



2025-2026



First Steps 4K Guidelines

Child Early Reading Development and Education Program

Photo taken at Small Impressions Child Development Center in Taylors, South Carolina



Child Early Reading Development and Education Program (CERDEP) Guidelines First Steps 4K 2025-2026

First Steps 4K is a comprehensive, results-oriented initiative for improving early childhood development. First Steps 4K exists to develop, promote, and assist the efforts of agencies, private providers, and public and private organizations and entities, at the state level and the community level, to collaborate and cooperate, to focus and intensify services, assure the most efficient use of all available resources, and eliminate duplication of efforts to serve the needs of South Carolina's young children and their families.

Purpose of the First Steps 4K Program

First Steps 4K partners with high-quality private for-profit, private non-profit, faith-based, nonprofit independent schools, and other eligible providers to expand four-year-old kindergarten programs during the 2025-2026 school year. Programs shall focus on the developmental and learning supports that children must have to be ready for school and will incorporate research-based practices, ongoing assessment, and parenting education.

Purpose of the First Steps 4K Guidelines

The First Steps 4K Guidelines provide the standards and expectations for all 4K classrooms participating in the First Steps 4K Program.

Introduction: A Note to South Carolina's Early Childhood Providers

Dear Early Childhood Partner,

On behalf of First Steps 4K, allow me to welcome you to a new year of the South Carolina Child Early Reading Development and Education Program – a groundbreaking Four-Year-Old Kindergarten program within high-quality, private, faith-based, federal, non-profit independent schools and other non-school district settings.

The First Steps 4K Guidelines outline the requirements that will guide the program's implementation during the school year. Key program components are listed in the Table of Contents for easy reference. Additional First Steps 4K Resource materials can be found on our webpage. We invite you to check our site regularly for materials and information that you may find helpful, and I encourage you to contact me if you have any additional questions.

Thank you for the work you do on behalf of South Carolina's youngest learners.

In admiration of your service,

Martha M. Strickland

Martha M. Strickland
4K State Director, SC First Steps



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1.0 PROGRAM OPERATION

Approved programs shall provide high-quality; developmentally appropriate educational services to age-, income-, and geographically eligible four-year-old children. Educational services are defined to include all domains of development: cognitive, physical, emotional, social, cultural, and non-cognitive.

1.1 Days of Service

First Steps 4K programs shall operate no less than five (5) days a week, for 180 or 220 instructional days annually on our First Steps 4K calendar as established in the First Steps 4K provider contract. A 6.5- or 8-hour day may be selected. Each approved First Steps 4K program may honor the Thanksgiving, Winter, and Spring holiday (closure) schedule of the school district in which it is located and swap days with the consent of the 4K State Director/4K Managers. Calendar Change Request online link is provided by each 4K Manager. Centers wishing to provide service on these days may do so on an optional basis. Note that these days will not be considered a part of the 4K program year and no 4K tuition will be provided by SC First Steps. First Steps 4K classrooms follow the inclement weather closures of the district they are located in. E-Learning days are not supported by First Steps 4K classrooms - those dates will be considered closed for the First Steps 4K classrooms. By submitting the Calendar Change Request form, days may be made up to cover those inclement weather days missed.

1.2 Hours of Service

The educational program shall operate for a minimum of six and one-half (6.5) hours daily, including breakfast, lunch, snack, outdoor play, and rest. The First Steps 4K instructional service may be extended to an eight-hour day.

A. Service Delivery Options for the 2025-2026 School Year

Pursuant to Proviso 1.47 of the General Appropriations Act for FY 26 First Steps 4K providers may elect – with the approval of First Steps 4K – to deliver an expanded program model. Traditional Day and Year (180 school days, 6.5 hours daily) Extended Day and Traditional Year (180 school days, 8.0 or max of 8.5 hours daily) Traditional Day and Summer School (220 days, 6.5 hours daily) Extended Day and Summer School (220 days, 8.0 or max of 8.5 hours) First Steps 4K providers may select only one of the options above. Tuition and transportation payments will be adjusted on a pro rata basis for First Steps 4K providers electing Extended Day and Summer school options. First Steps 4K providers should note that Extended Days and Summer School are designed to extend the instructional program and are not intended as “wrap around” care or summer camp.



1.3 Tuition and Fees

Regardless of program option, First Steps 4K providers may not charge tuition or receive any other form of compensation (i.e. Child Care Scholarships) for any portion of the instructional day already reimbursed by SC First Steps 4K, nor may enrollment fees be required. Tuition and fees may be charged for extended programming and/or wrap around care above and beyond the 6.5 hour (or 8.0 hour) instructional day, though participation in the state-funded 4K program may not be contingent upon enrollment in tuition-based services. Once enrolled, First Steps 4K providers may not remove state-funded students to create additional capacity for tuition-based students.

1.4 Transportation

Licensed First Steps 4K providers may offer (and will receive reimbursement for) transportation for First Steps 4K funded students. First Steps 4K providers may not charge fees for transportation to eligible students. First Steps 4K providers receiving reimbursement for transportation must have their current South Carolina Department of Social Services (DSS) transportation file available for review by their 4K Coach.

