

# Guidance for Strong Beginnings Variations for FY27 (26-27 SY)

## Funding

For FY 27, the funding per child by program option is as follows:

- \$18,000 5 day extended program
- \$15,000 4 day school day Strong Beginnings program
- \$9,000 5 day extended Strong Beginnings/HS blend
- \$7,500 4 day Strong Beginnings/HS blend
- \$7,500 4 day part day
- \$15,000 4 day school day Strong Beginnings/GSRP multiage program for children age eligible for Strong Beginnings. Children age eligible for GSRP will receive the 4 day school day GSRP allocation from GSRP funds. In addition, for each age eligible GSRP child, the program will receive an allocation from Strong Beginnings that is equal to the difference between Strong Beginnings and GSRP funding. This additional funding covers proportional costs for the Family Liaison and other Strong Beginnings requirements. For each classroom, the number of children eligible for Strong Beginnings and GSRP will be determined by the MSDS Spring Early Childhood Collection.
- \$18,000 5 day extended Strong Beginnings/GSRP multiage program for children age eligible for Strong Beginnings. Children age eligible for GSRP will receive the 5 day extended GSRP allocation from GSRP funds. In addition, for each age eligible GSRP child, the program will receive an allocation from Strong Beginnings that is equal to the difference between Strong Beginnings and GSRP funding. This additional funding covers proportional costs for the Family Liaison and other Strong Beginnings requirements. For each classroom, the number of children eligible for Strong Beginnings and GSRP will be determined by the MSDS Spring Early Childhood Collection.
- In braided classrooms, children funded by Strong Beginnings will receive the amount of funding provided for Strong Beginnings children in programs with the same number of days per week and length of program day. Children not enrolled in Strong Beginnings only receive an extra stipend from Strong Beginnings if they are participating in a Strong Beginnings/GSRP multiage classroom. If children not enrolled in Strong Beginnings are funded by tuition, Head Start etc., they do not receive any Strong Beginnings funding.
- All classrooms receiving some Strong Beginnings funding for all students will receive full funding for 15 students regardless of actual enrollment. Strong Beginnings funds will be used to fully fund classrooms that do not enroll 15 students, including Strong Beginnings/GSRP multiage classrooms. This does not apply to classrooms using braided funding with tuition, Head Start etc.

## **ISD Administration**

### **17. Head Start Program Performance Standards Waiver**

To expand access to Strong Beginnings, Head Start subrecipients may request to implement the Head Start Program Performance Standards for quality as an alternative for existing Strong Beginnings policies, regulations, and procedures. To request this allowance from CCRESA, Strong Beginnings Head Start subrecipients must:

1. Submit the Head Start Program Performance Standards waiver to their ISD for the allowance
2. Provide the ISD with the following assurances:
  - a. That the child care licenses of all centers operated by the subrecipient to serve Strong Beginnings and Head Start children are in good standing and that no child care licenses are suspended or revoked.
  - b. That the subrecipient has not been suspended by the Office of Head Start or disbarred from any other federal or state agency or disqualified from the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).
    - i. That the subrecipient will provide Strong Beginnings enrolled children with at least the minimum instructional time as required by CCRESA.
    - ii. That the subrecipient participates in this state's quality rating system at a level determined by the department.
    - iii. That the subrecipient uses a developmentally appropriate curriculum.
    - iv. That the subrecipient ensures that all enrolled children receive developmental screening and are referred for appropriate special education support and services.
    - v. Commits to allow the ISD access to Strong Beginnings Head Start classrooms following a mutually agreed upon plan.
    - vi. That the subrecipient commits to participating in program financial review and monitoring by CCRESA, as needed.
    - vii. Commits to conducting an annual independent financial audit and provides a copy of the annual audit to CCRESA upon request.
    - viii. Commits to submit all financial and program reporting requirements for Strong Beginnings as determined by the ISD. ISDs may choose to accept the financial audit as mentioned in lieu of requiring documentation for expenses.
    - ix. Commits to submit all program reporting and evaluation requirements for Strong Beginnings as determined by CCRESA.

- x. Commits to submit all financial and program reporting requirements for Strong Beginnings as determined by CCRESA.
  - xi. Commits to participate in the development and implementation of a collaborative recruitment and enrollment in partnership with their local intermediate school district(s).
- 3. Upon receipt of the request from the subrecipient, the ISD will review for acknowledgement of all commitments listed above. The ISD must forward the request to CCRESA within 10 working days of receiving the request. Included with the request, the ISD will include any concerns that they have that the subrecipient cannot satisfactorily meet the above commitments.
- 4. Any subrecipient demonstrating to the satisfaction of CCRESA that they can meet the above commitments and are currently meeting the requirements of the Head Start Program Performance Standards, will receive written notification from CCRESA that they are approved to implement Head Start national Performance Standards for Quality as an alternative to Strong Beginnings policies and regulations. The department will include the ISD on the written response.

