



**LOCAL FOOD
PROCUREMENT IN
MONTANA EARLY
CARE AND
EDUCATION SITES
SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES, AND
FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES**

**Prepared by Mission West Community
Development Partners and National Center for
Appropriate Technology**

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical time for social, emotional, and physical development. Exposing young children to a variety of foods and incorporating food education into formal or informal academic activities set them up for long-term healthy eating habits (Anzman-Frasca et al. 2017). Additionally, activities around food encourage connection with peers and caregivers, which boosts healthy social and emotional development (Shedd and Mensch 2020).

Farm to early care and education (ECE) utilizes the same three activities as farm to school to introduce young children to locally-produced foods: gardening, food-based educational activities, and local procurement. Gardening with young children in ECE settings is a great way to teach them about responsibility, health, and sustainability while also offering them a chance to learn through play. Children start to make connections about how food is grown, how to care for plants and soil, and how food relates to their own health. They learn how to share tools and work together towards a common goal. Gardens at ECE sites can be as simple as a few potted herbs inside a classroom that the children care for, or they can include raised beds and small greenhouses (Montana Farm to School N.d.).

Food-based educational activities are another important component of farm to ECE. These can include gardening activities, taste-testing of locally grown or made foods, touring a farm or ranch, and preparing or cooking simple meals with children. These types of activities engage the children's senses of touch, taste, and smell and provide vibrant and well-rounded learning activities that can be connected to broader subject such as science and health (Montana Farm to School N.d.).

The last component of farm to ECE is using local foods in the snacks and meals served in ECE settings. ECE sites can use foods grown in their gardens, purchase directly from local producers at farmers markets and farm stands, order from a local distributor, or purchase local products that are sold at their grocery store. Purchasing local foods helps support local food economies and can introduce children to the agricultural products available in their area or region, fostering a deeper connection to their food (National Farm to School Network 2016).

Many ECE sites participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) that is administered through the USDA Food and Nutrition Service. CACFP is a federally funded program that reimburses childcare institutions and facilities for nutritious meals and snacks that are served in their programs. CACFP allows for and encourages ECE sites to purchase and use local food in their meals and snacks, recognizing the health and academic benefits of incorporating local foods into an ECE's meal service (USDA FNS).

In 2020, there were 1,269 licensed child care facilities in Montana, providing spots for 22,531 children (Montana Kids Count 2021). Early care and education sites in Montana participate in farm to ECE in a variety of ways. Montana Harvest of the Month (HOM) materials have been developed for ECE settings, which provides ECE sites with simple and easy-to-use materials to incorporate local food activities and taste-testing into their meal services. ECE sites can register for the free program to access the materials. The Farm to Early Care and Education Coalition, a working group of the Montana Farm to School Leadership Team, also brings partners across the state together to collaborate and promote farm to ECE activities (Montana Farm to School N.d.).

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This report on farm to ECE specifically focuses on local food procurement in ECE settings in Montana. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 22 ECE sites participated in Montana Harvest of the Month (Montana Farm to School 2021), a significant drop from the 68 participating sites in the 2019-2020 school year (Montana Farm to School 2020). The challenges for childcare providers and families in the past two years have been created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely led to ECE sites to set aside their farm to ECE plans or goals. However, given supply chain challenges that resulted from the pandemic and the increased interest in local food, the time seemed right to dive deeper into local procurement for ECE sites in Montana. This report aims to understand the successes and challenges of local food procurement so that the Farm to ECE Coalition and other partners can determine future solutions.