The file at a minimum must contain the following:

- Current auto and liability insurance documentation;
- Driver's license of staff designated to provide transport children;
- Driving record of person(s) designated to transport children;
- Initial Attendance Checklist of 4K Children receiving transportation and a route map;
- SLED check of each eligible driver;
- Current First Aid & CPR documentation of drivers;
- First aid kit and fire extinguisher on the bus;
- Tracking sheets depicting when children are transported; and,
- Operable seat restraint for every child and driver on the bus.

All transportation services provided must adhere with the requirements detailed in South Carolina Section 56-5-195 (See Appendix F: Jacob's Law). First Steps 4K providers offering transportation may specify their own transportation routes and must make parents aware of these routes upon enrollment. Routes may cross school district attendance zones and/or county lines at the discretion of the First Steps 4K provider. If transportation is offered, eligible students living within established First Steps 4K provider routes must be afforded an equal opportunity to receive this service. First Steps 4K providers shall not be responsible for the transportation of any student living outside of these established boundaries. Transportation



forms signed by the student's parent/guardian must be on file in our First Steps 4K office **before** reimbursement may be invoiced.

Non-profit independent schools must furnish all applicable transportation requirements, as well as meeting Jacob's Law, to be considered for approval of transportation reimbursement. All required documentation is to be submitted to the 4K State Director for approval before any transportation is offered.

1.5 Meals and Snacks

All First Steps 4K funded students shall be offered breakfast, lunch, and a snack that meet USDA requirements. First Steps 4K providers not participating in the USDA Food Program must create daily meal plans that align with the requirements of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and ABC Grow Healthy Standards (if providers participate in the ABC-Q Program). Weekly menus must be dated and posted prominently. Changes to the posted menu must be documented on the menu. All health and sanitation procedures outlined by DSS and CACFP will be adhered to before, during and after meal service and/or preparation.

1.6 Wrap-Around Services

First Steps 4K providers are encouraged to provide before- and after-school care to accommodate the needs of working families. If a student requires child care beyond the contracted 6.5 or 8 hour First Steps 4K instructional day, all First Steps 4K enrolled students can qualify for a half-time child care scholarship through our partnership with DSS – SC Child Care. This partnership and added benefit to families is called First Steps 4K + Child Care Scholarships. These scholarships are honored at any ABC-Quality provider. Tuition may be charged for any wrap-around care that exceeds the required 6.5-hour or 8.0 hour instructional day if the student does not attend an ABC-Quality rated program. Tuition may also be charged for the provision of service on holidays (not included as part of the instructional calendar detailed in your contract), and/or for extended year programming. A child's enrollment in the state-funded First Steps 4K program may not be contingent upon his/her participation in tuition-based services.

2.0 CHILD AND FAMILY ELIGIBILITY

2.1 Age Requirements

Children must be four years of age on or before September 1, based on acceptable documentation to be kept on file by the First Steps 4K provider (birth certificates, passports, or official documents from other countries). Children are eligible to attend the First Steps 4K Program for one year only. A waiver of this requirement may be sought from the First Steps 4K State Director in the rare event that a child is deemed unable to advance to kindergarten for developmental or other reasons. Waiver requests should be accompanied by documentation from the child's physician, parent(s)/guardian(s), and teacher. An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) issued by the local school district and stating that, "an additional year of pre-kindergarten



is necessary” shall also be deemed an acceptable form of evidence to support the waiver request.

2.2 Family Income Requirements

Approved First Steps 4K providers shall receive reimbursement from First Steps 4K for service to students whose documented family incomes qualify them for either the free- and reduced-price lunch program (185% of federal poverty, see Appendix H) or are Medicaid, SNAP, or TANF eligible, or are experiencing homelessness, transiency, or are in foster care. An income eligibility statement or verification of Medicaid eligibility (for all Medicaid participants) shall be retained in the file of each student. Proof of income-eligibility must be on file before the child begins attending the First Steps 4K program (e.g. acceptable forms of verification include, pay stubs, tax returns and/or documentation of eligibility for SNAP, TANF and SSI). First Steps 4K providers may continue to enroll – and charge tuition for – students whose family incomes exceed this eligibility threshold, provided that total class size does not exceed 20 students and the instructional program offered to all children meets the requirements outlined herein. State funding will ONLY be provided for approved, income-eligible students.

