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Racial Equity in the MI FTECE Network: Facilitation Debrief

**FOR THE MICHIGAN FARM TO EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION NETWORK**

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The Michigan Farm to Early Childhood Education Network (MFECE or the Network) is a statewide body comprised of early childhood education (ECE) professionals and auxiliary support agency representatives whose purpose is to promote farm-to-ECE models for increasing children's access to healthy foods and supporting learning environments. The network conveners have been facilitating efforts for the network to be more equity-centered in their network activities and ECE practice. MFECE partnered with Bumblebee Design and Evaluation to facilitate a planning session with its membership. This session was conceived as a follow-up to a previous session where participants completed a Racial Equity Assessment Tool (REAT). This brief outlines the results of the planning session.

PROCESS

The session, held on June 29, 2022, was collaboratively developed by Bumblebee and the MFECE Network's Equity Workgroup over three meetings. Bumblebee also developed a survey that was reviewed by MFECE members and the workgroup prior to being sent out on the MFECE listserv.

The session took place over three hours and was virtual. Eight (8) people attended the session. Participants reviewed a summary of the REAT data and then reflected on the results in small groups. During this section, they responded to the following questions:

What did you notice?

What are the implications for the work you do?

They then engaged in a brainstorming conversation to identify initial actions the network could take to promote equity in and throughout the network. They responded to the following questions:

What would be helpful for the network to facilitate in service to Farm to ECE work?

How can this network help promote equity?

How can this network space help you promote equity in your home organization?

They were invited to respond to these questions through the lens of three focus areas: advocacy, data (research), and practice. They then closed the session by reflecting on the results of the various discussions. Network members were also invited to complete a survey that followed similar themes. We geared this survey toward ECE frontline workers--as their schedules were often a barrier to meeting participation--although any member was welcome to complete it. We chose to add this method to gather more input on the session themes. Seven (7) members responded to the survey.

RACIAL EQUITY WORK IN THE NETWORK

Before presenting the results, we offer a caveat. Since only a small section of members contributed data to these findings, the results should be viewed with caution as they may not reflect the opinions of the full membership.

Like in many sectors, the early childhood education field is examining the role of its profession in promoting racial equity. MFECE Network members were no exception. We heard from members about racial equity-related needs, interests, and challenges during the session and in the survey results.

Network members affirmed there is a need to promote racial equity in Farm to ECE work in Michigan and in the Network. According to the survey data, members are taking various actions to promote racial equity in their organizations. All reported that they believe that their organizations should promote racial equity. Six out of the seven survey respondents felt the Network should promote racial equity.

Survey: What do you do to promote racial equity? (n=7)	# (%)
Share my perspective to colleagues and leaders as a member of a marginalized group or ally to one	4 (57%)
Participate in a workplace affinity or culture transformation group	5 (71%)
Promote equity through a leadership role in my organization (e.g. contribute to policies)	5 (71%)
Advocate for social change efforts related to childcare, nutrition or other issues related to associated with my work	6 (86%)

These sentiments were mirrored in the facilitated session. For example, one member shared their experiences in facilitating racial equity education efforts among their colleagues. These members expressed concerns regarding the racial/gender makeup of the Network and ECE field. Most felt the field was a White-led sector at the top with much of the racial diversity in lower-paid frontline provider positions. They felt this was a reflection and producer of racial inequities. They also believed there was a need for more sector-level diversity in the Network. For example, they felt there was a lack of local farmers and other food producers engaged in the Network and that these groups were more reflective of the racial diversity amongst early childhood center staff and children served by these centers. They also wanted to see DEI become part of the culture of Farm to ECE vis a vis the Network. Two ways were to promote equity more explicitly in Network meetings and advocating for better supports for ECE centers and the frontline workers that staff them. Finally, members felt there was a need to better account for the root causes and racial inequities of food insecurity.

However, there are challenges to promoting racial equity in the Network.

One urgent challenge is that current and potential Network members are limited in terms of time, which undermines their capacity to engage in Network activities, particularly meetings. Colleagues struggle to connect to existing resources; they don't have the bandwidth and find accessing these resources feels too complicated.

At the same time, members acknowledge that some of their colleagues have had limited exposure to topics related to DEI; this hinders efforts to make DEI more central to Farm to ECE efforts overall in Michigan. Thus, along with working to promote equity outside of the Network, these members felt there is a need to 'ready the soil' by educating people about why racial equity work is important to Farm to ECE.

Finally, members were concerned about the nonprofit complex and its impact on funding. Specifically, they brought to focus the lack of space and resources to center DEI in a white supremacist and capitalist model of decision-making on funding programs. They saw that grantors are interested in DEI work, but were hindered by operating structures that are in conflict with DEI. Some examples include the emphasis on traditional markers of success being tied to the quantities of people served versus the quality of service. Members also acknowledged that grantors are beginning to understand the value of coalition building and trust building in addressing food insecurity, but that grantors are also learning how to support this work.

INITIAL ACTIONS: THEMES

Note: themes are classifications of the group's contributions. There were comments that did not fit clearly into one of these classifications. They are not included here but are included in the notes.

In the survey and session, members shared their ideas for increasing the Network's impact on racial inequities. We asked survey respondents to share what action steps they would support and which they would consider working on to move forward. The results are on the table on the next page. These results reflect a group willing to support racial equity work but limited in capacity to participate. We heard similar messaging in the facilitated session.

Members shared what they felt were the most appropriate actions to take to jump start the Network's efforts to promote racial equity. These are summarized after the survey table in three categories: Advocacy, Practice, & Data. Much of the next section is comprised of feedback from the facilitated session, but survey data is included where relevant.