METHODS

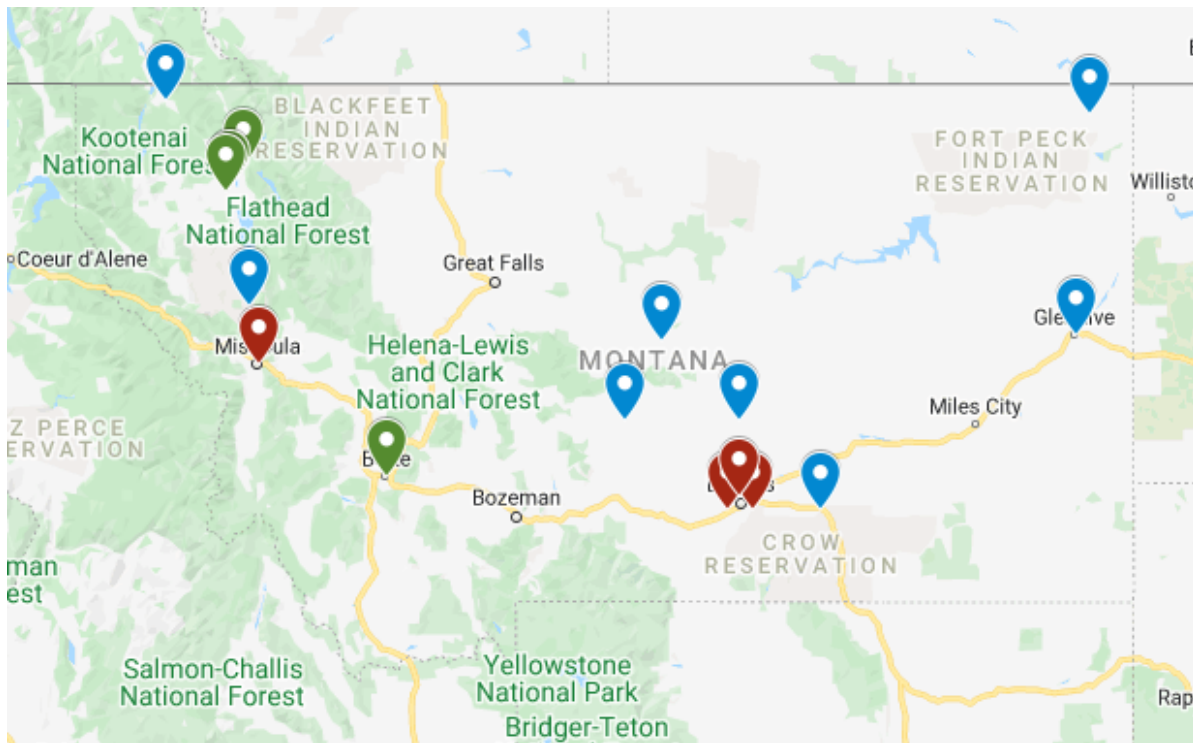
This report was funded by the USDA Local Food Promotion Program grant awarded to Lake County Community Development Corporation (dba Mission West) in 2018. Mission West and National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), a key partner under this grant, worked together to plan, execute, and report on this study.



Mission West and NCAT determined that interviews with ECE sites would provide more in-depth understanding of local food procurement successes and challenges compared to surveys. An interview guide was developed for ECE food and nutrition directors that asked questions related to their current food purchasing and preparation practices, their experiences with buying local food, what is working well with local procurement, and what challenges they face when buying local (see Appendix for interview guide). For these interviews, local was defined as food grown or made in the state of Montana. The interview guide also included collecting basic data on their sites, such as the number of students in their programs, the meals that they serve, and their participation in CACFP. ECE sites were recruited through the Farm to ECE Coalition and Montana Child Care Resource and Referral agencies. In order to reach ECE sites across the state, several ECE sites were also contacted based on location in order to obtain a more representative sample. ECE sites were offered a small gift card for participating in the interview.

Interviews were conducted over the course of two months in the summer of 2021. A total of 22 ECE sites were contacted for the study, and 12 interviews were completed, giving a response rate of 55%. Interviews were conducted with nutrition directors and owner/operators for sites across the state in both urban and rural areas. Twelve counties were represented in the responses, with some centers having multiple locations across several counties.

