More Than Just a Map: A Tool for Facilitating Community Connections

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Background

Early childhood is a pivotal period for brain development and the formation of habits around food choices and physical activity, which influence health outcomes as children grow (O'Toole, et al., 2022). Childhood obesity is soaring throughout the world, driven by factors such as poor diet choices, increased screen time, and low physical activity (Kumari et al., 2022). Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) programs address this growing problem by providing children with greater exposure to healthy, fresh, locally sourced produce, more time spent outdoors, and

increased physical activity (Blair et al., 2023). Many ECE sites struggle with limited funding, time constraints, and lack of knowledge (McCloskey et al., 2020), which can hinder efforts to procure and prepare local foods or maintain gardens.

As we consider innovative tools to support Farm to ECE initiatives, it's helpful to reflect on how maps can be used in new and impactful ways. Maps play multiple roles in public health, functioning as tools for communication (Stieb et al., 2019), analysis (Elliott & Wartenberg, 2004), planning (Nykiforuk & Flaman, 2011), and community empowerment (Dennis et al., 2008). Traditionally, maps are flat representations used to display one or more data points, helping users locate things geographically. But what happens when a map evolves from being just a tool for finding locations to a platform for fostering connections? This transformation is exemplified by the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map, a tool created to facilitate the connection of childcare sites and local food vendors, including farmers, farmers' markets, food hubs, and local food distributors.

Current technology provides us with instant access to a vast array of knowledge, yet we have become increasingly disconnected within our own communities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Public health maps help simplify complex systems and facilitate positive change and interaction by spotlighting organizations that can meet users' needs (Kiekens et al., 2022). They also contribute to positive change by identifying gaps in services and pinpointing areas where additional resources or support are needed. Through this process, public health maps enable more targeted interventions that address the specific needs of communities (Watson et al., 2024). Ultimately, public health maps facilitate better access to services, empower informed decision-making, and help create a more equitable distribution of resources

(Hashtarkhani et al., 2024). This transition from disconnection to collaboration is especially vital in today's siloed world.

The NC Farm to ECE Connections Map fosters connections between farmers and childcare sites, effectively bridging the gap between these two groups. By addressing common barriers, such as the demanding schedules and limited resources of both farmers and childcare providers, the map helps reduce the challenges of local food procurement. This tool addresses a critical need by recognizing the significant time and capacity constraints faced by both farmers and childcare centers. Farmers often have packed schedules due to the seasonality and unpredictability of agricultural work, making it difficult to devote time to establishing new business relationships (Schreiber et al., 2023). Similarly, childcare centers are already stretched thin with the demands of caring for children, managing staff, and maintaining daily operations. These constraints often make it challenging for both parties to navigate the complex logistics of sourcing local food, which can require significant time, coordination, and effort (Rutz & Bloom, 2017).

By providing a streamlined, user-friendly platform, the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map can aid in alleviating these pressures. It simplifies the process of finding local food vendors and establishing direct connections between farmers and childcare centers. This reduces the need for extensive back-and-forth communication and eliminates time-consuming research on both sides. The map ultimately saves valuable time and resources, enabling farmers to focus on their primary agricultural tasks while childcare centers can more easily meet their food procurement needs without overburdening their limited capacity.

Beyond its practical function, the map can serve as a powerful tool for transformation, supporting children's health and well-being, strengthening local food systems, and deepening community ties. By making it easier to connect farmers with childcare centers, the platform helps unlock new opportunities for meaningful collaboration that go well beyond food purchasing.

By mapping out the services offered by both groups, the tool highlights areas where their needs and services align, encouraging partnerships that can foster long-term relationships, going beyond basic transactions. For example, the Community Connection Icons featured on the map provide users with additional ways to create meaningful connections beyond just food procurement. These icons enable map users to easily identify opportunities for collaboration on activities such as field trips, produce boxes for the childcare center's families, and educational events.

