

# Identifying Key Players in Georgia Farm to School: An Innovative Application of Reader's Theater

## Abstract

*Farm to School is a program that teaches children about healthy practices around agriculture, food, nutrition, and the environment. Organizations such as the National Farm to School Network serve as information resource centers for those looking to champion Farm to School in their area. In Georgia, Georgia Organics is listed as the lead organization for Farm to School and its related programs. However, no account exists detailing Farm to School's start in Georgia, which is complicated by different participants applying Farm to School in diverse ways. This article is the first in a series and aims to identify the early champions of the program. The study used a qualitative narrative inquiry approach. A semi-structured appreciative inquiry-framed interview protocol guided data collection. Researchers used respondent-driven sampling to recruit participants. Results are presented as a reader's theater dialogue in podcast form. In total, six participants held a director role, three a CEO role, two a specialist role, and one an educator role. Future research should seek to build upon this study: This study represents a sampling of some key players in Farm to School in Georgia, some of whom indicated they were directly involved in the early days of Farm to School and others who were only aware of the early days tangentially. Future research should explore other ways to identify key players in Farm to School and how they are related to the individuals in this article. Educators can use this information to identify whom they should include in their programs.*

**Keywords:** Farm to school champions; Nutrition; Agriculture; Reader's theater

## Introduction

Farm to School is a multi-faceted education program focused on teaching children about healthy practices around agriculture, food, nutrition, and the environment (Joshi et al., 2008; National Farm to School Network, 2021a). Several activities promote the ideas of Farm to School, but generally, activities fall under local procurement efforts, school gardens, and hands-on education. Local procurement refers to the efforts of school nutrition staff, i.e., how they connect with local farmers to bring fresh produce into the cafeteria (National Farm to School Network, 2021a). School gardens are a long-standing part of the traditional school setting but are a highlighted component of Farm to School (Burt, 2016). Gardens and garden education allow students to engage in hands-on, experiential learning to learn where their food comes from while simultaneously allowing them to grow food themselves (Blair, 2009; Burt, 2016). Teachers can also pair inside classroom lessons focused on Agricultural Education, food, health, and nutrition with teaching outside in the garden (National Farm to School Network, 2021). Blair (2009) further highlights gardens' ability to connect learning across multiple subjects (e.g., science, math), concluding that gardens increase observation skills, connections to nature, and food literacy.

Farm to School has operated since the early 1990s (Bisceglia et al., 2021; Feenstra & Ohmart, 2012), but a few garden-based education organizations, such as Life Lab in Santa Cruz, California, were established as early as the 1970s (Life Lab, 2022). Organizations such as the National Farm to School Network (NFSN) also emerged over time and currently serve as information resource centers for those looking to champion Farm to School in their area (National Farm to School Network, 2021a). In Georgia, Georgia Organics is listed as the lead organization for Farm to School and its related programs (National Farm to School Network, 2021b).

## Research Purpose

The Georgia Farm to School Alliance is comparable to the National Farm to School Network as it serves as a clearinghouse for Farm to School activities in the state. Over time, the Alliance has garnered the support of over 50 different organizations (e.g., nonprofits, schools, and government agencies) (Georgia Organics, 2022); however, no cohesive account exists detailing this organizational growth. Additionally, numerous schools participate in funded, federally recognized Farm to School efforts while others institute general Farm to School practices. These nuances complicate the efforts of educators and individuals looking to start Farm to School programs. This study explored the origin and building of Farm to School in Georgia by focusing on identifying the early champions of formalizing Farm to School in Georgia. Specifically, this paper introduces the individuals identified as champions of the early days of Farm to School in Georgia. Subsequent work will further examine the deeper conversations I had with these participants. Establishing the key players in Farm to School in Georgia in this paper creates relevant context and familiarity for future work. Subsidiary questions to be addressed in this paper include:

1. What underlying connections existed among the early champions of this work?
2. What background experiences led these individuals to work in this sphere?
3. What professional positions do these individuals find themselves in now?

Practitioners and researchers will find these questions useful to their pursuit of acquiring Farm to School knowledge because this paper's exploration will address one method for identifying key players while also providing guidance on whom to ask for support around establishing Farm to School programs.

## Research Methods

### Theoretical Framework

This study was a qualitative narrative inquiry study grounded in the interpretive paradigm, specifically social constructionism, an epistemology that purports individuals 'construct' knowledge and meaning based on their interactions with other individuals and by being within the world (Bhattacharya, 2017). Individuals form knowledge in relation to others, as in, what others do or say in addition to what one already knows or thinks ultimately informs the construction of new knowledge (Flick, 2006; Schwandt, 1997). Ultimately, social constructionism contends that multiple truths or realities exist; hence, the reality of Farm to School in Georgia is considered from multiple viewpoints.