Interviews were conducted by phone and recorded to ensure accurate data. All of those interviewed were women, with nine holding the title of Owner or Director, two health services or nutrition director, and one assistant director. Respondents ranged in age from 27 to 71. Data were compiled and categorized into two major themes, successes and benefits of local food procurement, and challenges with local food procurement.

MAP OF ECE SITES



 Small Metro County  Micropolitan County  Noncore County

The above map shows the locations of interviewed ECE sites. Two interviewees were responsible for managing ECE sites in multiple counties; therefore, all of their sites are shown. Sites are color-coded according to their county's classification in the 2013 National Center for Health Statistics Urban-Rural Classification Scheme. Small metro includes counties with one or more Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) with a population of less than 250,000 and more than 50,000. Micropolitan refers to counties with no MSAs but has an urban cluster population between 10,000 and 49,999. Noncore refers to counties with no MSAs and population clusters of less than 9,999. For the purpose of this study, "urban" will refer to sites in small metro or micropolitan counties, and "rural" will refer to sites in noncore counties.

RESULTS

ECE CHARACTERISTICS

Enrollment at interviewed ECE sites ranged from 6 to 277 children. Four enroll 12 or fewer children, five enroll between 13 and 100 children, and three enroll over 101 children. In total, the sites interviewed serve nearly 900 children. Seven serve infants through preschool age children, and five serve toddlers and preschoolers only. The percentage of low-income children enrolled at the sites ranged from less than 10% to 100%, with an average of 57% of enrolled children from low-income families. Five were classified as ECE centers, four were group facilities, and three were family facilities. All but two participate in CACFP, and all serve breakfast, lunch, and a snack to the children.

MEAL PLANNING AND FOOD PURCHASING

Most of the individuals interviewed were involved in the food planning, purchasing and/or preparation processes for their facility. Sites had between 1 and 4 individuals involved in food preparation. All ECE sites reported that they mostly do scratch cooking for the children and use rotating menus, with some flexibility for seasonal fruits and vegetables. Common meals included pastas, tacos, sandwiches, and soups. Most reported using a variety of fresh, frozen, and canned fruits and vegetables with lean proteins. A couple of facilities use produce from on-site gardens for small snacks or additions to meals. The recipes that they use come from a variety of sources, including USDA CACFP, Pinterest, web searches, and their own cooking experience. All sites purchased their food from their local grocery stores, including Costco, Albertsons, Safeway, and Walmart. Four of the largest centers purchased from US Foods or Sysco.

LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING

When asked how often they serve local foods in their meals and snacks, responses varied significantly across sites. Six said they serve local food in their meals or snacks at least once a week. Three serve local foods once a month, and one serves local food once a year. Two said they did not serve local or were not sure. Of those who served local foods, most reported purchasing local foods from their usual grocery stores. Six also reported purchasing some foods from farmers markets or directly from local farmers. Two sites purchase from local agricultural cooperatives, the Western Montana Growers Cooperative and Yellowstone Valley Food Hub. A few of the facilities use produce from on-site gardens for small snacks or additions to meals and receive occasional donations from families of the children with excess produce from their gardens.

Six sites purchase local proteins for their meals, including beef and bison. Nine use local fruits or vegetables, and a couple reported using local grains, such as flour. One also stated that she uses local milk and dairy in her meals. Half of the sites said that they participate in Harvest of the Month programming. The sites that participated in HOM served local foods more frequently. Of the sites that purchase local foods, five sites reported increasing the amount of local food that they purchase in the last two years, two said their purchasing of local food has decreased, and three stated that it has remained the same.

BENEFITS OF LOCAL PROCUREMENT

Supports and builds relationships with local farmers

When asked what is working well with local food procurement, several key themes were discussed. First, respondents said that one major benefit of local food procurement is that it supports local agriculture, and they are able to build good relationships with local producers and distributors:

“Promoting local and small business is important and all ECEs should be trying to do so.”

Multiple respondents noted by purchasing local food, they are supporting their community and local food economy. One Head Start employee added that Head Start is a community partnership, and they are helping to fulfill their mission by using local food in their meals and teaching the children about local agriculture. Local food purchases can put money back into their communities and encourage economic growth and well-being.

