

The Farm-to-Preschool Model

Improving Children's Health with Fresh, Local Produce

by Sara M. Teece

In a world obsessed with convenience, healthy food choices aren't necessarily the ones people reach for first, but early education providers can help children and their families make smarter, healthier choices. To get there, most providers need to fundamentally change their organizational culture.

Research from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control paint a troubling picture for children in the United States ages 2 to 5: nearly 25% are overweight or obese, with African American and Hispanic children disproportionately affected. The American Academy of Pediatrics associates a range of childhood health risks with being significantly overweight. According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, one place where the problem of childhood obesity can be confronted head on is in



For more than 25 years, Sara M. Teece has served as the Director of Food Services for Square One. In her capacity as Director, Sara is responsible for the oversight and management of Square One's food service program for its Center Base programs, as

well as Family Child Care Homes, and after-school programming. She has an Associate's Degree in Science for Dietetic Technology, is an active member in the School Nutrition Association, as well as The Sponsor's Association, through the CACFP, and is called on frequently to share her experience and expertise to local, regional, and international audiences. Sara is also a key contributor to Farm to Preschool. Her true passion is ensuring that all children and their families, regardless of income, learn to make sensible, nutritional choices for a healthy future.

the preschool setting, where 74% of children ages 3 to 6 spend part of their day.

One innovative child care organization recognized the problem of childhood obesity in its own centers several years ago, well before it was receiving the degree of attention it is getting now. Their idea wasn't all that complicated: *serve the children fresh produce sourced from local farmers.* Putting that idea into practice proved challenging on several fronts, but the effort has paid off:

- The children love the healthy foods they are served.
- The food service staff relies on their skill as food preparers instead of their ability to open cans.
- Administrators who manage the bottom line understand that serving whole foods costs less.

The organization behind this concept is Square One, a full-day child care center licensed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The organization serves children largely from low-income, inner-city families in

greater Springfield, Massachusetts. Square One acknowledged that it had an opportunity as well as the moral obligation to address childhood health risks directly with the children and families it serves each day. Importantly, Square One did more than identify a problem. It embraced fundamental change — and implemented it through its Farm-to-Preschool model.

With adjustments based on local needs and resource availability, the Farm-to-Preschool approach can be applied to practically any early education facility. Where to begin? Let's look at the model.

Do Your Research

Begin by assessing the feasibility of implementing and measuring outcomes for a multi-faceted health, wellness, and nutrition intervention. Square One consulted community health officials associated with the region's largest teaching hospital for input. The results of the study demonstrated clear potential for reducing daily consumption of saturated fats and cholesterol, while increasing consumption of fiber. The study also strongly suggested that more could be accomplished if the organization went further than simply putting children 'on a diet.'

Build Your Foundation

Square One reached out to a nearby college with nationally recognized programs in education, physical education, and community development. Faculty and students coordinated with the teaching hospital's community health staff and the organization's senior staff to design an integrated health and wellness curriculum for preschoolers.

It should be noted that Square One created a formal academic curriculum, not simply a to-do list of programming changes. The curriculum, called LAUNCH, emphasizes helping young children build good habits relating to nutrition, physical activity, and personal character. Initially, the curriculum formed the framework to achieve the specific health, wellness, and nutrition goals, with healthy eating as part of the daily classroom experience.

Look in the Mirror

Self-assessment is the step-off point for implementing fundamental change. Every early education program needs to take a long, hard look at the quality of its meals. Quite simply, what are you feeding the children in your care? Many early education and care providers use a conventional 'open-a-can' institutional food service model. Factory-processed foods such as breaded chicken nuggets and all manner of canned fruits and vegetables are the norm. Ordering by the case is straightforward, storage is easy, and preparation is minimal.

Migrating to the new model (Square One calls it the Farm-to-Preschool model) means sourcing fresh produce from farmers, not placing orders with a commercial grocer. It means serving whole, healthy foods that require kitchen prep and cooking, not just opening cans and heating.

Involve Your People

Any organization that envisions itself making such fundamental change is wise to seek early involvement and buy-in from the people whose jobs will be directly impacted. Ask them for advice and listen to their ideas on how to make a new approach work. Expect some initial kickback; change can be difficult, especially when people have done things a certain way for a long time.

One way to gain that all-important buy-in is to have food service staff help in the design and implementation of a test run:

- Think about where you will source fresh produce.
- Examine what kitchen procedures will need to change.
- Consider what new equipment will be required.

This might also be a good time to get your finance or advancement people involved, too.

Food service staff will be required to learn additional skills. They will need to:

- Learn sanitary procedures when dealing with fresh foods. (Square One's kitchen staff is now Serve Safe Certified.)
- Develop knife skills.
- Learn cooking methods they may not have used before, such as steaming.
- Change from heat-and-serve kitchen help to become food service professionals who prepare, cook, and serve meals.

It's important to realize that it's not only the food service staff that must buy into the Farm-to-Preschool approach; every part of the organization is involved. For

example, Development can get involved to raise funds needed to purchase equipment. Square One's VP of Development, Kimberly Lee says,

"You may need a slicer to prepare vegetables, a mixer to prepare fresh baked goods, a steamer to cook vegetables, or a freezer to preserve produce for the winter months. Securing those items may require financing or gifts. When our donors learned what their money could help us to achieve, most were eager to contribute."

Source Your Produce

There's nothing more important in adopting a Farm-to-Preschool model than finding a farmer who is interested in taking your organization on as a customer. The farmer should be able to deliver fresh produce to you on a regular basis. You will have to work on logistics. You will have to develop menus as well as menu flexibility because you can't be certain what a farmer will have available at any given time. It's not the same as taking canned food off a shelf.

