



Success Stories

Washington Farm to Early Care and Education
September 2021

From Taste Tests to Doorsteps: How Skagit/Islands Head Start Has Grown Their Farm to ECE Program

By starting small and building lasting partnerships, Skagit/Islands Head Start in Skagit and Island Counties is successfully bringing nutrition education and local produce to children and families.



Building Buy-In and Starting Small

Championed in part by Nutrition Program Manager Brandy MacFarland, [Skagit/Islands Head Start](#) began by learning about [Harvest for Healthy Kids](#) (HHK), a free farm to ECE curriculum. "When the opportunity came for me to learn about Harvest for Healthy Kids, I jumped right on it," Brandy recalls. With the help of her program director, she began by introducing HHK at an all-staff training. The staff all brainstormed together on how they could use it at their own centers. To gather buy-in, Brandy piloted a nutrition curriculum project at four of Skagit/Islands Head Start centers.



'We began with having them start where they could,' Brandy said. Some centers cooked from scratch, while others simply put HHK flashcards in their play area.



After a successful pilot, Skagit/Islands Head Start transitioned to incorporating farm to ECE activities into all ten Head Start centers in February 2018. Even though most staff were excited about farm to ECE, some teachers felt overwhelmed and hesitant to start. To help these teachers, "we began with having them start where they could," Brandy said. Some centers cooked from scratch, while others simply put HHK flashcards in their play area. Other centers tried small-scale activities like growing a plant, watching a potato grow roots, or crafting stamps out of fruits and vegetables.

"I was fortunate to have our Education Manager on board to help show the teachers how they could incorporate [HHK activities] into things they were already doing," Brandy explained. This integration, along with one-on-one support, helped every center find a version of farm to ECE that worked for them. To ensure that programs accomplished their intended farm to ECE activities, in 2019 Brandy and Skagit/Islands Head Start staff completed an in-depth training focused on incorporating HHK into teaching goals.

Expanding the Program Through Partnerships

That same year, Brandy connected with the local [Washington State University \(WSU\)-Extension office](#), whose staff visited the Head Start classrooms to provide nutrition education to children, staff, and families. Through that connection, Brandy and Jennifer GoForth, Program Coordinator at WSU Extension, started to talk about how they could expand the HHK program to strengthen their goals. Together, they implemented a taste testing program for six Head Start centers. Food Access Specialist at WSU Extension Diane Smith facilitated connections with the [Northwest Career and Technical Academy \(NCTA\)](#) and Steve Crider from [Viva Farms](#), a local nonprofit farm business incubator.

Students from NCTA developed the taste test snacks and Steve provided the local fruits and vegetables. These fruits and vegetables were



purchased through WSU Extension. Diane and fellow WSU Extension staff would then bring the snacks to each Head Start center for children and families to sample.

"This was extremely helpful for us as some of our centers are in school districts and therefore can't cook from scratch," Brandy said. "It also was a way to support classrooms who, at times, felt it was overwhelming to introduce and implement a new nutrition curriculum when we have so many other standards to meet."

Skagit/Island Head Start's outreach and engagement with families through healthy, local foods has made a big impact. Brandy recalls one parent's experience while visiting the center for lunch. "She got tears in her eyes when her daughter picked up raw cauliflower and ate it. She felt guilty because she said, 'I don't buy these things because I don't like them, and I never thought she would, but here she is eating raw cauliflower with no problem.'"

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Unexpected Opportunities

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted early education, Brandy was undeterred in her mission to bring local produce to Head Start families. "We were given some great opportunities to further support families in experiencing fresh locally grown vegetables," she said.

Brandy and her partners at WSU-Extension and Viva Farms put together nutrition education boxes for families. These boxes contained fruits and vegetables such as kale, potatoes, squash, leeks, beets, onions, and rainbow carrots. Recipes that used the ingredients in the box were also provided. Steve helped organize and deliver the boxes to the Head Start centers. Head Start staff would then deliver the boxes to families' doorsteps.

"Families were excited to try new things, recipes, and produce that they had never tried before," Brandy said.

These boxes not only provided families with a new experience, but also provided additional food for families in need.

Even with the shift to online education, all Head Start centers continued to implement the HHK curriculum on some level. Some centers gave out recipes, while others also provided the ingredients for the recipes. "One nice thing for us is that many of our staff represent the current population. Therefore, teachers can provide families with culturally appropriate recipes. And, because these recipes go to everyone, we are also providing opportunities for families to experience recipes outside of their culture," said Brandy.

Stephannie Kestler, a teacher at a Head Start center in Mount Vernon, shared how impactful the boxes and curriculum were to the children, parents, and staff during the pandemic. "We work with families that are in need, and so it was nice to be able to provide fresh foods for them and a recipe and to say 'Hey, not only can your kids help, but they want to help.'"

Teachers at the Head Start center in Mount Vernon would hold a "lunch club" on Zoom, where students would eat the foods that were sent home together. Teachers would use the HHK curriculum to spark conversations around where food comes from, play games, and do taste tests.

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"Usually parents don't join in on Zoom classes, but parents loved the lunch club," explained Stephannie. The children enjoyed trying new foods and flavors, and staff learned what new fruits and vegetables to include in future menus. "I never thought they would like green bell pepper, but it was a hit and now we're planning on using it in our meals."

Keys to Growing a Successful Program

Brandy attributes Skagit/Islands Head Start's farm to ECE success to the gradual program rollout. "When you roll something out on a large scale it can be extremely overwhelming and then it seems too big to even start, and so it fails," she noted.

A great first step is incorporating farm to ECE versions of activities programs are already doing, such as asking children to describe the food they are eating during meals, reading books about food, and bringing in food and agriculture-related toys.

She also stressed the importance of providing continuing education through yearly staff training and building farm to ECE into existing systems. For example, Skagit/Islands Head Start tied their child assessment tool, called GOLD standards, to farm to ECE activities. This allowed them to find areas where children need more attention and use farm to ECE activities to help them meet standards.

"We were able to hit so many GOLD standards," explained Stephannie. "Harvest for Healthy Kids does a great job of laying out what you need, with opportunities for language, math, and cognitive thinking integrated into the activities."

If the harvest of the month were beans, children could count them and learn about food and math at the same time. Cooking activities had an abundance of opportunities for math learning, such as measuring and counting ingredients. Other farm to ECE activities introduced science concepts such as how plants grow. They also helped with language skills by exposing children to big, complex words like "harvesting" and "season". Brandy also attributes the program's success to her belief in accepting constructive criticism and working together to find solutions. "Don't be afraid to say, 'You know what, this isn't working for us here, so let's shift gears,'" she advises.

Though Skagit/Islands Head Start has successfully integrated farm to ECE, Brandy still has big goals for the future. "I would love for all of our centers to perform taste testings, have space to store large quantities of fresh produce and the capacity for truck deliveries on a routine schedule, and expand on education for our food service workers and other staff to know how to shop and cook locally grown produce."

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Want to Learn More?

- The [Washington Farm to ECE](#) website has resources on how to get started, gardening, local procurement, how to engage families and communities, and more
- Learn more about starting farm to ECE in your early learning programs by taking our [online Farm to ECE training](#) for 2 STARS credits
- Join the [Washington State Farm to ECE Community of Practice](#) to connect with farm to ECE partners throughout the state

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