“It’s important to support the local economy and I like to try to teach my own children about sustainability and where food comes from.”

Interviewees also shared that they enjoyed building relationships and partnerships with local producers and distributors:

“It is nice to have a personal relationship with the lady who produced the beef we use.”

Both ECE sites and producers can benefit from building these relationships and partnerships. For producers, they can have a reliable market for their product, which is beneficial for production planning and financial stability. For ECE sites, this relationship helps build trust about where their food is coming from and what their children are eating, and they can feel confident in the food’s quality and safety.

Easy access at grocery stores, farmers markets, and farm stands

Three interviewees also shared that they like having easy access to local foods at their local grocery stores or farmers markets.

“It’s convenient that it’s at my local grocery store. There’s a variety of options there for me.”

“[When] there’s local at the local grocery that is very convenient; otherwise, it doesn’t really happen.”

Several ECE personnel from smaller family or group sites mentioned that they do the food shopping for their facility and for their families at the same time. With busy schedules, this saves time and energy. Having local food available at their neighborhood grocery store takes the hassle of conducting additional research on where to buy local foods and increases the likelihood that they will purchase the product for their facilities and their families.

Additionally, a few noted that their local farmers markets can be great places to shop and access local products for their meal services.

“There is access to smaller food stands outside of Billings for sourcing locally.”

Farmers markets and farm stands can offer convenient stops to access a wide variety of locally grown food products. They can also be good locations to meet with farmers directly, learn about their operation, and build a long-term relationship that will be beneficial for both the ECE facility and the farmer. It is important to note that the sites that noted easy access to local foods, at grocery stores, farmers markets, or farm stands, were located in urban areas. Sites in rural locations did not mention ease of access to local foods.

Health, nutrition, and quality

Three interviewees also noted that health, nutrition, and quality play into their decisions to purchase local foods.

“Local food is of much better quality.”

“Locally sourced food seems more trust worthy. I trust Montana and the producers. It feels safer.”

Locally grown food generally travels much shorter distances than food purchased from a major distributor and is handled less often. Local food is therefore often fresher and more flavorful than non-local items. A couple also noted that nutrition and health is a major factor when choosing to buy local foods.

“I felt like it [local] was closest to organic without paying organic prices. That is what we use for our girls [at home] so I wanted to offer that to the kids in my program as well.”

“I’m all about supporting the local community and providing the best nutrition we can for the kiddos.”

Introducing young children to high-quality, nutritionally-dense foods is important for laying the foundation for healthy habits in the future. Early childhood is a critical time in development, and ensuring children have access to nutritious foods is important for these ECE facilities. Serving healthy and local foods can also help children begin to make connections between their own health, agricultural production, and the broader food system.

CHALLENGES OF LOCAL PROCUREMENT

Limited knowledge on how to procure local food

Four main themes emerged from the interviews about the challenges ECE sites were facing when procuring local foods. All of the following themes were mentioned by at least five of the interviewees.

First, procurement knowledge was discussed as a major barrier to purchasing local foods.

“Procurement knowledge is a challenge – I'm not sure about other local options and what the price would be.”

“Finding local food can be a challenge.”

Multiple interviewees mentioned that they just are not sure where to look for local foods and how to go about purchasing it. They would like to make those connections, but they are not sure where to turn.

“Finding that connection - where and who sells it. The largest obstacle is just that connection and knowing where to buy.”

Particularly among the smallest facilities in this study, the owners and/or directors that we interviewed were the ones doing the menu planning, food purchasing, and preparation in addition to their other responsibilities of running their facility. One noted that because the responsibility of doing additional research on where to buy local foods falls on her, purchasing local food needs to be as simple as possible. The same was also true for one of the larger ECE sites interviewed:

“I have to know every week that I'm going to be able to get the products that I need, because we're serving a lot of meals.”