### **Head Start Waiver for Individual Requirements**

A Head Start subrecipient seeking a waiver of individual Strong Beginnings requirements must complete the Strong Beginnings/Head Start Blend Waiver Form and submit it to the ISD. Once reviewed by the ISD, it will be submitted to CCRESA for approval.

*Note: The language in section 17, Head Start Performance Standards waiver, is under revision for both GSRP and Strong Beginnings and will be updated soon.*

### **Eligibility**

A child with an individualized education program (IEP) who is income eligible for Head Start must be referred to the local Head Start agency. **IEP Prioritization:** A child with a current IEP must be given first priority for enrollment in a Strong Beginnings classroom regardless of actual family income unless the IEP Team has determined that the child’s educational needs can only be met in a more restrictive, self-contained classroom setting (The actual family income must still be collected and reported in Michigan Student Data System (MSDS)) for **Blended Programming:** A child with a current IEP who is enrolled in a program such as a Head Start classroom that is blended with Strong Beginnings. (Program blending requires that the highest licensing and rule requirement of each program be met in the blended setting unless a signed waiver is in place).

## **Child and Family Supports**

In multiage classrooms receiving Strong Beginnings funding, all children and families, regardless of the child's age or funding source, should receive the same child and family supports.

### **Program Administration and Staffing**

#### **4-Day School-Day, 4-Day School-Day Strong Beginnings/GSRP Multiage, 4-Day Part-Day, 4-Day Strong Beginnings/Head Start Blend Option and 4-Day Part-Day or School Day Strong Beginnings/tuition, Head Start etc. Braided**

Classrooms beginning in the 26-27 school year as well as continuing classrooms offering the 4-day school-day, 4-day school-day multiage, 4-day part-day or 4-day Strong Beginnings/Head Start blend option must operate 4 days per week for a minimum of 120 days spread over at least 30 weeks.

#### **5-Day Extended Strong Beginnings Program, 5-day Extended Strong Beginnings/GSRP Multiage, 5-Day Extended Strong Beginnings/Head Start Blend, 5-Day Part Day Extended Strong Beginnings and 5-Day Part or School Day Strong Beginnings/tuition, Head Start etc.**

Classrooms beginning in the 26-27 school year and offering the 5-day extended program option or 5-day extended Strong Beginnings/Head Start blend option must operate 5 days per week for a minimum of 180 days spread over at least 36 weeks. To better align with the local K-12 calendar and operations, the Strong Beginnings classroom may schedule up to eight (8) days for family engagement including home visits or parent-teacher conferences. Up to five (5) professional learning and/or coaching days of five (5) or more hours may also be scheduled and counted as instructional days. Also, in alignment with local K-12, the Strong Beginnings classroom is allowed up to six (6) instructional days that may be forgiven for inclement weather cancellations. ISDs are responsible for ensuring that program schedules are set before school begins and do not take unfair advantage of these options. Programs should only make use of these options to the extent necessary to accomplish Strong Beginnings requirements.

### **Specials**

Programs implementing the extended program option may consider the use of "specials" to facilitate teaching team planning time, ongoing child assessment, collaboration with other service providers, coaching, and family engagement. During specials, children engage in developmentally appropriate activities such as art, music, literacy, and physical education that may be offered by the local school

district or community partnerships such as a yoga instructor, local librarian, or music instructor. Specials providers should work collaboratively with Strong Beginnings teachers.

Specials providers should understand and be guided by the [Early Childhood Standards Quality for Birth to Kindergarten \(ECSQ\)](#). Programs should take care to follow child care licensing requirements around fingerprinting, health and safety training requirements, and the use of approved space with consideration given to bringing specials providers into the classroom or program instead of taking children to another space for that time. If choosing to allow periods of release time for one member of the teaching team during this part of the day, the specials providers will need to complete all licensing requirements to be considered in the ratios. If the specials provider does not meet all licensing requirements to be considered in ratio, then the teaching team members need to be in the room with the children during the programming provided by the specials providers.

## **4- and 5-Day School Day Extended Strong Beginnings**

4- and 5-day school day Strong Beginnings classrooms, including multi-age classrooms, Head Start blend and braided programs, must operate for at least the same length of day as the local school district's/public school academy's first grade program. A classroom that offers a 4- or 5-day school-day or a 5-day program, including multiage programs, must enroll all children for the same length of the day to be considered a 4-or 5-day school day program.