### Data Collection and Participant Sampling

Data collection was guided by a semi-structured interview process, where the interview guide was grounded in narrative and appreciative inquiry. I used respondent-driven sampling to recruit participants for this study and a variation of reader's theater to represent the findings.

### Inquiry

Narrative inquiry roots itself in the experience and story of the individual(s) who experience a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). This form of research relies on synthesizing how individuals personally, historically, and geographically relate to the events of their own or others' lives and experiences (Leedy & Ormrod). Appreciative inquiry is "a group process that inquiries into, identifies, and further develops the best of 'what is' in organizations to create a better future" (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, p. 1). For example, participants were asked to describe stories of collaboration among organizations in the Georgia Farm to School Alliance or to imagine the

future of Farm to School programming (Cooperrider et al., 2008). The combination of narrative and appreciative inquiries enabled us to encourage participants to entrust us with their stories. Questions were also left open-ended to ensure that participants would provide rich detail and depth (Carspecken, 1996). Figure 1 displays a sample excerpt from the interview protocol. The interview guide was reviewed by two experts, one of whom was an expert in qualitative interviewing, and the other of whom was an expert in appreciative inquiry.

**Figure 1**

*Sample Questions from the Semi-Structured Interview Guide*

<p><u>Experiences in Your Organization</u></p> <p>Now that we've talked a bit about your background, I would like to learn more about your experiences working with Farm to School. I would also like to ask a few questions about your values, both personal and professional, as they relate to your work.</p> <p><b>7. Can you give an example of a time you felt most alive, involved, or excited about your involvement in your organization's work with Farm to School?</b></p> <p><i>Probing Questions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What made this an exciting experience?</li> <li>• Were others involved that made it exciting? Who?</li> <li>• Is there anything about you (personality, background, interests, etc.) that made this an exciting experience? (Essentially, why – personally, professionally, or both – was this exciting for you?)</li> </ul>
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*Note.* Sample questions from the interview guide combine key concepts from Carspecken's (1996) suggestions and Preskill & Catsambas's (2006) tenets of appreciative inquiry.

***Respondent-Driven Sampling***

Respondent-driven sampling (RDS) (Heckathorn, 1997) is a method that allows researchers to navigate the ambiguity of uncertain populations by drawing on related sampling techniques, namely, key informant, snowball, and targeted (Gile & Handcock, 2010; Heckathorn, 1997). Because of the uncertainty around how Farm to School had grown in Georgia, the literature indicated this would be the most appropriate data sampling procedure.

In RDS, the researcher(s) selects the initial seeds or 0<sup>th</sup> wave, so I selected the past and present directors of Farm to School at Georgia Organics as seeds ( $n = 2$ ). This was an intentional decision because Georgia Organics is considered the lead contact for Farm to School in the state (National Farm to School Network, 2021b). I determined further waves by asking each individual of the respective wave to share names of who could best contribute to telling the story of Farm to School in Georgia. In waves one and two, participants were asked to provide two names, and in wave three, participants were asked to provide five names. The variance in the number of names requested was to ensure that I reached data saturation in the final round. In this final round, several repeat names were listed, so I knew saturation had been achieved. There was a total of three waves and 14 participants, but two participants could not be reached, so there were twelve participants in total, as shown in Table 1. A corresponding table of reasons explaining why participants were recommended to participate in this study can be found in Table 2.

**Table 1***Identifying Early Champions of Farm to School in Georgia via Respondent-Driven Sampling*

“Seeds” (n = 2)

Selection Criteria: Past or present director of Farm to School at Georgia Organics

<b>Name</b>	<b>Current Organization</b>	<b>Did they participate?</b>
Kimberly Della Donna	Georgia Organics	Y
Erin Croom	Small Bites Adventure Club	Y
1 <sup>st</sup> Wave (n = 4)		
Selection Criteria: Recommended by those of the previous wave		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Current Organization</b>	<b>Did they participate?</b>
Tasha Gomes	FoodCorps	Y
Jenna Mobley	Community Farmers Markets	Y
Jennifer Owens	HealthMPowers	Y
Donna DeCaille	NOSH Nutrition	Y
2 <sup>nd</sup> Wave (n = 8)		
Selection Criteria: Recommended by those of the previous wave		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Current Organization</b>	<b>Did they participate?</b>
Wande Okunoren-Meadows	Little Ones Learning Center	Y
Holly Thaw	Georgia Department of Education	Y
Nichole Lupo	Atlanta Neighborhood Charter School	Y
Kyla Sankara	Fernbank Science Center	Y
Stephanie Van Parys	Wylde Center	Y
Ashley Rouse	Captain Planet Foundation	Y
[Name remains undisclosed]	previously, Georgia Department of Agriculture	N
No name given	n/a	N
Total		n = 14