Availability and Convenience

Another key barrier for ECE sites to local food procurement is the availability of local food and the convenience of purchasing. As noted by several ECE sites (above), purchasing local food is convenient at their grocery store, but other locations can be hard to access because they are open at inconvenient times, like the farmers market, or would require additional time and energy to shop.

“It [local food] is just not very convenient. It's hard if I can't do all of my shopping at once and have to go get specialty fruits and veggies.”

“Availability to go to farmers markets is limited and having charge accounts with vendors seems cumbersome.”

While both urban and rural sites noted challenges with accessing local foods, rural sites were more likely to state their limited access to local options. Additionally, a few ECE sites noted that Montana's short growing season can make it challenging to access produce at peak times.

“The availability of seasonal produce is a challenge – we are not in session in summer.”

While Montana has a rich agricultural economy, the northern latitude means that the growing season for fruits and vegetables is short and peaks when some ECE sites are not in session. This can make accessing locally grown produce at other times of year challenging to nearly impossible. One interviewee noted that while other locally grown products are available year-round, such as lentils, she is wary of purchasing those kinds of products because the children do not want to eat it.

Limited Storage

For nearly half of the ECE sites interviewed, storage was mentioned as a barrier to purchasing more local products.

“Storage is a big barrier. Food goes bad quickly in the summer.”

“I don't have enough refrigeration to store lots of local produce.”

Many ECE sites, including several of the ones that were interviewed, are based out of homes and are using a typical home kitchen to store and prepare the food for their facility's meals and snacks.

Without access to large refrigerator or freezer units, they are limited the amount of storage space available for fresh or frozen local product. A couple also noted concerns about waste. ECE sites carefully budget for their meals and snacks, and they do not want to lose product due to spoiling because of a lack of refrigerator or freezer space. While ECE sites said that they use fresh produce in their meals, they also stock up on canned or frozen fruits and veggies that can be stored, easily prepared, and fits within the CACFP requirements.

Cost

Finally, the higher cost of local food products was mentioned as a major barrier to incorporating more local foods into ECE meals and snacks.

“Local food is more expensive than bulk. In more rural areas the food is even more expensive.”

Most of the ECE sites interviewed participate in CACFP, which provides reimbursements for meals and snacks that meet certain nutritional guidelines. However, these reimbursements do not cover the full cost of the purchased food (Child Care Connections 2020), meaning ECE providers must carefully budget their food purchases.

“Cost is a big one. I’m working within the CACFP budget so trying to buy fresh local strawberries gets expensive. I try to average that out with doing organic versus canned...I have to make a commitment to purchasing local and then offset it somewhere else. Sometimes that means doing Sysco products.”

When working within tight budgets, it can be challenging for ECE sites to find financial flexibility to consistently purchase local products. The size of the facility also matters when budgeting. Buying local can be more cost effective when buying in large volumes, but facilities with a smaller number of children will not be able to purchase large quantities of food. Conversely, feeding a large number of children local food products can be financially challenging as well:

“Local food is expensive. I’m feeding so many people that it just doesn’t even out to make it cost effective. I always have to look at best price.”

As one ECE provider noted, buying local food does not always rise to the top of the priority list:

“My first priority is that kids are fed and full. The bottom line is that these kiddos are hungry.”

When it comes to deciding between a smaller quantity of local food versus a higher volume of another product, many ECE sites will choose the most cost-effective option that keeps their children fed and happy.

CONCLUSION

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Most of the interviewees noted that they would like to purchase more local food for their meal programs, and many said they would be interested in increasing their local food purchasing if local food was available and simple to access. Several sites that were not participating in Montana Harvest of the Month said they were interested in learning more about the program and how it could be incorporated into their menus. From this small interview sample, there does appear to be interest in incorporating more Montana-grown foods into ECE menus. This suggests that ECE sites could be a potential new market for Montana farmers.

“I’ve never heard of farm to ECE. I would like to learn more about what is out there.”

“I would like to get more information on purchasing local and what would be considerable options for us.”