## **Part-Day Strong Beginnings**

Four-day part-day Strong Beginnings classrooms, including braided programs, must provide for a minimum of three hours of teacher/child contact time per day, for at least four days per week.

Special consideration is required before scheduling an afternoon section of Strong Beginnings. Most three-year old children require afternoon naps to support their productive engagement in classroom activities during that time. Since a part-day Strong Beginnings classroom schedule does not accommodate rest time, enrollment in the program should be limited to only those children not needing an afternoon rest to have a successful classroom experience. In addition, many locations will not have sufficient populations to support two sections (morning and afternoon) of Strong Beginnings. If both AM and PM sessions of Strong Beginnings are scheduled, they must be at the same location.

## **Multiage Strong Beginnings**

An ISD or subrecipient may offer a classroom that includes both children who are eligible for Strong Beginnings and children who are eligible for GSRP. Eligibility guidelines for the appropriate program should be utilized depending on the age of the children applying. Most multiage classrooms will be 4 Day School Day classrooms but 5 Day Extended classrooms may also be allowed.

Requirements for multiage classrooms, regardless of numbers of children eligible for Strong Beginnings and GSRP that are enrolled, are the same as for all Strong Beginnings only classrooms utilizing that program option.

During the pilot phase of Strong Beginnings, all multiage classrooms will be funded at the level of other Strong Beginnings classrooms selecting the same program option. This will be accomplished by providing for each child age-eligible for GSRP a stipend from Strong Beginnings funds that is equal to the difference between Strong Beginnings and GSRP funding for the program option utilized. This additional funding covers proportional costs for the Family Liaison and other Strong Beginnings requirements. The numbers of children to be funded primarily by Strong Beginnings and by GSRP will be determined on the basis of the MSDS Spring Early Childhood Collection. Any slots that are unfilled at the time of that Collection will also be funded by Strong Beginnings.

In a multiage classroom, it is expected that the range of developmental levels will be even wider than in a classroom with children of the same age. Enough children of each age group must be enrolled to ensure that there is a reasonable distribution of children across this wide range. This will enable and encourage the development of meaningful peer relationships and deeper exploration of ideas. Classroom activities must also be even more thoughtfully planned and implemented to support and encourage the development of each child. More information is available in the Classroom Quality section of this manual.

Multiage braided classrooms with some children funded by Strong Beginnings and some by tuition, Head Start etc., are also allowed. The multiage guidance in the Classroom Quality section of this manual as well as all other Strong Beginnings guidance must be followed in these classrooms. Please see also the additional guidance on classrooms with braided funding included in this section of the manual.

## **4-Day Strong Beginnings/Head Start Blend and 5-Day Extended Strong Beginnings/ Head Start Blend Classrooms**

An ISD or subrecipient may partner with Head Start to create a Strong Beginnings/Head Start "Blend" within a classroom. This is accomplished by blending Strong Beginnings and part-day Head Start funding resulting in a school day of early childhood programming. The traditional 4-day Blend classroom operates for a minimum of 120 days; the 5-day Extended Blend classroom operates for a minimum of 180 days. The funding for the Strong Beginnings portion of the day in a traditional 4-day Blend is the same as 4-Day Part-Day Strong Beginnings. The funding for the Strong Beginnings portion of the day in the 5-day Extended Blend is half the funding of a 5-day Extended Strong Beginnings classroom.

4-and 5-day Strong Beginnings/Head Start Blend classrooms must operate for at least the same length of day as the local school district's/public school academy's first grade program. A 4-day school-day, versus a part-day, daily routine must be implemented. A child may not participate in Strong Beginnings for a part-day

session in one classroom and then transition to a Head Start part-day session in another classroom.

All Head Start and Strong Beginnings policies and regulations must be applied to the blended classrooms, with the highest standard from either program adhered to, except as detailed in the [ISD Administration of Strong Beginnings section](#) of this manual. All children funded by the 4- or 5-day Strong Beginnings/Head Start Blend must qualify for and be concurrently enrolled in both programs. Classrooms that include 4-day Strong Beginnings/Head Start Blend enrollment meet Head Start requirements for days in session. Classrooms that include 5-day Extended Strong Beginnings/Head Start Blend enrollment meet Strong Beginnings 5-day Extended Option requirements for days in session.