Square One started working with a farmer in a nearby town in 2009, and he has proven to be a great partner. Fresh produce supplied has included green beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, strawberries, blueberries, melons, zucchini, summer squash, butternut squash, potatoes, carrots, collards, and romaine lettuce. The farmer's employees do some simple prep like peeling and dicing sweet potatoes, snipping beans, and cutting carrots into coins or sticks. This prep work benefits the farmer because it creates rainy day projects for his people and can keep them working longer in the season.

As you consider where you will source your produce, also consider whether organizations in your area who share a similar mission may be willing to join with you to offer the farmer a larger

Square One in Brief

Square One is a family services, early education and care organization licensed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The organization serves children largely from low-income, inner-city families in greater Springfield, Massachusetts. Founded in 1883 to provide care for children of working parents, Square One has evolved and expanded over the years. Today its programs include both center- and home-based child care, parent education, group support and training, home visitation, and case management.

A private non-profit organization, Square One receives funding from public agencies along with donations from private sector businesses and individuals. This allows the organization to provide education, care, and transportation, all at low cost to parents.

piece of business and some additional bargaining power in price negotiations.

Prepare for the Off-Season

In some farming regions, such as Florida and California, harvest is practically year-round. But that's not the case in most of the United States. So what happens with fresh produce sourcing during the off-season? Some fruits and vegetables keep well with refrigeration, but there is more that can be done. Preserving the summer's bounty in preparation for winter is a strategy as old as humankind and can be critical to the success of your Farm-to-Preschool program.

You may want to consult with your finance and development people because you need to add a commercial grade storage freezer to your wish list. (Square One pitched its need to a local benefactor, Project Bread, and received a grant toward the purchase of such a freezer.) In summer, produce such as local strawberries and zucchini can be frozen, so that during the winter the children's menus can include strawberry fruit cup and smoothies and whole grain zucchini bread.

Bring the Farm to You

If your local farmer will be making deliveries to your facility anyway, perhaps there is a larger market to tap. During the harvest season, the farmer can operate a weekly mobile farmer's market — a bus outfitted with racks inside filled with fresh produce. The children's families can walk through the bus and purchase whatever crops the farmer has that week. Staff and residents in the surrounding neighborhood can be invited to take advantage of the mobile farmer's market, too.

An inner-city farmer's market can present some minor challenges, such as helping parents who are unfamiliar with how to prepare fresh produce. Food service staff can help by providing guidance and take-home recipes, which tie in with the day's classroom curriculum. This means that the children can participate in meal preparation at home and reinforce what they learn in preschool.

Start Sooner Rather than Later

If you think your organization may want to implement changes found in the Farm-to-Preschool model, then get started. Soon you may not have a choice. The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 is already having an impact on public school lunches. The USDA

has mandated changes to school lunch menus that include an increase in produce, fiber, and whole grains. These changes have not taken place in the Child and Adult Care Food Program, a separate program for private programs receiving federal aid, but change is likely to impact these providers as well. Speaking about the innovation in her centers, Kim Lee says,

"We saw what the environment was going to be like in the near future. We considered what changes we could make and started making them while we were in the driver's seat. We had some stumbling points, but you deal with them, you move forward, and you keep feeding the children good food."

Consider These Outcomes

So the change from open-a-can food service to Farm-to-Preschool can happen. It already has. What are some key outcomes to date?

- **Lower food cost:** Buying fresh and local produce costs less than buying canned and processed foods.
- **Lower food service cost:** And the cost of preparation is similar to that for processed offerings.
- **Higher-quality healthy foods:** There are measurable improvements in quality and healthiness of food served to children. Fat content decreased by 30%. Sugar and sodium content dropped and fiber increased significantly by serving whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables.
- **Increased awareness and improved eating habits:** Farm-to-Preschool promotes healthy food awareness and changes in eating habits such as sitting down for meals instead of constantly snacking.

There is some different equipment required for food preparation and storage, and some different supplies are needed. Once those initial costs are met, equipment costs are similar. In addition to all these benefits, the overwhelming majority of preschoolers, teachers, caregivers, and parents in the Square One community prefer the food offerings of Farm-to-Preschool.

Square One created a new approach, and it's working. Now the organization is trying to stay ahead of the curve. Kim Lee says:

"We take a lot of pride in knowing that we changed our food offering because we thought it was right for the children, not because it was in vogue or because it had been mandated. Our plans were already in the works before Michelle Obama wisely decided to make preschool an intervention point in her Healthy Kids Initiative. When we have children in our care for the length of time that we do, some for upwards of 10 hours a day, we have an opportunity to influence their health and nutrition. It's too huge a responsibility to ignore."

Resources

National Farm to School Network
www.farmtoschool.org/index.php

Insights from the Director of Food Service

Sara Teece, Director of Food Service for Square One, says food service directors in child care settings need to make a frank self-assessment of their existing offerings.

"Look at your menus. Are you using a lot of canned and processed foods? We were. We were using a lot of white bread and high fat foods, too. That was four years ago; we look nothing like that today. The Farm-to-Preschool model lets us provide our children with meals that have superior nutrition, higher fiber, and lower fat and sodium than what we had been serving. The meals children eat here are often the only non-processed or non-fast foods they eat all day. The children absolutely love fresh fruits and vegetables. To our very pleasant surprise, serving fresh produce has reduced our overall food service costs. It wasn't easy to make the change, but it's absolutely been worth the effort."

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