All participants were contacted via email and asked to participate in a voluntary 60-minute online interview. There were no risks associated with participating. All sampling recruitment materials and target population were approved by the Institutional Review Board at The University of Georgia (Project00004617), including the researchers’ decision to provide the participants’ real names and organizations. The participants consented to have this information shared, and this was done to increase the credibility of the accounts and backgrounds shared. Additionally, the researchers considered this information to be useful for others looking to start their own Farm to School programs (e.g., teachers).

**Table 2***List of Reasons for Participants Inclusion in the Research Study*

Name	Wave	First By	Recommended	For What Reason(s)
Kimberly Della Donna	0	N/A		Current director of Farm to School at Georgia Organics
Erin Croom	0	N/A		First director of Farm to School at Georgia Organics
Tasha Gomes	1	Kimberly Della Donna		Contributes to the equity initiatives in Farm to School
Jenna Mobley	1	Kimberly Della Donna		Key player in developing Farm to School in Georgia
Jennifer Owens	1	Erin Croom		Early key player
Donna DeCaille	1	Erin Croom		Early key player
Wande Okunoren-Meadows	2	Tasha Gomes		Discussed in at least two interviews about her efforts to unite those in the Georgia Farm to School Alliance
Holly Thaw	2	Tasha Gomes		Represents Georgia Department of Education perspective
Nichole Lupo	2	Jenna Mobley		Participates in relevant work
Kyla Sankara	2	Jenna Mobley		Helped determine what role (“lane”) everyone would play in Georgia Farm to School
Stephanie Parys	2	Jenna Mobley		Helped determine what role (“lane”) everyone would play in Georgia Farm to School
Ashley Rouse	2	Jenna Mobley		Recommended as a “mover and shaker” in the field; Early key player
[Name remains undisclosed]	2	Donna DeCaille		Represents Georgia Department of Agriculture, an early key players

**Data Analysis**

Narrative analysis was used adjacent to the data collection methods because it can help guide decisions on how a story is told (Riessman, 2008). Mishler (1995) proposed a typology for narrative analysis: (1) reference and temporal order; (2) textual coherence and structure; and (3) narrative functions. Within the former, reference and temporal order, he suggests four strategies for “the telling and the told.” This specific study sought to construct a telling rooted in the told. Instead of a singular told, several perspectives had to be considered. Subsequently, thematic narrative analysis was employed, a method that suggests participant accounts should be analyzed as whole units rather than as single units of themes built upon another (Riessman, 2008). The researcher does not construct a theory per se to describe the findings, rather what was said is taken at face value to create a wholistically-informed account. I, therefore, consolidated or shortened some quotes for ease of reading and removed filler words such as “like,” “um,” or “mm-hmm” because the importance of recounting the story was grounded in what was said, not how it was said.

To effectively combine these analytic considerations, I used reader’s theater as the presentation method. Traditionally, the term “refers to a staged presentation of a piece of text or

selected pieces of different texts that are thematically linked” (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995, p. 406). Due to podcasts' emergence as an information-sharing platform, this reader's theater was represented as if the participants were guests on a podcast (Rossiter & Godderis, 2011). Upon completion of the podcast, I provided participants with a copy for their review. I addressed all feedback from the participants and sent them a final draft for their review. Generally, I received positive remarks about the final product.

### ***Reflexivity Statement***

I am a graduate student interested in the application of farm to school as a general educational practice. Prior to graduate school, I gained experience in nutrition education, community gardening, and small-scale agriculture, experiences that propelled my interest in this subject. Based on previous research experiences and conversations with these participants, I have come to understand *Farm to School* as the participation in the actual government-funded program whereas *farm to school* is an organization that implements some of the related activities but chooses for one reason or another not to seek formal recognition or funding for their participation. Tensions exist around these distinctions of case. As a constant asker of “why,” I wondered how understanding Farm to School's history could serve as a generative process for innovating or reimaging traditional farm to school practices.