Survey: Which of these action steps would you...? (n=7)	Support	Move forward
Forming formal partnerships with new organizations that promote racial equity in related fields	5	2
Forming formal partnerships with other networks that promote racial equity in related fields	5	2
Increasing engagement with community organizations across the state	6	5
Increasing engagement with community members at-large across the state	5	4
Joining existing community food movements	5	3
Developing more opportunities for people to serve leadership positions within the network	4	2
Engaging in work that addresses the root causes of child malnutrition	5	5
Do more research on issues related to Farm to ECE programs and how they promote racial equity	4	3

ADVOCACY

1) Bring more attention to Farm to ECE issues. Members suggested taking action to advocate for more funding for Farm to ECE initiatives. With advocacy, Farm to ECE programs can receive a lot of attention that can be translated to appeals to continue to support the work. To go about this, they suggested Network identify needed elements for Farm to ECE programs and being explicit about these needs when requesting support. They also suggested that the Network identify which of those elements can be built into existing food systems-related state policy platforms (e.g. Good Food Charter, 10 Cents a Meal).

2) Engage constituents and build trust. Members also acknowledged the need for a strong, diverse, and engaged base that can undergird the Network's advocacy platform. In part, this requires building trust with the communities that are experiencing inequities. This is done through sharing power in directing the Network's strategies. One method endorsed in the session and survey data is to develop partnerships with trusted community organizations as well as members. From there, the Network can identify strategies community members recommend for Farm to ECE and include them in Network activities. Members also recommended diversifying efforts to engage people outside of those that are most comfortable or typical. One breakout group proposed, for example, "Sign and Send" types of petitions or letters of support that can be shared out to providers to help the cause even if they can't be at events or go to the capital.

PRACTICE

1) Increase Network participation from the Farm to ECE field. Members also recommended diversifying Network participation by race, sector, and position (e.g. frontline providers). They offered suggestions to go about that, particularly given the challenges in engaging frontline providers. One method proposed is to ask already engaged members to invite others in their workplace settings and professional networks. Extending that, we also suggest identifying potential roles for recruited individuals

to play so that participation is clearly linked with a purpose for engaging. This might include service on sub-committees, which may allow participants to more readily work around their schedules. Members also suggested allowing them to host tables at different events to increase the Network's outreach capacity.

2) Disseminate information about the Network widely. Another action members suggested was to increase the visibility of the Network and its efforts for both potential members and others who can support its work, like funders. To increase recruitment, members suggested finding opportunities to "tell the story" of the Network broadly in places and platforms where there are more diverse audiences. To retain members, they suggested using dissemination materials to help people feel like they are still part of the Network, even if they cannot attend meetings (e.g. farmers, frontline providers). For both suggestions, they encouraged the sharing of Network meeting invitations and schedules.

3) Facilitate opportunities for self-directed learning. Earlier in this brief we mentioned that Network members acknowledged the value of recognizing their own inherent biases and putting the effort into challenging and managing said biases. To do this work, members recommended the Network disseminate written and visual resources that support members' individual-level learning on race/racism. This helps contribute to a culture of ongoing learning and development. They suggested gearing materials toward challenging inherent bias. They also advised persistence as this change work is slow moving and processing and digesting are part of the work.

DATA

1) Use data to measure progress toward equity. Members appreciated the role of data and research in furthering equity work, including in Farm to ECE efforts. They recommended collecting data with the purpose of measuring the Network and its members' progress on equity metrics. This first means selecting metrics in partnership with Network members and other partners. These should be metrics that can illustrate process and movement over time towards equity. Examples shared by members include geographic areas that are underserved by Farm to ECE programs and food deserts. They also recommend setting SMARTIE (Strategic, Measurable, Ambitious, Realistic, Time-bound, Inclusive, and Equitable) goals as well as periodically collecting data to measure progress and potential needed change in goals. We also suggest the use of the National Farm to School Network's Farm to Early Care and Education Shared Metrics Framework (https://policyequity.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Farm-to-ECE-Metrics_Guide.pdf).

2) Use data to build the argument for increased funding to the FTECE space. Network members underscored the importance of funding for successful implementation of Farm to ECE programs and recommended using data and research to build the argument that Farm to ECE programs need additional resources. They shared that they would like to adopt tools and training that allows them to share qualitative, process-oriented data in compelling ways that translate well into the "language of funding" and help grantors have a more accurate picture of what it takes to implement Farm to ECE programs and why a DEI lens needs to be centered in the work. They would also support evaluation planning for sites and statewide to increase data collection, which could subsequently be used to support more funding opportunities. Finally, they recommended including graphics that tie data collection to how those results impact funding for activities at centers (e.g. gardens and farmer visits).

3) Pursue ways to diversify data by form and topic to help drive increased engagement in the Network. Network members recommended using data to drive increased engagement amongst providers. For example, they proposed using data to illustrate where members are participating. We would build on this point by encouraging the use of data to guide targeted recruitment. For example, if data shows limited engagement in Southwestern Michigan, Network members might consider increasing tabling opportunities. By disseminating data on processes and outcomes, members anticipated others would be more motivated to participate in Network activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the expressed needs and interest of the Network, we would prioritize the following initial actions:

Engage constituents and build trust (Advocacy 2).

Increase Network participation from the FTECE field (Practice 1).

Disseminate information about the Network widely (Practice 2).

One reason we recommend these actions is that they address a major challenge for the Network: limited time for engagement (especially among frontline workers).

In addition to simply building a bigger base of participation, any efforts in this direction are also likely to contribute to a more diverse membership given that much of the racial diversity in the Farm to ECE field is among the frontline providers that also need more creative strategies to engage. We also recommend these actions because they can help the Network build needed capacity to address other actions members recommended, such as those related to advocacy. For example, having more people participate in advocacy efforts shows policymakers that there is a demand for Farm to ECE programs.