



Farm to ECE Connects Children to Menominee Food Traditions

People of Menominee Nation and County, including young children, experience limited access to fresh, locally-grown, and culturally-meaningful fruits and vegetables. By engaging in Farm to Early Childhood Education (ECE) efforts, Menominee children and families have opportunities to eat nutritious foods, develop healthy eating habits, learn about food systems, and connect with food sovereignty efforts. In Farm to ECE activities at the Menominee Early Childhood Services programs, young children have eaten traditional Menominee foods, experienced how their community grows these foods in gardens, a high tunnel, and an aquaponics system, and connected this learning to Menominee language and culture. Staff have developed confidence in teaching Farm to ECE topics and families have learned of local food assets in their community. Menominee ECS and the University of Wisconsin Division of Extension (Extension) are strengthening collaborations with other Menominee institutions to advance shared goals of food sovereignty.

Public Health Challenge

The people of Menominee Nation and County have limited access to fresh, nutritious food, especially fruits and vegetables that are locally-grown and important to Menominee culture. Approximately half of county residents qualified for federal food assistance in 2024¹. When young children participate in Farm to Early Childhood Education (ECE) efforts, they have more opportunities to eat nutritious foods, develop healthy eating habits, and learn about local food systems. For Native children, including Menominee, Farm to ECE can support the child, their families, and early childhood staff in connecting to traditional foods and contributing to food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce,

distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations².”



A Head Start child learns about the community's aquaponics system.

Approach

Menominee Early Childhood Services (ECS) operates Head Start, Early Head Start, and a daycare program. In 2024-2025, Menominee Head Start enrolled 245 children and is the only licensed group child care center in the county.

Menominee ECS has collaborated with Extension for years, including development of food service guidelines to ensure access to healthy foods and water for staff and family events.

Building on this relationship, Menominee ECS and Extension worked together to assess Farm to ECE activities in the Head Start program. Using the Go NAPSACC assessment, they saw that few Farm to ECE activities were yet in place. Menominee ECS worked with Extension to develop an action plan to expand Farm to ECE with four goal areas: Local Foods Provided, Gardening, Education and Professional Development, and Policy.

Implementing this action plan, in the past two years Menominee ECS and Extension have:

- Offered local foods during meals including culturally-significant and seasonal foods from the Harvest of the Moon curriculum
- Planted raised beds in an unused courtyard and involved children in planting and harvesting green beans, tomatoes, melon, and squash
- Organized field trips for children and their caregivers to the Farmers Market and the garden,

¹ Wisconsin Policy Forum. (June 2024). *Foodshare use remains high post pandemic*. Focus. https://wispolicyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Focus_24_13_FoodShare.pdf

² Nyéléni: International Movement for Food Sovereignty. (27, February 2007). *Declaration of Nyéléni*. <https://nyeleni.org/en/declaration-of-nyeleni/>

aquaponics, and high tunnel of the College of Menominee Nation

- Led children in hands-on Farm to ECE activities that incorporate Menominee language and culture, like harvesting sunflower seeds and planting a Three Sisters garden
- Provided in-service training to ECS staff, as well as books, food models, and more for classes
- Written regular family newsletter updates about Farm to ECE, including ideas for home activities
- Reviewed their food service guidelines to better incorporate Farm to ECE, anticipating future adoption of the revised policy

Results

Each year, more than 200 children and their families have been engaged in Farm to ECE activities. Approximately 40 staff participate in Farm to ECE training, facilitate in-class activities, support field trips, and prepare and serve local foods to ECS children.

Menominee ECS and Extension have seen children enthusiastically participate in these Farm to ECE activities. Children enjoy planting and harvesting and try the foods offered during taste testing. Through field trips and hands-on learning, children gained exposure to local food systems, traditional Menominee foods, and food-growing practices in their community. Parents and caregivers on field trips have shared that they were not always aware of these community food resources. The *Menominee Nation News* covered the Farmers Market field trip in June 2026 and described the children's learning about strawberries as a Menominee food and their planting corn and squash in the Three Sisters garden.

According to Rosemarie James, the Health, Safety, and Nutrition Manager, both new and veteran staff benefited from the Farm to ECE training. For new staff, having guidance and a knowledgeable collaborator helped them incorporate Farm to ECE activities into lesson planning. For veteran staff, James says Farm to ECE ideas brought something different and valuable to their work. Staff increased their confidence in leading Farm to ECE activities and connecting food-based learning with Menominee language and culture.

Menominee ECS and Extension also saw the benefits of these Farm to ECE efforts extending beyond the classroom into the community. Staff noted a shift in how local institutions are collaborating, including the Menominee Tribal Clinic and the Menominee Department

of Agriculture and Food Systems, now involving Menominee ECS in grant proposals and sharing knowledge and resources to advance food sovereignty. Menominee ECS and Extension are involved in conversations with a regional food hub to explore how Menominee ECS, the school district, and others could purchase local food together.

Sustaining Success

Menominee ECS staff will soon participate in another round of training with a focus on lesson planning and how to use Farm to ECE resources in the classroom. Children will have the opportunity to participate in additional field trips, including harvesting the Three Sisters garden they helped plant, and visiting a farm where Menominee FFA youth grow crops. Menominee ECS and Extension continue to further collaboration with other Menominee institutions and others in the region to advance shared goals of food sovereignty.

Anecdote

James reported that some classes have “just nailed it” with in-class activities after the aquaponics field trip. Staff brought into the classroom a small aquaponics set up with an aquarium, beta fish, and plants, and had children “planting seeds, watching them grow, and taking care of the fish” the rest of the school year. She expects to see the enthusiasm and commitment to Farm to ECE continue and spread among staff.

For more information:

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Visit the Kemamaceqtaq project website:

<https://health.extension.wisc.edu/cdc-hop-ashland-county-menominee-county-nation-community-health-project/kemamaceqtaq-were-all-moving-landing-page/>

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Contact Information

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