For classrooms that include 4-day Strong Beginnings/Head Start Blends or 5-day Extended Blends and where Head Start has the preponderance of responsibility, Head Start is contracted as the Strong Beginnings subrecipient. When the subrecipient delivering 4-day Strong Beginnings/Head Start Blend or 5-day Extended Blend classrooms is other than Head Start, considerations include collaboration on features such as enrollment, attendance, classroom tools and forms, cost allocation for the teaching team and classroom services, comprehensive services, and monitoring of requirements for both programs. The responsibility for each of these program requirements must be addressed in the formal agreement between Head Start and Strong Beginnings.

Educational guidance for the teaching team warrants special consideration. As with all Strong Beginnings classrooms, the Strong Beginnings Early Childhood Specialist (ECS) is the educational leader, ensuring that the program evaluation tool is administered and monitoring child assessment data. The ECS must also collaborate with the Head Start Education Manager as detailed within the written agreement. If both the ECS and the Head Start Education Manager are to support the classroom, they must also collaborate on feedback sessions, goal setting, and professional learning so that there is a systematic approach with consistent messaging and manageable expectations for teaching teams.

## **Strong Beginnings Classrooms with Braided Funding**

Strong Beginnings classrooms with braided funding are those classrooms in which some children are funded solely by Strong Beginnings and some children are funded solely by another funding source such as tuition or Head Start. When even one child in a classroom is funded through Strong Beginnings, all Strong Beginnings requirements for the program variation/option being implemented must be followed including staff credentialing, curriculum, assessment, family engagement, child and family supports etc.

In order to support expansion occurring through braided funding, materials and supplies purchased with Strong Beginnings funds may be used by other activities within a ISD or CBO program facility receiving funding from other state, local or regional awards. The provision applies to materials and supplies only; equipment purchase, salaries and other services are excluded. Materials and supplies

purchased by Strong Beginnings may not be used to supplement federally funded activities.

In addition to the above, the following additional flexibilities are allowable:

**Strong Beginnings funds can be used to pay for the cost of implementing the Strong Beginnings requirements**, including:

- Professional learning for classroom staff and administrators, outside of what is necessary for child care licensing. Specifically, professional learning for curriculum, child assessment and screening, and any professional learning for Strong Beginnings required by the ISD or CCRESA. Costs may include registration, travel, staff time and substitutes.
- Purchase of curriculum or assessment materials approved by Strong Beginnings.
- The documented difference between the salaries for Strong Beginnings qualified teachers and associate teachers compared to the salaries for other program teachers and associate teachers.
- An additional portion of administrator salaries for Strong Beginnings-specific duties.

Additionally, a tuition program offering GSRP may experience lost revenue because of the requirement to limit group size to 15 students with two adults at all times. The Lost Revenue Calculation Template can be used to calculate the proportionate rate that includes a percentage for lost revenue.

When considering a braided classroom, it is important to remember that the reimbursement rate for Strong Beginnings is significantly higher than the fees charged by almost all Michigan tuition based programs for three-year olds. Because of this, even if all classroom expenses can be charged to Strong Beginnings, the aggregate funding received from Strong Beginnings and tuition will likely be far less than what is appropriated for a Strong Beginnings classroom. **It will be very difficult to satisfy all the Strong Beginnings requirements in a classroom dependent only on some Strong Beginnings and some tuition funding.**

## **Program Year Planning for All Program Options**

ISDs are responsible for ensuring that program schedules are set before school begins. When planning the program year, scheduled breaks, holidays, and possible inclement weather days should be considered and sufficient days and weeks scheduled to ensure that the minimum number of program days and weeks is met. When excessive unexpected closures occur (e.g., inclement weather days) and reduce the number of instructional days children will attend to fewer than the minimum required, make-up days must be planned.

All program options, besides part-day, may count partial days of school as a day of instruction as is allowed for K-12 students. For example, a program may schedule

an early release periodically to provide teacher planning time or schedule early release for several days in one week to accommodate family conferences. For classrooms operated by school districts, this may be consistent with the schedule of the local school district.

## **Class Size and Ratio**

Up to a 2:15 adult/child ratio must be maintained at all times. Class size must be capped at 15 children.

## **Family Handbook**

- Programs including multiage classrooms should include information describing this approach and explaining how it meets the needs of children with a wide range of developmental levels.

## **Classroom Quality**

### **Class Structure**

#### **Multiage Grouping**

Multiage grouping is the practice of including both three- and four-year-old children in the same state-funded preschool classroom. Children enter classrooms at age three and return, when possible, to the same teaching staff at age four. Teachers treat the children as members of one composite class, individualizing as appropriate to meet the wide range of developmental needs typically found in such classrooms. This approach provides consistency for children and families while additionally allowing children to first learn from and then act as slightly older models of knowledge and behavior.