Procurement knowledge was mentioned multiple times as a significant barrier to local food procurement. When asked what they needed to overcome that barrier, multiple interviewees said that more communication, advertising, and instruction on how to purchase local foods would be very helpful. One opportunity would be to work with Montana’s Child Care Resource and Referral agencies that maintain communication with the licensed ECE facilities in the state. ECE sites already receive communication from these agencies, and this could provide a simple communication and outreach strategy for local food procurement. More broadly, the Montana Farm to ECE Coalition may have an opportunity to create a strategic outreach and communication plan for their partners to determine effective communication strategies, increase awareness of local food purchasing opportunities, and promote Montana Harvest of the Month. Several ECE sites in the interviews said that Harvest of the Month helped increase their local food purchasing and encourages them to create menu items around the HOM item.

Harvest of the Month provides a starting point for ECE sites that want to increase their local purchasing by focusing on one item per month and providing recipes and educational activity ideas that accompany the food item. Increasing awareness of the program could begin to boost local food purchases from ECE sites.

Convenience and availability were also the most commonly mentioned challenges. ECE directors are busy, and small family or group sites with 12 or fewer children often reported doing the shopping for their facility at the same time as the food shopping for their own families. Researching how and where to purchase local products for their facility takes time and energy, and childcare directors and employees are already often overworked and underpaid. Local food purchasing needs to be simple, easy to access, and convenient. Farmers and distributors that ensure purchasing their local food products is efficient and uncomplicated would benefit ECE sites statewide. This could include offering delivery or pick-up at a convenient location if possible, using simple online ordering systems, or working with processing centers to extend the life of their product through freezing, drying, or freeze drying. This would make local products available year-round. The interview results also show that rural sites often have fewer opportunities to access local food products. Investigating creative distribution opportunities to rural Montana locations is another important area of research for farm to ECE.

Finally, cost is a major barrier for ECE sites when looking to purchase local products. While large ECE centers are in a better position to purchase bulk products at a lower cost, small facilities that serve fewer children may face difficult financial barriers. One opportunity is promoting more cooperative wholesale purchasing among ECE sites. The [Montana Food Economy Initiative](#), led by the Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO), brings together stakeholders from various sectors to engage in community food systems development on community-led projects. In early 2021, NCAT assisted the coordination of cooperative wholesale purchasing for HOM items for several small ECE facilities in Billings. These facilities worked together to determine what products they wanted for the month from local distributors, with the goal of ordering larger volumes and therefore lowering the overall cost. Cooperative purchasing projects and agreements like this can take time to build trust and agreement across ECE sites, but they can be a creative solution to accessing more local food products at lower prices.

RESOURCES

Montana Harvest of the Month: Participation in the program is free! Sites must register in order to receive HOM materials.

Montana Farm to Early Care and Education: Landing page for Farm to ECE information and resources.

Abundant Montana: Searchable listing that connects farms and ranches with ECE sites and other institutions that are interested in purchasing local products.

National Farm to School Network: Farm to Early Care and Education: Comprehensive site for helpful information and resources about procurement, gardening, and food educational activities for Farm to ECE.



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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The goal of this project is to learn more about successes and barriers to local food procurement in Early Care and Education settings in Montana. We would like to learn more about the experiences you've had when introducing local foods into your food service and we hope to identify existing opportunities and barriers to local food purchasing for ECEs. For this interview, local food refers to food that is grown, produced, or processed in Montana.

The data from this project will be included in a report that will be shared with Farm to School and Farm to Early Care and Education partners across the state. Your participation in this project will remain confidential, and your name and organization will not be shared in any communication related to this project. We are also providing a gift card as a thank you for your participation in this interview.

Are you comfortable with me recording this conversation? It'll help me make sure I capture your comments accurately.

(If yes, start recording)

Do you have any questions for me before we start?