2.3 Residency Requirements

Eligible students residing in any school district may participate in the South Carolina Child Early Reading Development and Education program (CERDEP) pending the availability of space and funding. First Steps 4K providers should note that the First Steps 4K program is designed to expand services to eligible children residing in SC. First Steps 4K providers documenting their service to such children may be eligible for participation in any district of SC. Age and income-eligible children must provide documentation of their legal residency in SC. State issued identification or one of the following- current tax bills, utility bills, rental agreements, etc.- shall be retained on file for each child receiving state funds

2.4 Children with Special Needs and/or Speaking English as a Second Language

Children identified as needing early intervention services and/or related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) shall not be denied access to the First Steps 4K program. First Steps 4K providers shall collaborate with the First Steps 4K Coach and the child’s school district of residence (or service) in determining whether a child may have special needs that would qualify him/her for special education services. The child’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and recommendations from the school district shall determine any appropriate special education placements and/or related services. With the permission of parents, First Steps 4K providers shall allow service providers/therapists to provide approved services on site. First Steps 4K providers serving children with special needs are required by DSS to receive at least one hour of training in serving children with special needs. Training may be provided by the SC Child Care Inclusion Collaborative, at no cost. When First Steps 4K providers refer a child suspected of having disabilities to his/her school district of residence, the referral request must be submitted in writing to the district’s special education coordinator. School districts are requested to give priority for testing children in these non-district 4K



programs and providing needed services, preferably in the location where the children are receiving 4K services so that disruptions in their 4K program activities are minimized.

If English is not the primary language spoken in the home of an eligible child, the First Steps 4K provider, with the assistance of the First Steps 4K Coach, shall collaborate with the child's school district of residence to determine what, if any, additional services he/she may be eligible to receive. Eligible students may not be denied enrollment based on linguistic status.

3.0 ENROLLMENT/DISENROLLMENT

3.1 Enrollment

Enrollment for the First Steps 4K program must be open and non-discriminatory. Should the number of age-, income- and geographically eligible students seeking enrollment exceed the number of slots available, acceptances must be prioritized in accordance with developmental risks measured by the Ages & Stages Developmental Screening (ASQ-3) (Appendix D). First Steps 4K providers shall not be required to expand their programs to accommodate all children desiring enrollment. Prior to billing, each student must be officially approved for enrollment by First Steps 4K. No invoice will be considered for services to students not yet officially approved by First Steps 4K.

3.2 Health Records and Screenings

All licensed First Steps 4K providers shall comply with the DSS Licensing Regulations for Private and Public Child Day Care Health, Safety and Sanitation requirements. All First Steps 4K providers, including non-profit independent schools, shall maintain a health record for each child on site.

Each record shall include the following information:

- A statement signed by the parent or guardian regarding the child's health prior to admission to the 4K class;
- A current copy of the child's immunization record signed by a physician or other health official. This record should indicate that all required immunizations are complete as recommended and routinely provided by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, or that the appropriate official has provided written proof that the child meets either medical or religious exemption requirements; and
- Other health information deemed necessary by the program director and/or by the parent(s)/guardian(s).

First Steps 4K providers should coordinate with their local First Steps Partnership, school district, health department and/or a local health care provider to arrange for basic health screenings (vision, hearing and dental) within 90 days of the program's start date. Students in the First Steps 4K program should be referred to an appropriate health care provider or the local health department when a health problem is suspected or detected. All health-related referrals



shall be noted in the child's health file on site and the results of all screenings should be shared with parent(s)/guardian(s).

3.3 Attendance

The First Steps 4K program is educational in nature, providing at least 6.5 hours of instructional time, five days a week, and at least 180 days per year. These minimums may be exceeded depending on the Service Option chosen for 2025-2026. (See Section 1. 2 (A). All First Steps 4K funded students are expected to attend regularly and for the full instructional day as determined by the program option selected. Attendance requirements must be explained to parent(s)/guardian(s) during the enrollment process. Classroom attendance shall be recorded daily, maintained on site (within the First Steps 4K classroom), and submitted daily in ChildPlus. ***Children are allowed a maximum of ten unexcused (10) absences per school year.***

Attendance will be taken daily and entered in the 4K data system by each lead teacher. Directors will assure that attendance is accurate and timely. Leaders will submit online Weekly Updates to the First Steps state office to report enrollment data.

3.4 Chronic Absenteeism, Tardiness, or Early Departure

Leaders will be required to give parents written notice when a child misses an interval of two, five, seven and nine days using a form provided by First Steps 4K and retain notice. Students will be dropped from the program after the tenth total day of absenteeism is reached. Appeals will be reviewed and may be granted by the 4K Manager for your site. Re-enrollment will not be allowed unless approved in writing by your First Steps 4K Manager.

If there are legitimate reasons for the child's absence or persistent early departure (illness, death, extreme family hardship, etc.), the child's parent(s)/guardian(s) and/or the First Steps 4K provider may seek an appeal of excessive absences from their First Steps 4K Manager. If no appeal is granted the student will be automatically removed from the roster of the First Steps 4K program.

Tardies are marked when a student is more than 30 minutes late. No enrolled 4K student may be denied entrance in the 4K class. Students will remain in class for the duration of the 4K class time. Only on rare occasions will students be dismissed early.

3.5 Suspension or Disenrollment of a Child

Developmentally appropriate behavior management techniques should be always utilized. Suspension should be used sparingly and as a last resort. Disenrollment will be considered under extraordinary circumstances and only with thorough documentation of both the circumstances surrounding the request and the provider's sustained and active efforts to resolve these issues in partnership with the child's parent(s) or guardian(s).