For instance, childcare centers can use the icons to find local farmers that offer educational tours or hands-on experiences for children, promoting learning about where food comes from and the importance of sustainable agriculture. These field trips can enhance children's learning experiences while helping them build meaningful connections with local food producers, potentially sparking a lifelong interest in agriculture and food systems. Likewise, the icons spotlight ways farmers can partner with childcare programs on produce box initiatives, bringing fresh, local food directly to families. This can be particularly impactful in areas with limited access to nutritious options, helping families incorporate healthier foods into daily life while reinforcing healthy eating habits. These partnerships can also strengthen the ties between farmers, childcare providers, and the families they serve. The icons also support collaboration on community-based educational events, such as garden workshops or seasonal festivals. These

gatherings provide shared spaces to exchange knowledge, promote wellness, and engage the broader community in food and nutrition education.

By making these opportunities visible and accessible, the map encourages more than just transactional exchanges; it fosters a culture of cooperation, community-building, and shared values. These collaborations can help weave a stronger social fabric within neighborhoods, contributing to a more resilient and interconnected local community. Ultimately, the map supports a vision where farmers and childcare centers grow together; not just to meet immediate needs, but to cultivate lasting relationships grounded in healthy eating, local food systems, and collective well-being.

In March 2024, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) Division of Public Health (DPH), Community and Clinical Connections for Prevention and Health Branch (CCCPH), launched this map, and within its first year, registered around 380 childcare sites and 100 local food vendors, including farmers, farmer's markets, food hubs, and local food distributors. Training videos explaining how to use the map are available for farmers, childcare providers, and technical assistance providers who work in this area. Evaluators monitor the map using surveys to assess usage, needs and preferences of users, and barriers to participation.

This paper outlines the development of the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map, focusing on key elements. It covers the process of the data collection strategy as well as gathering input from community members and experts. The paper highlights the importance of creating connections between farmers, childcare centers, and the community, along with a self-registration system. It

also discusses practical considerations like budget, staffing, and ongoing maintenance to keep the tool effective and sustainable over time.

Collecting Data with Intent

When developing a data set for collection, it's crucial to maintain a broad, strategic perspective, keeping long-term goals in focus. Creating a logic model or following the Theory of Change (TOC) approach could help visualize the pathway to your desired end result. A well-crafted community connections map should serve multiple purposes, enhancing its overall usage and value to the community. Considering various potential uses from the beginning ensures the resource remains versatile and impactful. For the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map, CCCPH was interested in creating connections for local food procurement between childcare sites and local food vendors; however, the map can also be used as a tool for other initiatives such as recruitment for Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and SNAP-authorized vendors. Collecting data intentionally around those initiatives was important to the long-term goals of increasing healthy food access across the state. When developing your community connections map, assess short term and long term goals and be intentional about what data is collected.

Community and Subject Matter Expert Input

The foundation of a successful community connection map is the inclusion of thorough and accurate listings. A well-defined map ensures that the end users can find the information they need to make meaningful connections. Understanding the needs of end users is a specialized skill set that can only be cultivated through extensive experience in the field. Subject matter experts and community feedback bring invaluable insights and a deep understanding of the unique requirements of the target audience. For the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map, CCCPH called

on experts from organizations such as the NC Farm to Preschool Network, Wake County Smart Start, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP), Buncombe Partnership for Children, NC State Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and NCDHHS Division of Child Development and Early Education to provide guidance in the development of the registration forms. The team was given an example registration form as a starting point to spark discussions, allowing them to collaborate in adapting, revising, and adding questions that would better serve the needs of both farmers and childcare providers. Through their expertise and insights, they identified key questions that would be crucial for the map's users. For example, the group suggested including the childcare center's license capacity and the number of meals served per month, which would help farmers assess the amount of food needed at each site and plan accordingly. They also recommended adding a question to confirm whether farmers provide itemized receipts, ensuring that childcare providers who require this information for documentation or reimbursement purposes are aware of the availability. By incorporating these practical considerations, their input helped transform the registration form and, ultimately, the map into a tailored tool that specifically addresses the needs of early care and education providers and local farmers, making it more functional, relevant, and user-friendly for all parties involved.