## **Results and Findings**

**JADE** Hello, everyone, and thank you for being on the show! I'm excited to have you all here today to talk about your background in the Farm to School world in Georgia. I know you all come from different personal and professional backgrounds, but what was most amazing to me was how in some way or another, almost all of you knew each other – a small world, indeed! Today, I hope to share some of these unique connections with our listeners. Kimberly, since you were the first person I interviewed, would you mind starting us off?

**KIMBERLY** Sure! Hey, y'all, my name is Kimberly Della Donna, and I'm the Farm to School Director at Georgia Organics. We are largely a farmer services organization, so we primarily support organic farmers. At the core, we see Farm to School as a way to connect Georgia farms with Georgia families. *Laughs*, The heart of my job is being a connector, so I do a lot of talking on the phone with people, emailing, identifying resources for folks who need them. I'm usually working with school nutrition directors and teachers to encourage them to implement Farm to School in their schools. I'm sure you've touched on the three core elements – local procurement, school gardens, and education – so for me, this may look like encouraging those in school nutrition to purchase, serve, and educate students about local food in the school meals and snacks program. Or, it may mean encouraging teachers to show students how to grow and make foods so that the kids will know where it comes from and how it affects their bodies, environment, community, and local economy.

**JADE** Wow, that's awesome! I don't know that I shared this with you, but the more we delved into your background, the more in awe I was. You mentioned you started in Rhode Island working at an organization called Kids First, right?

**KIMBERLY** Yes, that group supported schools by helping them improve their nutrition and physical activity initiatives. Kids First actually closed in 2012, but another organization called Farm Fresh Rhode Island took on the Farm to School program. I taught culinary skills and cooking programs to school nutrition directors and children, respectively, while I was there.

**JADE** Very cool! I forget this sometimes, but I also almost went to a culinary school in Rhode Island after I graduated from high school. My end goal was to learn how to be a chef and a dietitian, but I changed my mind to pursue a program more geared toward becoming a dietitian. I'm glad I pursued the path I did, but I certainly was jealous when I learned about your experiences in the kitchen! *Kimberly laughs in appreciation*

Hello Erin! It's great to have you here today. You served as the first Farm to School Director at Georgia Organics, right? What are you doing now?

**ERIN** I sure did. Now, I am the co-founder and CEO of Small Bites Adventure Club. Basically, we create recipe kits for parents and teachers to help them easily implement taste tests with their kiddos. We design, pack, and ship them all across Georgia and the whole U.S. Our hope is that these kits are easy tools for them to use to help children discover and love fruits and vegetables.

**JADE** Nice – kind of like a fresh-picked garden in a box then, or a meal kit for kids?

**ERIN** Yes, exactly. I serve as the director and visionary for that, and we have a team of about six – actually, I see Jenna and Donna on the screen – I get to work with them fairly often.

**JENNA** Oh, can I go next? I work with a lot of different organizations, but, yes, I overlap with Erin, and Kimberly, too.

**JADE** Sure, Jenna, go for it!

**JENNA** Great, hello, everyone, my name is Jenna Mobley! My job is kind of complicated to explain because I have a lot of them, but I'll try to be brief. I am the Director of Education and Outreach at Community Farmers Markets. We have several different farmer's markets that we run throughout the Atlanta area and during the week, so my job is to reach out to the families and children that live around those market areas and provide them with access to local food. And then, yes, I work with both Small Bites and Georgia Organics as a teacher trainer and curriculum developer, so I create a lot of lesson plans for them. These are more so my roles with Georgia Organics, but I do similar work with Small Bites. I know Erin already touched on this, but we have a monthly box subscription that goes to teachers and schools that has everything they need to do a hands-on taste test. My role in this is to create all the educational materials so teachers have standards-based developmentally-appropriate hands-on activities for kids. I also do some work with Life Lab, and then with FoodCorps, more on the national level, to provide training for all their service members. The other thing I wanted to mention, too, was that while I don't do this anymore, I was also a teacher in Atlanta Public Schools for 10 years or something like that. As I said, not a current role, but it's where a lot of my experience comes from.

**KIMBERLY** Jenna is probably one of the most impressive people I have ever met – a dynamo for sure!

**JADE, *laughing*** And also – she didn't share this with us – but a fun fact I learned was that she was actually a recipient in 2015 of the Presidential Innovation Award for Educators from former President Obama – I agree with Kimberly, a dynamo for sure!

**DONNA** Jenna and I do some work together – I mostly provide consultation around nutrition education for children, picky eaters, the works – since we both work with Erin at Small Bites.