The following procedures, in consultation with the 4K Coach, shall be followed for suspension/disenrollment of a child from the First Steps 4K class:



- List the reason(s) why disenrollment is being requested;
- List the interventions used to help the child benefit from the class;
- Attach all written correspondence and meeting notes showing the ongoing involvement with the child's parent(s) or guardian(s);
- Attach behavioral and learning environment observations of the child that support the reasons for the requested disenrollment;
- If the child has special needs, attach documentation of consultation with the child's zoned school district's special education personnel, results of applied interventions, and indicate the status of the special education referral (if applicable); and
- Submit all documentation to the First Steps 4K State Director through this link, [Exclusionary Report for FS4K 2025-2026](#).

No state-funded students may be disenrolled without the express written permission of the 4K State Director.. The Center Director or School Administrator may elect to suspend a child for up to two (2) days at any time the child is causing harm to himself/herself or others. No prior approval from First Steps 4K is needed, but the First Steps 4K State Director must be notified through the link,

https://www.cognitofrms.com/SCFIRSTSTEPS4K/_20252026ExclusionaryReportForFS4K , that such action has been taken immediately upon suspension. Extended suspension (more than two (2) days and/or more than three (3) incidents of immediate suspension) requires prior permission from the First Steps 4K State Director. Providers must submit the same information as they would for disenrollment.

4.0 PROVIDER ELIGIBILITY

4.1 Legal Operation, Capacity and Regulatory Violations

Eligible providers must, at minimum:

1. Be fully approved, licensed or registered by DSS. Programs holding "provisional" licensure will not be approved for initial participation or renewal. If a provider's license lapses to "provisional" status during the contract year, its continuing eligibility/participation shall be determined at the sole and absolute discretion of the First Steps 4K State Director .
2. OR be a non-profit independent school approved by First Steps 4K.

Eligible Providers must, at minimum:

- Have the facility capacity to serve students in a class of at least ten, but not more than 20 four-year-old students;
- Comply with all state and local health and safety laws and codes;



- Have been in legal operation for a period of one year or more (or be granted a waiver of this requirement by First Steps 4K) and;
- Have no pending/unresolved regulatory violations relating to child supervision, compliance with ratios, or serious health and safety issues upon approval to participate in the program.

Approved providers must inform the First Steps 4K State Director within one (1) business day of any founded regulatory violations, contacts with law enforcement, the issuance of a provisional license, and/or reports of Out of Home Abuse and Neglect (OHAN) occurring during the contract period.

Approved providers must resolve all regulatory violation(s) with DSS Child Care Licensing to the satisfaction of First Steps 4K. Copies of the written Corrective Action Plan (CAP) issued by DSS shall be provided to the First Steps 4K Coach and the 4K State Director. Providers shall make a copy of the DHEC and Fire Marshall's report available to the First Steps 4K Coach upon DSS license renewal process. Providers shall submit a copy of the renewed license (front and back) to First Steps 4K. First Steps 4K will review both regulatory violations and 4K Monitoring Reports monthly. Providers displaying a pattern of regulatory infractions or who are cited for endangering the safety and/or well-being of students may have their eligibility suspended or terminated at the sole and absolute discretion of First Steps 4K.

4.2 Anti-Discrimination Requirements

Approved First Steps 4K providers must comply with constitutional provisions and all federal and state laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability or need for special education services (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997), race, color, creed or national origin (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), gender (Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 and Title II of the Vocational Education Amendments of 1976), and religion.

4.3 Criminal Background Checks

First Steps 4K providers must comply with all applicable state laws regarding criminal background checks for employees and exclude from employment any individual not permitted by state law to work with children.

4.4 General Programmatic Requirements

Approved First Steps 4K providers must comply with all programmatic, reporting, and assessment criteria established by First Steps 4K, to include:

- Adherence to an approved, research-based preschool curriculum aligned with the South Carolina Early Learning Standards for four-year-olds (see Section 6.6 and Appendix C);
- Employment of qualified staff and the provision of substitute teachers as necessary;



- Maintenance (and data entry as required) of individual student records including (but not limited to);
- Eligibility verifications (proof of SC residence; proof of income to include W2s or check stubs or letter of eligibility for SNAP ; Medicaid Card; copy of birth certificate);
- Health data;
- Attendance records;
- ASQ-3 or other approved developmental screening scores;
- Teacher observations, documentation, and rating of skills with Gold© by Teaching Strategies;
- Records of parent/teacher contact and conferences;
- Assume accountability for meeting the educational needs of each eligible children and report regularly to parents on his/her progress;.

Providers shall maintain all program records on site for a period of at least two years.

5.0 PROGRAM STANDARDS

5.1 Class Size and Adult-to-Child Ratio

Eligible providers must maintain a classroom of at least ten (10) four-year-old children, but not more than 20 four-year-old children with an adult to child ratio not to exceed 1:10. In classrooms of ten children, the 1:10 ratio must be a lead teacher to child ratio. The adult-child ratio must be always maintained during the 6.5-hour (or 8.0 hour) instructional day. Waivers of the minimum – but not the maximum – class size may be sought from First Steps 4K.