Gathering feedback from the community is another essential component of this process. In public health, it is widely recognized that involving the community in the creation of new resources ensures they are developed with their needs in mind (Pennsylvania State University, 2019)—truly embodying the principle of "by the people, for the people" (Lincoln, 1863). In the case of the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map, CCCPH took a proactive approach by engaging both childcare providers and farmers in the process of reviewing and refining the registration

forms. This collaborative effort was aimed at ensuring the forms met the practical needs of both groups. CCCPH facilitated discussions with childcare providers to better understand their daily operations, the types of food they require, and any logistical challenges they face in sourcing local produce. Simultaneously, they engaged farmers to learn about their available products, distribution capabilities, farming production practices, and any barriers they may encounter when completing the registration forms.

By gathering direct feedback from these key stakeholders, CCCPH was able to incorporate valuable recommendations that would make the registration forms more user-friendly, relevant, and effective. For example, childcare providers suggested adding more options to the question around types of foods served, while farmers highlighted the importance of tracking specific delivery requirements or whether itemized receipts were needed. This collaborative feedback process ensured that the map would be a tool that truly reflected the needs and realities of both the farmers and childcare centers, strengthening the overall impact of the initiative and facilitating better connections between these groups.

In addition to gathering feedback on the content of the forms, the team also addressed the capacity of users to complete them, taking into account factors such as form length and time constraints. They worked to make the forms concise and user-friendly, ensuring that childcare providers and farmers could easily provide necessary information without feeling overwhelmed. By gathering direct feedback from these key stakeholders, CCCPH was able to incorporate valuable recommendations that would make the registration forms more relevant and effective.

Building in Opportunities for Connection

When designing a community connection map, it is important to envision how users can engage with one another and offer opportunities for connection. Consider how different groups can interact and create clear visual representation that reflects the intended connections in each listing. For instance, on the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map, farmers are prompted during registration to indicate whether they are open to hosting field trips at their farms, and childcare sites are asked if they are interested in visiting farms. When either select "yes," an easily recognizable icon is added to their listings, enabling them to quickly find and connect with each other.

Building in opportunities for connections like these makes it simple, straightforward, and highly effective for users to engage with one another. By providing clear and accessible pathways for collaboration, such as easily identifiable icons or registration prompts, the map fosters an environment where childcare providers and farmers can quickly identify potential partners and opportunities. This ease of use is designed to reduce barriers to engagement, encourage participation, and ultimately strengthen the community by making the process of connection feel seamless and natural.

Lastly, offering connection opportunity icons provides users with a clear starting point for initiating meaningful conversations. These icons can serve as conversation starters, making outreach more approachable and less intimidating. For example, a farmer might reach out to a childcare center and say, "I noticed you have the 'field trip' icon on your listing on the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map. Our farm is open to hosting visits, and we would love to explore this opportunity further." By making these connections explicit and easily identifiable, users are empowered to begin dialogue with confidence, enhancing the likelihood of productive partnerships and fostering stronger community ties.

Self-Registration with Purpose

Self-registration is a crucial element in creating a community-focused tool, as it ensures that participants are there with shared intent (Howard, 2012). For the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map, self-registration signifies a commitment to advancing farm-to-early care initiatives, creating a unified community working toward the same goals. Allowing self-registration empowers users to join a cause they are genuinely interested in. Without this feature, there could be increased frustration among end users, as some individuals listed may not be actively seeking involvement in this space.