**JADE** Donna, if I recall, you also wear many hats. Would you mind walking us through your various roles, too?

**DONNA** Sure. Hi y'all, as Jade said, my name is Donna DeCaille, and I'm actually a dietitian and also the founder and CEO of Nosh Nutrition. It's a company that provides consultation around communication, nutrition education, healthy eating, and food access for kids. During the week, I work at a pediatric psychiatric behavioral facility and provide consultation around clinical management for children. In that role, I also do nutrition education, so I have a garden and we have a Master Gardener that comes in and works with us. I try to integrate what's going on in the garden with food services *and* clinical, so I'm like food service-clinical. I spend probably about 10 to 12 hours of my week doing that, and then I also provide some guidance around PR and communications for a cheese company called Cabot Cheese. It's a co-operative based out of Boston. So basically, I work as a dietitian to provide nutrition education. I might pitch or write articles for them or help them find community-based organizations to support.

**JADE** Thank you, Donna! I remember when we talked – we spent the first 10 minutes or so remarking about how we got into dietetics. It was a cold, Friday afternoon in January and I definitely appreciated the warm, friendly conversation!

I touched on this a bit earlier, but I mentioned I moved away from the culinary program to pursue a dietetics program. I spent the first two years of my degree immersed in nutrition courses and the latter two years completing an internship that took me to various places across the Fort Worth area. My senior year is when I was in my community rotations, which is when I kind of filtered myself into the more community garden and agriculture-based internship opportunities. It was such a unique world, and Donna and I were able to talk about its intersection in the dietetics world.

**HOLLY** Yes, Jade, you and I talked about this, too! It was great to connect over that.

**JADE** Yes, Holly is a dietitian, too, and works as the Farm to School Specialist at the state level.

**HOLLY, *nodding*** Yes! I work for the Georgia Department of Education in the School Nutrition Division. As the Farm to School Specialist, I help support that programming in Georgia's school nutrition programs, so a lot of my work is helping the school nutrition professionals understand state and federal regulations and how to implement Farm to School at the local level. I also work to share the story of our local districts, especially their work in Farm to School.

**JADE** And how was it that you came into dietetics, Holly?

**HOLLY, *laughs*** I actually didn't know much about dietetics when I started school, but my family has a medical background, so I knew I wanted to do something related to health. I switched to dietetics a little later in college. Then, when I graduated, I first worked as a clinical dietitian but also helped develop some training for school nutrition programs, so that was a little bit of a foray into school nutrition for me. I went on to work for Fulton County School Nutrition, and later, Chatham County School Nutrition in Savannah. I actually left school nutrition for a little bit and went to work for UGA as a FACS agent in Chatham County. During that time, the person from the state who was in this role moved away, and the position became available, and I jumped on it. I was really excited to get back into school nutrition – sad to leave UGA – but I couldn't deny the calling to get back into school nutrition.

**JADE** Thank you for sharing, Holly, what a neat path to where you are today!

**ASHLEY** I think we had some overlap during my early days in Farm to School, Holly. I recall one of your internship experiences being at Atlanta Public Schools.

**HOLLY** That's right! Ashley is a masterful gardener – why don't you share some of your work?

**ASHLEY** Sure! Well, yes, hi, everyone, my name is Ashley Rouse, and I am the director of Project Learning Garden and Project Giving Gardens at Captain Planet Foundation. Most of my work involves supporting the teachers and schools in these programs, and fundraising when it's needed. It's very exciting – Project Learning Garden is a program that's been around for 10 years this past spring of 2022. We currently operate over 500 school gardens across 40 states. It's a holistic program that provides teachers with the essential elements they need to start and use school gardens as onsite learning laboratories and instructional spaces. The program started here in the metro Atlanta area, but about 8 years ago, a national funder came in and helped expand the gardens to 26 states. And then, Project Giving Gardens is actually a program that was established as a response to COVID-19. We leveraged our school garden partners to hire growers to help plant and maintain gardens and then harvest food from them. They give the harvested food back to the communities that the schools are a part of or that they exist in. This program also started in the metro Atlanta area with a hundred schools, but we were also able to pilot it with around 100 schools in the Bay Area of California.

**KYLA** Ashley and I have been co-conspirators on a lot of things over the years. I started with Captain Planet as a consultant and helped put together the first version of that program. And then I came on and worked for them for another few years to get that program up and running.