Providers should note that not all enrolled students must meet the First Steps 4K income eligibility criteria. Providers will be reimbursed only for eligible First Steps 4K students but may charge tuition to otherwise ineligible children served in the same classroom, providing the instructional program provided to all children meets the requirements outlined herein. Once enrolled, First Steps 4K funded students may not be disenrolled to create additional space for tuition-based students.

5.2 Classroom Environment

The provider shall maintain appropriate classroom space, equipment, materials, and supplies. All classrooms will be fully equipped to serve the designated number of students per class. All



classrooms will be learning center based and equipped with materials that promote language and literacy, mathematical thinking, reading, writing, listening, fine and gross motor development, scientific inquiry, block play, dramatic play, sand/water play and art. Each learning center will be made available to children daily without limits of use.

A high-quality 4K environment is designed to foster young children's development in all areas—social, emotional, cognitive, and physical—while creating a safe, engaging, and nurturing space. Key elements include:

1. Classroom Layout:

- Defined learning centers: Areas for specific activities, such as a reading/book area, art area, dramatic play area, sensory table, and block-building zone. These are clearly organized, labeled, and visually appealing to encourage exploration.
- Child-sized furniture: Tables, chairs, shelves, and materials at children's height, allowing for independence and easy access.
- Calm and cozy spaces: Quiet corners or soft spaces for relaxation, where children can self-regulate and recharge.

2. Curriculum and Learning Materials:

- Rich, diverse materials: Age-appropriate books, manipulatives, puzzles, sensory materials, and culturally inclusive resources.
- Hands-on learning: Activities that promote active engagement, like art supplies, science experiments, and building materials. Play-based learning is prioritized.
- Literacy and language supports: Visual cues like labeled items around the room, alphabet charts, and opportunities for both structured and unstructured language development.

3. Teacher-Child Interactions:

- Responsive and nurturing teachers: Educators who actively engage with children, ask open-ended questions, model positive behavior, and provide emotional support.
- Individualized attention: Teachers recognize and adapt to each child's learning style, needs, and interests, offering tailored activities or scaffolding when needed.

4. Emphasis on Social-Emotional Development:

- Inclusive and respectful environment: Diversity is celebrated, and children are encouraged to share about themselves and respect others. Conflict resolution is taught in a positive, constructive way.
- Routine and predictability: A consistent daily schedule that gives children a sense of security, with time for free play, group activities, meals, and outdoor play.
- Emotional regulation tools: Teachers help children name their feelings and provide strategies to cope with frustration or excitement, like using a feelings chart or calming techniques. Self-regulation is practiced and taught.

5. Family and Community Engagement:

- Strong parent-teacher communication: Regular updates about the child's progress and ways for families to get involved in the classroom.
- Community resources and partnerships: Connections with local libraries, museums, or other organizations to enrich the curriculum and bring the outside world into the classroom.



6. Safety and Cleanliness:

- Childproofed and well-maintained space: Clean, organized, and free of hazards. Adequate supervision is always ensured.
- Health-conscious policies: Regular handwashing routines, healthy snacks, and an emphasis on hygiene and safety practices.

This environment supports whole child development and prepares children for the academic and social demands of kindergarten while nurturing a love for learning.

5.3 Outdoor Equipment

Outdoor play areas and play equipment must adhere – at minimum – to the DSS requirements as stated in the Child Care Licensing Regulations, Chapter 8; 114-507 (B). All outdoor playground equipment must be age appropriate and meet licensing requirements. The playground and equipment must be accessible to all, including any enrolled student with special needs. Outdoor equipment shall be arranged so that children are able to be always seen. The height of play equipment shall be developmentally and size appropriate.

Outdoor Learning Environments (OLE) are encouraged and valued. An effective outdoor learning environment is a dynamic space that encourages exploration, creativity, and physical activity while promoting cognitive, social-emotional, and motor skills development. Key components of a high-quality outdoor space for 4K include:

1. Natural Elements

- Gardens and Plants: Children can plant, tend, and observe plants growing in a vegetable or flower garden, fostering a connection to nature and basic science concepts.
- Trees, Grass, and Sand: These offer natural spaces for sensory play, like digging, touching, and exploring textures. It also provides a backdrop for spontaneous play, climbing, or sitting in the shade.
- Water Features: Simple water play areas, such as a water table, allow children to experiment with floating, pouring, and measuring, enhancing motor skills and sensory experiences.

2. Physical Activity Spaces

- Play Structures: Age-appropriate equipment like slides, swings, balance beams, and climbing frames build physical strength, balance, and coordination. The structures should be safe and challenging but not overwhelming.
- Open Space for Running: Wide, open areas where children can run, jump, and engage in large-group activities or games like tag, promoting physical fitness and teamwork.
- Bike Paths: Smooth paths for tricycles, scooters, or balance bikes help develop gross motor skills and coordination.

3. Loose Parts Play

- Natural Loose Materials: Items like sticks, logs, rocks, and leaves can be used for creative and imaginative play, encouraging problem-solving, critical thinking, and cooperative play.