Strategic Recruitment

A strong recruitment plan is essential to populate a community connections map effectively. Key questions a program could consider might include: What networks can you tap into? What partnerships can be leveraged to bring in participants? The NCDHHS Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE), which oversees child care licensure in North Carolina, played a pivotal role in the development of the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map. As a member of the NC Farm to Preschool Network, DCDEE was already familiar with the map's purpose and goals. They provided contact information for licensed child care sites across the state, enabling the use of this information for recruitment efforts. Through this partnership, the CCCPH was able to reach all licensed childcare sites statewide, sharing an overview of the map's mission and distributing registration forms. Another key partner in recruitment was the NC Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services, who provided a North Carolina Farm Directory, which is a voluntary list for food producers across the state. Other partners in recruitment have been technical assistance (TA) providers, like Appalachian Sustainable

Agriculture Project (ASAP), a non-profit who regularly provides TA to child care sites. They are able to encourage sites to register on the map and can help facilitate connections between the childcare site and the farmer. Community-oriented conferences, events, and newsletters also serve as valuable avenues for dissemination of information and recruiting participants.

Facilitation and Usage

Once the community connections map is populated with sites, how do you ensure connections are being made? The goal is for these connections to be community-driven, but until the tool gains recognition and trust, purposeful facilitation may be necessary. Community capacity also plays a role. When attempting to connect two busy groups, such as childcare providers and farmers, gentle encouragement may be required to spark action. Community-based TA providers can guide users on how to make connections and utilize the map effectively. For the NC Farm to ECE Connections Map, TA providers could include, and are not limited to, Community Health Workers, Child Care Health Consultants, Cooperative Extension Agents, Local Health Department staff, Partnership for Children TA Providers, and local non-profits, like Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP). What appears to be straightforward to the developers of a community connections map may not always be clear to others. Training for TA providers may be necessary to ensure understanding and proper delivery of information.

Resource Sharing

Returning to the idea of long term goals, intent, and usefulness of the tool, providing users with easily accessible resources ensures that the map continues to serve as a valuable tool for its audience. With minimal effort, resource tabs can be added to your community connections map. Be sure the resources are useful, up-to-date, and evidence based. The NC Farm to ECE

Connections Map provides a comprehensive set of resource tabs to support ECE programs, farmers, and community partners in integrating Farm to ECE initiatives. The resource tabs available on the map include:

- ***What is Farm to ECE?*** – Offering an overview of the Farm to ECE movement, its benefits, and how it supports young children's health, learning, and development through local food sourcing, gardening, and nutrition education.
- ***Farm to Preschool Network*** – Connecting users with the statewide network that fosters collaboration and promotes Farm to ECE efforts in North Carolina.
- ***ECE Resources*** – Providing tools, curricula, and resources specifically designed for early childhood educators to implement Farm to ECE activities, incorporate nutrition education, and create garden-based learning experiences.
- ***Farmer Resources*** – Supporting local farmers with information on selling to early childhood programs, forming partnerships with child care centers, and understanding requirements for providing fresh, local food to young children. Farmers can access the Frequently Ordered Food Graphs here, allowing them to evaluate the demand for their current crops in this market and make informed decisions when planning future crops.
- ***CACFP*** (Child and Adult Care Food Program) – Explaining how Farm to ECE initiatives align with CACFP guidelines, helping child care providers incorporate locally sourced foods into reimbursable meals and snacks.
- ***How to Use the Map*** – Offering videos for TA providers, farmers, and childcare providers with step-by-step instructions on navigating the map and utilizing relevant resources and connections.

These resource tabs ensure that educators, farmers, and stakeholders have access to the information they need to implement Farm to ECE practices across North Carolina. Each tab is designed to organize essential resources, offering a comprehensive one-stop shop for Farm to ECE information.

Resource Development Recommendations and Lessons Learned

Development costs for community connection maps can fluctuate significantly based on the geographic location and the specific needs of the target audience. It's essential to consider factors such as the local market rates for web development, design, and maintenance, as well as the complexity of the features required. When determining how to manage these costs, organizations may choose to leverage in-house staff, utilizing their existing content expertise. Organizations may also engage their communications team if one exists to assist with web design and implementation. They may also engage external contractors or vendors that provide specialized services, which may require seeking bids through a request for proposal process according to their organizations policy.