**JADE** And what is it that you do now, Kyla?

**KYLA** I work for Fernbank Science Center, which is actually a site of the DeKalb County School District. I'm an instructional specialist, which is basically a teacher, and I do a lot of different things. I teach agriculture and botany to high schoolers. I teach outreach programs to elementary schoolers. For example, I might take first graders to Arabia Mountain for a nature hike or teach fourth graders about native pollinators. I also run a vocational horticulture program for children with special needs, so we do some training in the greenhouses. We usually grow veggie starts for school gardens or local farms. Sometimes, we will run a plant sale here, too, mostly native trees, shrubs, and perennials, but veggie starts occasionally. So I've been here a bit. Before that, I actually worked over at the Wylde Center. Jenna was on the board there for a while, but Stephanie is the executive director right now.

**JADE** Yes, of course, I forgot about the connection between the three of you. Stephanie, I won't take your introduction from you, would you mind sharing a bit about your work?

**STEPHANIE, *laughing*** Oh, that's okay, thank you, Kyla, Jade! So, yes, my name is Stephanie Van Parys and I am the Executive Director at the Wylde Center. I've been here almost 20 years now, 17 of which have been as the ED. I am in charge of making sure we use our resources in a way that allows us to effectively carry out our mission. So, I am involved with organizational strategy, financial oversight, human resources, and building relationships with community partners. I also get to work with a very talented and generous staff to create education programs and maintain our 5 different gardens.

**JADE** Wow, 17 years! I know the gardens you mentioned are quite a large part of the Wylde Center's operations. Would you mind explaining them?

**STEPHANIE** Absolutely. So I actually live in the neighborhood where one of our gardens, the Oakhurst Garden, is located. The Oakhurst Garden is our oldest garden, but we have five total and they all serve a different purpose. So, for example, at our Oakhurst Garden, we have community plots, a mini-farm, chickens, and a greenhouse, and it also is home to our (in)famous plant sale, which draws people from all over Atlanta. We also host 3,000 students a year for field trips at this site. Another of our gardens, the Edgewood Community Learning Garden, serves as a demonstration garden where kids learn how to garden and cook what they grow. And then we also have our beautiful Hawk Hollow Garden Sugar Creek Garden, and Mulberry Fields Garden, which has goats! They are all within a few miles of each other – just a morning’s bike ride.

**JADE** I remember when you first described these gardens to me. I was having one of those days where graduate school and my seeming lack of progress on my research was getting me down. By the end of our time, I was once again enthralled with life, especially after hearing you describe these gardens – they seemed so magical! I am not a huge fan of Atlanta but hearing about these gardens made me want to visit.

**STEPHANIE, chuckling** Oh, well, I’m glad you walked away feeling better after our conversation.

**JADE** All of these conversations were certainly fun and uplifting. In fact, Nichole, would you mind sharing next? Your role is so fun, and Stephanie shared that you worked together for a number of years.

**NICHOLE, smiles** Yes, Stephanie was my old boss. But right now, I work as a School Farms Specialist at Atlanta Neighborhood Charter School. We have two campuses, elementary and middle, so I work with kids from kindergarten through eighth grade. My role within the school is to help coordinate the activities that take place on the school farm.

**JADE** And what all happens on the school farm?

**NICHOLE** Well, in short, a lot! We partner with different farmers across the area whom we call our school farmers, and we also have a scratch nutrition program that is helmed by two chefs. I schedule weekly harvests with our farmers and then communicate with teachers and the school nutrition staff to get classes involved in the harvest and make sure what we harvest aligns with the weekly menus. I am also an educator and teach kindergarten through fifth grade. So I serve as both an educator and a relationship builder and sort of a communications manager for all these different stakeholders in our Farm to School program. I also recently started an after-school farm club, so I help organize and coordinate that, too.

**JADE** Wow, that sounds like a lot of fun, thank you, Nichole!

I wanted to briefly pause and thank everyone once again for being here today. I’ve enjoyed getting to know more about all these connections!

I want to backtrack a bit and highlight FoodCorps. Jenna mentioned some of her work at the national level, but Tasha, I know you work a bit more locally. Would you mind telling us more?

**TASHA** Absolutely. As Jade said, my name is Tasha Gomes, and I’m the Associate Director for FoodCorps Georgia. FoodCorps is a grantee of AmeriCorps, so our program is a partner of theirs and does operate on the national level, which Jenna kind of alluded to. I work on the state level, with the Georgia program, but we are actually transitioning soon to a regional model. So, for

example, I will also be overseeing FoodCorps in the Carolinas, among other states. But right now, my specific role is to oversee the programming and partnerships for our direct service sites in Georgia, so part of my job is establishing and maintaining partnerships in the state. I also guide the programmatic decisions of our program, so basically, looking at which direction to go.