- Recycled or Man-made Loose Parts: Large tires, crates, or fabric pieces can inspire children to build forts, balance, or engage in dramatic play, developing both motor skills and cognitive flexibility.

4. Sensory Areas

- Mud Kitchen: A designated space where children can “cook” with mud, water, and natural materials. This kind of play supports sensory experiences, creativity, and social interaction.
- Sandboxes: Children can dig, build, and mold sand, which enhances both fine motor skills and cooperative play, as they work together to create structures.
- Natural Sensory Paths: A path made of different materials like pebbles, mulch, or wood slices provides a tactile experience as children walk barefoot or in shoes, enhancing sensory awareness.

5. Creative and Quiet Areas

- Art Stations: Outdoor easels, chalkboards, or nature art spaces where children can create with natural materials like leaves, sticks, and flowers. Art outdoors helps children make connections between creativity and the environment.
- Story Circles: A designated storytelling space with logs, stumps, or seating arranged in a circle for group reading, discussions, or quiet reflection time. These areas promote literacy and calm interaction.
- Nature Observation Spots: Benches or quiet corners where children can sit and observe birds, insects, or plants, fostering curiosity and scientific observation skills.

6. Learning Extensions

- Outdoor Classrooms: Shaded areas with seating where teachers can conduct structured learning activities, like circle time, music, or lessons related to the natural environment (e.g., weather, seasons, plants, and animals).
- Science and Exploration Stations: Magnifying glasses, bug boxes, bird feeders, and weather stations can spark curiosity and exploration, teaching students basic scientific concepts through hands-on discovery.
- Building Areas: Blocks, large building materials (like wooden planks), and construction toys can be used outside for collaborative building projects, integrating STEM concepts into outdoor play.

7. Social and Cooperative Play Spaces

- Dramatic Play Areas: Outdoor playhouses, pretend markets, or simple stages where children can engage in imaginative play. This helps develop social skills and language as they interact with peers.
- Seating for Group Interaction: Picnic tables or benches where children can gather for group activities, collaborative projects, or simply to eat or talk together.

8. Safety Considerations

- Safe Surfacing: Areas under play structures should have soft, impact-absorbing surfaces like mulch, rubber, or sand to prevent injury.
- Fencing and Boundaries: Clear, secure fencing to keep children within safe limits and protect them from hazards outside the designated play area.
- Shade and Weather Protection: Trees, awnings, or umbrellas provide necessary shade to prevent overheating and sunburn, while shelters can protect against rain.



An outdoor environment rich in opportunities for exploration and learning allows 4K students to develop in a more holistic, hands-on approach, supporting their natural curiosity and love for active play.

6.0 CURRICULUM

6.1 Approved Curricula

Each approved First Steps 4K provider shall offer an age-appropriate educational program, operating with fidelity to an approved, research-based preschool curriculum aligned with the South Carolina Early Learning Standards for four-year-olds (see Section 6.6). The program must focus on the developmental and learning supports children need to be ready for school. Providers must offer a uniform instructional program to all enrolled students in the 4K classroom(s).

The approved research-based curricula for the current school year are:

- High/Scope Cognitively Oriented Curriculum
- Creative Curriculum by Teaching Strategies
- Montessori Method (The Montessori Method groups children into classrooms based on planes of development with Montessori Primary (ECE) including 3-6 year-olds. This method is an approved curriculum with one of the principles being mixed age group classrooms, however only 4-year-old students are eligible for our tuition funding.

Providers wishing to use a supplementary research-based curriculum shall seek prior approval from First Steps 4K. See Appendix C for details.) Providers seeking to change their curriculum choice during the contract period must seek prior approval from First Steps 4K.

Instructional coaching visits shall include supporting appropriate measures of curricular fidelity. Visits are in person and will be a minimum of twice monthly for 1.5-2 hours each.

6.2 Lesson Plans

Written lesson plans containing specific educational activities are required for a minimum of 5.0 hours per 6.5 hour instructional day (or 7 hours for an 8.0 hour instructional day) and should include educational experiences in the areas of language/literacy, math, science, social studies, fine arts (music, art and drama), social and emotional and physical development. The remaining 1.5 hours of the instructional day, consisting of meals, rest time and/or outside play, etc. may be included in the written plans at the teacher's discretion and/or as they relate to instructional objectives.

Lesson plans will be completed on-line using SmartTeach®. Lesson plans should show evidence of the lead teacher's deliberate and thorough efforts to prepare for the week's instructional activities. Ready Rosie will be used develop digital playlists to share with families



to work on specific skill building with their child. Lesson plans will be reviewed by First Steps 4K Coach. These plans must be maintained on-line and on site (within the First Steps 4K classroom) and will be reviewed for completeness, alignment with the South Carolina Content Standards and fidelity to the program's selected curriculum model.

6.3 Instructional Technology and Television

The use of active/participatory instructional technology, such as age-appropriate computer/tablet software, shall be limited to no more than 30 minutes a day. **The regular viewing of television programming or video materials is prohibited.** Teachers must preview all video materials to ensure their appropriate use and discuss what is viewed with the children. Providers shall ensure equal access to active instructional technology for all children.