In a multiage classroom, it is expected that the range of developmental levels will be even wider than in a classroom with children of the same age. Enough children of each age group must be enrolled to ensure that there is a reasonable distribution of children across this wide range. This will enable and encourage the development of meaningful peer relationships and deeper exploration of ideas. Classroom activities must also be even more thoughtfully planned and implemented to support and encourage the development of each child.

Each multiage classroom should incorporate a variety of teaching strategies and techniques to ensure that the needs of all children are met. For example, teachers should vary the level of questions they ask (What animal do you think this book is about? Why do you think the bird went looking for his mother?) and the type of responses that they elicit (verbal, motor etc.) at large group times. During work time, a wide variety of materials that children can explore and use at their own developmental level (paints, blocks, etc.) should be available. Children should have daily opportunities to be challenged and learn new information that is appropriate for and intentionally targeted to them. In addition, the following more specific practices should be employed to ensure the classroom meets the varying needs of all enrolled children.

- Children should participate in at least one small homogeneous group time based on their developmental level daily. Activities for this experience should be differentiated and targeted at the differing developmental levels of each small group.
- For the few classroom components such as the classroom floorplan/layout that cannot be differentiated based on developmental levels, the needs of the younger children should be paramount. For example, since younger children generally have less bodily control and need more space around them, the classroom layout should reflect this need.
- While best practice dictates that work time materials should be readily available so children can utilize them independently, it may be that especially at the beginning of the year some materials, such as those with small pieces, that are appropriate for the older children, present a potential hazard to the youngest children in the classroom. In these cases, materials should only be available and used with proper supervision.
- Consideration should be given to any component of the daily schedule or area of the room that seems to elicit more frequent behavioral challenges than other parts of the day or areas of the room. It may well be that these timeframes or areas are not meeting the needs of children at one end of the continuum of developmental levels.
- Multiage grouping is most likely to provide positive results when teachers are experienced enough with both three- and four-year-old children that they can challenge and support children at varying levels of development. Whenever possible, teachers with experience supporting both 3- and 4-year old children should staff multiage classrooms. This will be more likely to ensure that the developmental levels and needs of all the children in the classroom will be understood and supported.

Requirements for multiage classrooms, regardless of structure or ratio of children eligible for Strong Beginnings and GSRP, are the same as for all Strong Beginnings only classrooms utilizing that structure. In addition, the Connect4Learning curriculum is not approved for classrooms enrolling any Strong Beginnings students. More specific information is available on this and other aspects of multiage grouping in the Program Administration section of this Implementation Manual.

## **Budget and Financial Guidelines**

In addition, all programs receive start-up funds of \$20,000 for each new classroom for the purchase of durable equipment and supplies, including child safety restraint systems for buses, or small renovations. All Strong Beginnings classrooms, regardless of the program option or additional funding sources utilized, receive the same amount of start-up funds. All Strong Beginnings/GSRP multiage programs will receive \$20,000 start-up funds provided by Strong Beginnings. Additional start-up

funds may be available from GSRP. No Strong Beginnings funds will be available for carryover.

## **Use of Transportation Funding**

The total transportation funding pool for Strong Beginnings includes approximately \$500 per child enrolled in a four day per week program, whether school day, part day, multiage or Strong/Head Start Blend, for the school year. It includes approximately \$625 per child enrolled in a five day per week program whether school day or Strong Beginnings/Head Start blend, for the school year. Four school day Strong Beginnings/GSRP Multiage classrooms will receive \$500 and five extended day Strong Beginnings/GSRP Multiage classrooms will receive \$625 for each child age eligible for Strong Beginnings who is enrolled at the start of the school year. If the classroom is not filled by the date the transportation estimate is required, the current percentage of children eligible for Strong Beginnings enrolled in the classroom will be used to determine the base transportation funding. For example, if there are currently 10 children in the 4 day classroom and five are age eligible for Strong Beginnings and five for GSRP, the base funding for the classroom would be  $\$500 \times 14 \times .5$  as half the children of a full classroom would be considered eligible for Strong Beginnings transportation funding. Children who are age eligible for GSRP will be funded by GSRP transportation dollars. In braided classrooms with both Strong Beginnings and other sources of funding, Strong Beginnings transportation funding of the same amount as for other classrooms utilizing the same program option will only be available for children funded by Strong Beginnings. The exact amount of per child transportation funding available for the pool is included in the yearly contract between the ISD and CCRESA.