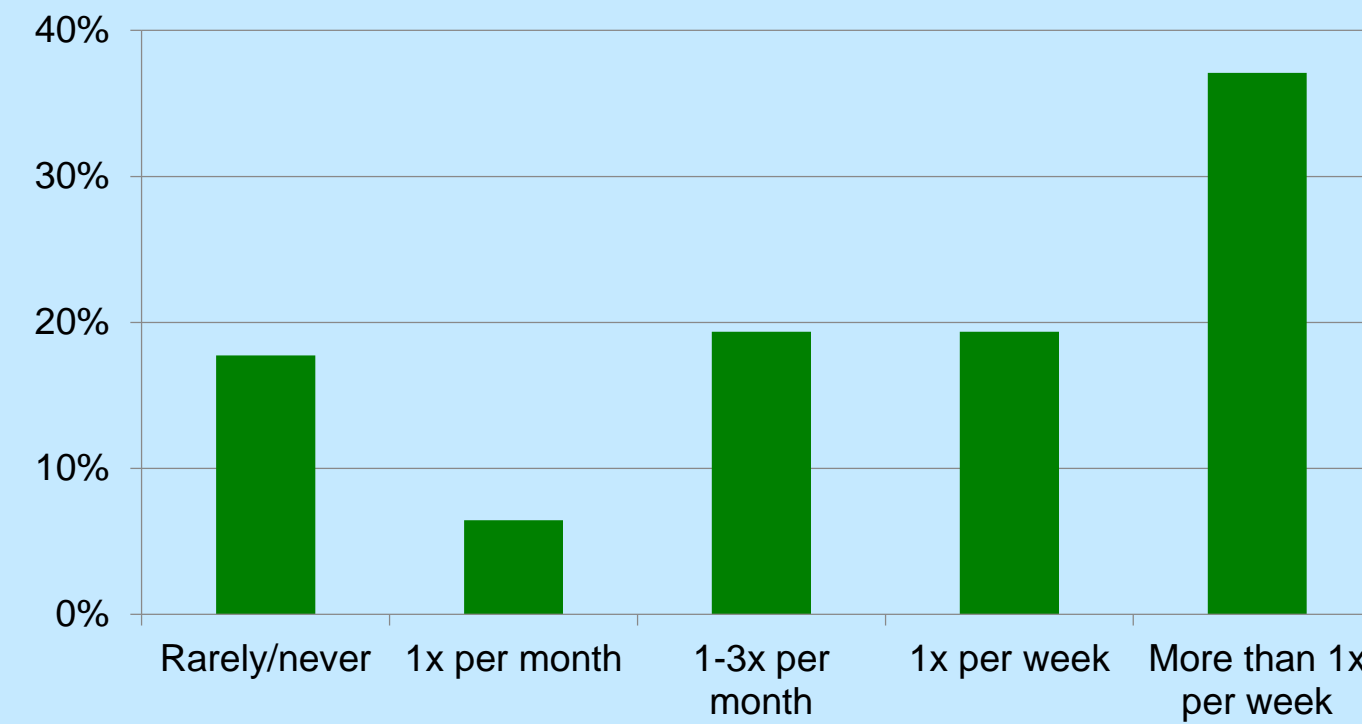


**Table 1: Where Food is Purchased**

Grocery store	97%
Wholesale/bulk	76%
Farmers market	43%
Distributor	13%
Online delivery service	10%
CSA/farm share	8%

## Results

**Figure 3: Frequency of local foods in meals**

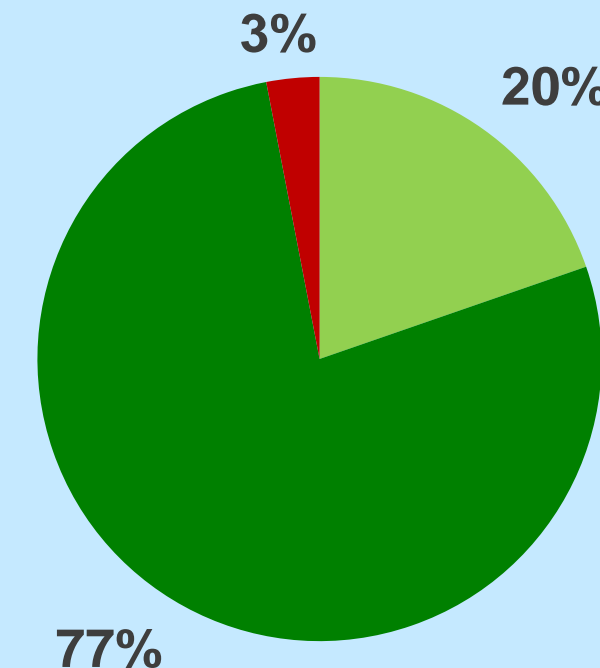


**Table 2: Barriers to Purchasing Local food**

Cost	82%
Seasonality of products	76%
Unreliable Supply	32%
Convenience	31%
Storage	27%

**Figure 4: Does the program currently engage in Farm to Early Care and Education activities?**

■ answered YES and DOES engage in Farm to ECE activities  
■ answered NO, but DOES engage in Farm to ECE activities  
■ answered NO, and DOES NOT engage in Farm to ECE activities



## Discussion

Our survey provides a start to understanding food and nutritional education in ECE providers in VT. At least one meal is served daily at **93%** of centers surveyed. Providers are a significant source of food for young children, and it is encouraging that most programs serve local foods (**84%**).

Cost and food quality were the most important factors when determining where to buy food. Cost was considered the most reported barrier to acquiring local foods, specifically.

Following cost, seasonality was the second most reported barrier. A surprising **43%** of participants said they purchased from farmers markets.

Being a northern state, Vermont has a challenge of providing accessible produce year round. Among the top reported purchased food were apples, berries, cucumbers, and carrots, which have limited growing seasons.

Educating providers about what constitutes Farm to ECE is another area to address. Among participants, **80%** reported that they do not currently have Farm to ECE activities in their program; however, when polled on activities at their center, **96%** of participants who originally answered no, marked at least one activity that qualifies as a Farm to ECE event. This indicates a gap in understanding about what Farm to ECE is and its accessibility to providers.

## Conclusions

Farm to School promotes childhood nutrition and supports local economies. Integrating Farm to School into early education in VT can have similar benefits. Going forward, further data collection should focus on the challenges of seasonality in order to provide year-round access to affordable, quality, local food in early care settings. The State of Vermont would like to extend the Farm to School Program to 75% of Vermont schools by 2025. Based on the results of this project, we suggest that a similar goal be established for Vermont-based early care programs targeting improved nutrition for Vermont's youngest children and while supporting local farms and markets.

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