**JADE** Tasha, could you explain these service sites and members a bit?

**TASHA** Sure, so when I recruit, I hire service members who go into schools to provide hands-on education in food and garden-based lessons. We have seven sites total, five of which are in school district nutrition offices and the other two of which are in community-based organizations. Our hope is that these service members either will already know or are prepared to learn the needs of the region. We hope that after their time as a service member, they will remain in the community and continue doing the work.

**JADE** I know that getting service members in the classroom is a crucial objective of FoodCorps.

**TASHA** That's right. Our members may teach in the classroom or the garden, and often they will also work with the school nutrition staff. So they definitely get a lot of experience in impacting local food system change.

**JADE** Before I started graduate school at UGA, I was in a fellowship program, and my role was pretty similar to what these service members do. When I started thinking about my next steps, I actually came across FoodCorps. At the time, I was loving what I was doing, but my fellowship was very hands-on in that I worked about half the time on a farm. I liked the idea of FoodCorps because it seemed like you would get to have a huge impact in the classroom.

**TASHA** Absolutely. That's also changing a bit because some of our service members are taking on roles to help more on the school nutrition side, but up until this year, all of our members were classroom-based.

**WANDE** Tasha, I wanted to applaud your attention to community – it is so important.

**JADE** I agree! And Wande, I know your role is pretty focused on community, too. Would you like to introduce yourself next and share a bit about your background?

**WANDE** Absolutely. Hi, everyone, my name is Wande Okunoren-Meadows, and I am the Director of Culture, Quality, and Engagement at Little Ones Learning Center. Little Ones is an early childhood program in Forest Park, which is just outside of Atlanta. Forest Park is in Clayton County, which is the least well-off county of the metro Atlanta counties. Many assume we are glorified babysitters, but we are more than that. We operate as an accredited preschool and also as community conveners. We have a garden and even a farm stand, which is called the Little Lions Farm Stand. We offer sound therapy and yoga, and our kids especially love our taste tests – actually, we also partner with Small Bites Adventure Club!

**JADE** It's nice to see so many connections among us! Thank you, Wande. And with that, I think we have just one more person to introduce. Jennifer, would you mind closing us out?

**JENNIFER** Sure. Hey, y'all! My name is Jennifer Owens, and I am the president and CEO of HealthMPowers. Like Stephanie, I am also ultimately responsible for the day-to-day and long-term financial, operational, and programmatic management of the organization. We do a lot here at

HMP, but overall, we provide training for and do policy change work around nutrition education and physical activity promotion, primarily for youth across the state of Georgia.

**JADE** Yes, that's right, you and Stephanie both do have similar roles.

**JENNIFER** Yes, we do, though I've only been at HMP since August of 2020. I definitely haven't been in my role as long as Stephanie has been at the Wylde Center! But, to bring it full circle, I actually got my start in Farm to School working in advocacy and fundraising at Georgia Organics. Not with Kimberly, *smiles and nods at Kimberly*, but with Erin and Ashley, actually.

**JADE, smiling** Small world we have here! It has been so wonderful to explore and engage with all of you today. I am constantly in awe of all the connections among us. Thank you, everyone, for being on the show today – I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did, and I look forward to continuing to learn more about Farm to School in Georgia. Thanks for listening!

### Discussion and Conclusions

This study sought to determine the early champions of formalizing Farm to School in Georgia. Upon examining the data, subsidiary questions that were answered were:

1. What underlying connections existed among the early champions of this work?
2. What background experiences led these individuals to work in this sphere?
3. What professional positions do these individuals find themselves in now?

Though the above conversation was not entirely representative of all who work in the Farm to School field, the idea to use reader's theater as a presentation mode was specifically chosen for the way it could elucidate the connections between the participants. Subsequently, the conversation showcased both professional and personal background experiences that led these individuals toward becoming innovators and leaders among those in Farm to School. The resulting dialogue also revealed their underlying connections and friendships.

### Summarizing Existing Connections, Background Experiences, and Current Positions

In total, six participants held a director role, three a CEO role, two a specialist role, and one an educator role. Many worked for a nonprofit, but three started their own business or ran their own one-on-one services, three worked for schools or independent organizations, and one worked at the state-level government. Regardless of their title or type of organization, every individual I interviewed supported Farm to School in some capacity. For example, Donna, Nichole, and Kyla worked most directly with children, educating them in some capacity about food, nutrition, plants, or agriculture. Kimberly, Erin, Jenna, and Ashley seemed next removed regarding working with children: their focus was directed more toward a combination of teachers, parents, and families, helping these groups to more easily start in or disseminate Farm to School-related concepts and activities. Holly, too, works closely with those in school nutrition to help them manage their Farm to School programs. Finally, Tasha, Wande, Stephanie, and Jennifer play some type of oversight role. They all focus on the direction their program pushes the Farm to School needle, and much of their days are spent building relationships and advocating for the importance of this type of programming. In looking at background experiences, too, one individual came from a culinary perspective, two from gardening, two from dietetics and nutrition, and five from education. The other two individuals approached Farm to School from business-oriented and community-building arenas.