6.4 Rest Time

Opportunity for a brief rest time shall be incorporated into each instructional day. Rest time may not exceed forty minutes per day, although thirty minutes is the suggested length, except as necessary to address the specific individual needs of children. During rest time, the staff/student ratio shall remain at least 1:10. Students who do not sleep after a brief rest period shall be allowed to have a quiet activity on their mats or go to a supervised area for quiet activities.

6.5 Discipline

First Steps 4K providers shall use developmentally appropriate guidance techniques and may not allow the use of corporal punishment or severe discipline. Corporal punishment is the use of physical force to the body as a discipline measure. Physical force to the body includes, but is not limited to, spanking, slapping, biting, threats and shaking. Severe discipline includes shouting, withholding food, and/or isolation or confinement for long periods of time. All staff members and parent(s)/guardian(s) shall be furnished a copy of the disciplinary policy prohibiting corporal punishment and this policy shall be reviewed with each family upon enrollment. Both staff members and parent(s)/guardian(s) shall sign and date the disciplinary policy statement in recognition of receipt and understanding of the policy. The signed disciplinary policies shall be maintained on file.

6.6 SC Early Learning Standards

All instructional programming must be designed to support South Carolina's approved curriculum standards for four-year-olds. These statewide expectations ensure that:

- Teachers know what is to be taught;
- Children know what is to be learned; and
- Families know both what is to be learned and how well these concepts are being learned by their child.



6.7 Orientation

An on-site orientation for families must be offered and conducted prior to the first day of instruction. This orientation should be conducted jointly by the classroom teaching staff (4K Lead Teacher and Instructional Assistant) and director/program administrator as possible and may be held in conjunction with other orientation programs being offered. During the family orientation, guardians shall receive written information concerning meal and extended day opportunities, a school calendar noting holidays and closures during the school year, discipline policies and the philosophy of the program. A First Steps 4K Orientation Checklist will be completed on all families and shall be maintained onsite.

6.8 Parent Education and Involvement

Parents are a child's first and most important teachers. Their involvement is critical to the success of their children. To strengthen parental involvement in the learning process, each provider will participate in a Parent Education and Involvement Plan for First Steps 4K.

This plan must include provisions for:

- A family orientation at the beginning of the school year;
- At least three family-teacher conferences during which assessment data on the child's progress must be shared;
- Documentation of the guardian(s) efforts to participate in the parenting programming offered by the First Steps 4K provider;
- The provision of family resources (a parent education resource library, regular newsletters, etc.); and
- Opportunities and written operating policies for ongoing family involvement (volunteerism, classroom visits, etc.).

In addition to at least three family-teacher conferences, the First Steps 4K provider shall offer at least two parent (keep parent here or change to family?) education workshops during the school year. The first of these workshops may be an initial orientation/open house. At least one of the two workshops shall focus upon interactive literacy. Documentation of these parent/family workshops, to include agendas and attendance records, shall be maintained on-site, as shall documentation of all family-teacher conferences.

6.9 4K to 5K School Transition Plan

First Steps 4K providers shall be responsible for developing and implementing a 5K transition plan for each eligible First Steps 4K student and his/her parent(s) or guardian(s).



The transition plan shall include:

Family Information

- The name, address and phone number of the school the child is zoned to attend.
- Pertinent school information (registration dates, enrollment requirements, materials, etc.)

Child Information

- Plans to provide the school with a portfolio of student work and assessment data (with parent/guardian permission)
- Provision of any child-specific information that will enable the 5K teacher or other school personnel to best support the child's continued developmental and academic progress (with parent/guardian permission)

Visitation and Transition Planning

- Coordination of visits to new school and/or 5K classroom
- Exploration of Countdown to Kindergarten participation through the First Steps Local Partnership

7.0 PERSONNEL AND TRAINING

7.1 Classroom Staffing

Each First Steps 4K classroom (of 11 or more students) shall at all times be staffed by a lead teacher and an instructional assistant. Classrooms enrolling ten students (the program's minimum class size) may elect to employ a single adult provided this is a lead teacher. Lead teachers and instructional assistants may not serve dual work roles within the center.

7.2 Lead Teacher Qualifications

First Steps 4K providers shall employ qualified lead teachers in each First Steps 4K classroom. Teachers holding a four-year-degree or higher in Early Childhood Education are preferred.

Each lead teacher employed in the First Steps 4K program shall possess, at minimum, a two-year degree in early childhood education or a related field. Teachers possessing a two-year degree must be enrolled and demonstrating progress toward the completion of a teacher education program within four years.

A list of acceptable related fields is attached to this Guidelines document. (Appendix B) Providers unable to locate lead teacher candidates meeting these qualifications may petition for a waiver from the First Steps 4K State Director. Waiver requests will rarely be considered on an



individual basis and will reflect both the provider's documented efforts to employ a lead teacher meeting the qualifications detailed herein and the qualifications of the proposed lead teacher.

Programs electing to use Montessori as their curriculum model must have a Montessori credentialed lead teacher. This credential should come from a MACTE recognized organization.