Participant Information

- Name of Respondent: _____
- Pronouns: _____
- Position/Title: _____
- Gender:
 - Woman
 - Man
 - Non-Binary
 - _____
 - Choose not to disclose

- Age Range
 - 18-26
 - 27-35
 - 36-44
 - 45-53
 - 54-62
 - 63-71
 - 72-80

Facility Information:

- Name of Institution/Facility: _____
- Location (town) of facility: _____
- Number of children attending the facility: _____
- Percentage of low-income families: _____ (would come from scholarship recipients or CACFP income eligibility guidelines)
- Type of program (indicate all that apply):
 - Family
 - Group
 - Center: Campus, Head Start, other
- What age group are you serving:
 - Infants (0-1)
 - Toddlers (2 - 3)
 - Preschoolers (3 - 5)
 - School age (5 +)

Warm-Up Questions:

- Do you participate in CACFP?
- What meals do you serve at your facility? And how many per day?
 - Breakfast _____
 - Lunch _____
 - Snack _____
 - All of the above
- How does your food service operation work? Do you prepare meals and snacks on site? Is there a designated staff person to prepare meals? Who is responsible for menu planning and food purchasing?
 - Number of kitchens: _____
 - Central kitchen: Y/N
 - Central warehouse? Y/N
 - Other types of storage?
 - Total number of food service staff? _____
 - Number of part-time employees: _____
 - Number of full-time employees: _____
 - Who is in charge of procurement?: _____

- Can you describe your food preparation process?
 - Scratch cooking?
 - Typical weekly or monthly menu?
 - Examples of menu items?
 - Where do you get your recipes?

Procurement Procedures:

- Where do you purchase your food from? (Check all that apply)
 - Quality Foods Distributing
 - Western Montana Growers Cooperative
 - COSTCO
 - Local Farmers
 - Grocery stores
 - Other (major distributors?): _____
- Do you have any other sources of food (donations, grant funded foods)?
 - Yes
 - If so, do they come from local sources (i.e. local farmers)?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
 - No
- Do you serve local foods in your meals? If so, how often?
 - Every meal
 - One meal a day
 - One or two meals a week
 - One meal a month
 - One meal per year
 - No meals incorporate local food.
- Do you serve local foods in your snacks? If so, how often?
 - Every snack
 - One snack a day
 - One or two snacks a week
 - One snack a month
 - One snack per year
 - No snacks incorporate local food.
- If they serve local foods: What types of local food do you purchase?
 - Fruits
 - Vegetables
 - Protein
 - Dairy
 - Grains
 - Other

- How do you source your local food?
 - Local Farmer
 - Farmers market
 - Grocery
 - School garden
 - Other: _____
- Do you know what year your facility/institution started purchasing locally grown foods?
- What initially motivated your institution/facility to start buying locally grown food?
- Is your institution affiliated with any local food promotion programs such as Harvest of the Month or other similar programs?
- Has your purchasing of local foods increased or decreased in the last two years?
- What's working well when it comes to procuring local foods? (Examples: relationships with local producers/distributors, quality of foods, community support, etc)
- What are your current obstacles to buying local?
 - Storage (i.e. not enough refrigeration)
 - Regulations
 - Cost
 - Procurement knowledge
 - Distribution
 - Limited staff time to prepare
 - Other:
- What do you need to overcome the barriers to buying local food?

Other Influencers

- Are you aware of any local, state, or federal policies that impact your ability to buy locally grown food? If so, how?
- Do parents or other ECEs influence your decision to buy local foods?

Opportunities

- Are you serving too much, too little, or just enough local foods?
- Do you have any plans to increase the amount of locally grown foods your food service operation buys?
 - If yes: Tell us more about your plans.
 - How much do you plan to increase local foods?
 - Where will you get the food (direct from farmers, WMGC, other distributors)?

- Are there specific foods you would buy if they were available locally?
 - Vegetables
 - Fruits
 - Meats
 - Grains, beans, lentils, etc.
 - Dairy products
 - Processed foods
- Is there anything else that you would like to talk about with regard to local foods?