### Limitations

These individuals represent the early champions of Farm to School in Georgia and were asked to participate because of the sampling method used. However, a limitation of the study was that each individual *does* align in some form or fashion with only one of the three focus areas of Farm to School: education, gardening, or school nutrition/local procurement. At least three individuals mentioned in their interviews at large that this work has been in existence for much longer than the Farm to School program has existed. Indeed, literature reveals gardens have long since been established as a teaching setting (Burt, 2016), yet funding for Farm to School did not come about until the early 2000s (Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry United States Senate, 2009). Contrary to the formal establishment of Farm to School, both Stephanie and Wande respectively pointed out that several subject areas, such as agriculture, science, and environmental education, as well as black, brown, and indigenous-oriented organizations, have been doing the work of Farm to School for decades. In some ways, the sampling method thus limited learning more about Farm to School beyond the three key domains. The sampling method was, however, beneficial in that these divergent views of Farm to School emerged; this is helpful for future research and will be discussed later.

It is important to re-enunciate that this paper specifically sought to introduce and identify the key players in Georgia's Farm to School program, not necessarily discuss strengths or complications in Georgia's Farm to School program itself. However, another limitation of RDS to note is that because each participant's background and position did not overlap entirely, there were gaps in the account of Farm to School. For example, about half of the participants were involved in the early days and formalization of Farm to School in Georgia (e.g., Erin Croom or Ashley Rouse). When asked who else could help tell the story of its formation, though, often only current efforts were listed (e.g., Kimberly Della Donna or Jenna Mobley). These individuals were able to provide a picture of the current scope of Farm to School but not expand the understanding of the conceptualization of Farm to School in Georgia. As a result, the early story of Farm to School in Georgia is still muddled because of the number of perspectives working on the various initiatives today. This limitation will be explored in a later paper (Davidson & Peake, to be submitted, Chapter 5).

### **Future Research and Practical Implications**

Future research should seek to build upon this study. This study represents a sampling of some key players in Farm to School in Georgia, some of whom indicated they were directly involved in the early days of Farm to School and others who were only aware of the early days tangentially. Future articles dedicated to this study should thus examine the relationship between the participants (e.g., categorize recommendation links as professional connections, past/present employers/employees, etc.).

Additional research should also seek to explore how gaps in the respondent-driven sampling process could be mitigated. The process relied on methods akin to snowball sampling (Heckathorn, 1997), yet more purposive methods could be used to probe for other individuals working at the start of this Farm to School effort. As an example, I asked participants to identify individuals who could specifically help me better understand Georgia's Farm to School movement. Future researchers should endeavor to be more specific in how they ask their question, especially if their goal is to critically analyze the history of Farm to School's formation. Moreover, this study did not include voices from formal classroom educators, government agencies (e.g., Department of Agriculture), or school nutrition personnel. The way I asked the RDS question could have impeded the final study sample.

Future research should seek to explain the origin and building of Farm to School in Georgia. This article merely sought to introduce who the key players were. Yet, programs change and develop over time, so it would also behoove researchers to consider how that has affected the popularity or acceptance of Farm to School programs. Researchers should also explore the tension of formal Farm to School programs versus those who generally implement Farm to School activities. Exploring this divergence in how Farm to School is defined may reveal beneficial connections and overlap between the number of existing agriculture-, food-, and nutrition-based education programs.

Despite some of the limitations of the methods, this article provides a practical example of how to learn about Farm to School initiatives in the state. The participant list is a starting point that could be used to examine (1) the types of organizations involved and (2) the types of roles typical of individuals participating in this movement. The podcast representation of the findings also serves to indicate that largely this work is built on conversation and community. Though an extensive process of tracking down who is who, the conversation woven throughout indicates relevant background experiences one may need or could contact in the event of planning to start a Farm to School program. Moreover, though this sampling method produced mixed results because Farm to School is a community-based program, the general principles of RDS could be used by educators to further learn how to initiate Farm to School and related programs.

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