Web Design

Building the map as a page within an existing website offers a cost-effective solution by utilizing the infrastructure and resources already in place. Developing a completely new, standalone website would require separate hosting, design, and ongoing maintenance costs. Integrating the map into an existing website allows for the shared use of web hosting, content management systems, and other backend technologies. This approach minimizes the need for additional technical setup and reduces overhead costs associated with building and managing a new site from scratch. Additionally, the existing website likely already has an established user base,

which can drive traffic to the map page without the need for extensive marketing efforts. This integration not only saves on upfront development costs but also ensures a more seamless user experience, as visitors are already familiar with the layout and navigation of the primary site. Furthermore, ongoing maintenance and updates to the map can be more easily managed within the context of the existing website's infrastructure, further reducing long-term costs.

While building the map within an existing website is a cost-effective and practical option, it is also worthwhile to consider creating a dedicated logo (see Figure 1) specifically for your community connections map. A unique logo serves as a visual identifier, making the map easily recognizable and distinguishable from other resources. This is especially important when promoting the map across various platforms, including newsletters, social media, and community events.

Figure 1: The North Carolina Farm to ECE Connections Map Logo.



A well-designed logo conveys professionalism and establishes credibility, which can help build trust within the community. It also reinforces the map's identity and purpose, making it more memorable for users. For instance, incorporating elements that reflect the values or themes of your initiative—such as equity, community symbols, or relevant imagery—can strengthen the emotional connection users feel toward the resource. The logo for the North Carolina Farm to ECE Connections Map incorporates powerful symbols representing farms and schools, while the puzzle pieces indicate a connection. The designer also emphasized equity through the diverse skin tones of the people depicted and the use of vibrant colors and sun imagery adds a cheerful and welcoming touch.

Moreover, a specific logo allows the map to stand out even if it is housed within a larger website. This differentiation ensures that users associate the logo directly with the map's mission and functionality, fostering a sense of ownership and pride within the community. Whether on digital platforms, printed materials, or event signage, the logo becomes a consistent and powerful branding tool that supports long-term engagement and trust.

Ongoing Oversight and Maintenance

Thoughtful planning and proactive consideration of long-term maintenance costs are essential to ensure that a community connections map remains effective, relevant, and user-friendly over time. Regular updates and consistent oversight are critical for maintaining accuracy and utility, as outdated or incorrect information can quickly erode user trust and diminish the map's value.

Maintenance efforts should encompass several key areas, including updating listings to reflect changes, checking for inactive links, providing ongoing user support, and adapting the tool to meet evolving community needs. For instance, as new organizations join or existing ones shift

their focus, ensuring the map reflects these changes will keep it relevant and widely used. It is also necessary to keep systems and processes simple, aligning with the capacity level of the staff responsible for maintenance. Overly complex systems with unnecessary paperwork can overwhelm staff and lead to inconsistencies in updates and functionality. Providing clear workflows and allocating adequate resources—both financial and human—can help sustain the map's usability.

The NC Farm to ECE Connections Map is carefully maintained to ensure accuracy and functionality. Listings are updated monthly, including any removal requests, and a comprehensive review is conducted quarterly to identify and correct duplicate entries or other errors. Additionally, full site reviews are performed annually to verify that all links remain active and functional. New resources and links are added as they become available, keeping the map current and useful.

Moreover, regular engagement with end users, such as surveys or feedback sessions, can identify emerging needs and opportunities for improvement. Incorporating this feedback into periodic updates ensures the map continues to serve as a dynamic tool that fosters meaningful connections and supports the community effectively. By planning for these elements upfront, you can establish a sustainable framework that keeps the tool impactful for years to come.

The NC Farm to ECE Connections Map exemplifies how intentional design, expert collaboration, and strategic planning can transform a traditional map into a powerful tool for community building and connection.

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