Should an approved lead teacher leave the program's employment during the contract period, providers must notify their 4K Coach within three (3) business days. First Steps 4K Providers shall be allowed up to four weeks (20 school days) to find a qualified replacement. First Steps 4K Providers unable to locate a qualified replacement during this period may be subject to the suspension of their provider eligibility at the discretion of First Steps 4K State Director

7.3 Instructional Assistant Qualifications

Providers shall employ a full-time instructional assistant for each classroom enrolling 11 students or more. Candidates possessing at least a two-year degree with experience and pre-service training in early childhood education are preferred. Each instructional assistant employed by the First Steps 4K program must, at minimum, have a high school diploma or its equivalent and two years of documented experience working with children under five years of age. Instructional assistants must have completed the Early Childhood Development Credential (ECD 101) or enroll and complete this course within twelve months of the First Steps 4K contract award.

7.4 Days of Service

Teachers and instructional assistants shall be employed for a minimum of one hundred eighty days (180 instructional days), seven and one-half (7 ½) hour days. The times of employment will directly correspond to the Service Option chosen in Section 1.2 (A) . Each lead teacher shall be compensated for at least one hour of unencumbered, instructional planning time daily (7.5 hour requirement = 6.5 hour instructional day + 1 hour daily for planning and preparation). During this portion of the day, he or she may not be responsible for any other task, including (but not limited to) the supervision of children. To ensure quality, teachers should be in attendance each day of the First Steps 4K program. Vacations should be taken outside of the employment days of the 4K program.

7.5 Substitute Teachers

A substitute teacher and/or substitute teaching assistant shall be present and working in the First Steps 4K classroom for each day that a teacher and/or instructional assistant is absent, whether due to illness, required training, or personal leave. The provider should attempt to secure a substitute teacher with similar credentials to the regular teacher or assistant. Long term substitutes acting as lead teachers for a period of four weeks (20 school days) or more must meet lead teacher qualifications.

7.6 Professional Development



All personnel (both lead teachers and instructional assistants) providing instruction and classroom support to students participating in the First Steps 4K program shall participate in at least 15 hours of professional development to include training in:

- Teaching children from poverty
- Curriculum embedded assessment
- Emergent literacy (oral communication, knowledge of print and letters, phonemic and phonological awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension development)

Training hours must be approved through SC Endeavors. Documentation of each staff member's professional development hours shall also be maintained on-site and is subject to monitoring by First Steps 4K.

8.0 ASSESSMENT

8.1 Instructional Assessment

First Steps 4K providers participating in the First Steps 4K program shall use GOLD® by Teaching Strategies as their primary method of student assessment. GOLD® is a performance-based assessment requiring the ongoing documentation of student performance and progress. Summary reporting shall be monitored by First Steps 4K and required at least three times annually (at the end of fall, winter, and spring checkpoints). Programs electing to provide a summer school option will also complete the summer checkpoint. All summary ratings shall be based upon the student's documented performance and progress. Student portfolios and the teacher's observation records shall be maintained, shared with parents during conferences, and monitored by First Steps 4K staff.

8.2 Developmental Screening

Providers are required to complete a developmental screening on each First Steps 4K student as part of the enrollment process. Screenings shall be conducted with the ASQ-3 (Ages and Stages Questionnaire, Third Edition) or another approved developmental screening tool, with the results maintained in the child's assessment folder and reported SC First Steps 4K. First Steps 4K shall provide access to training and testing materials for eligible providers. Students whose developmental screening scores fall at the 10th percentile or below must be referred to the Special Education Coordinator within the child's school district of residence for additional diagnostic evaluation. Children experiencing discomfort, disinterest or refusing to participate shall be re-screened prior to making such a referral. Additionally, students with significant articulation difficulties should be referred for speech/language evaluations within their school district of residence.

9.0 PROGRAM COACHING

9.1 Coaching and Technical Assistance



Approved First Steps 4K Providers enrolling eligible students shall each be assigned a First Steps 4K Coach. Our 4K Coaches shall make both announced and unannounced coaching visits to the First Steps 4K classroom throughout the school year, to include virtual visits as possible. These visits may include unannounced evaluations using an ECERS-3 Assessment, Creative Curriculum Fidelity Tool, Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO), or others appropriate to measure the curricular fidelity. Deficiencies noted during coaching visits will be reviewed with the 4K Manager and the 4K State Director to form the basis of a Programmatic Improvement Plan to be shared with the program. Any visits documenting significant levels of non-compliance with the program's contractual obligations and/or those documenting the endangerment of enrolled children will result in a corrective action plan up to and including the termination of provider eligibility. Note that 4K Coaches are also considered "mandated reporters." Regulatory deficiencies noted on site will be reported to DSS as a matter of policy. Failure to permit timely facility access to First Steps 4K staff during normal business/operating hours may be cause for corrective action, up to and including the termination of provider eligibility.

10.0 FUNDING AND FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS

10.1 Per Student Funding

First Steps 4K shall provide funding in a minimum of \$5,100 per eligible student served during the school year. Students enrolled for less than 180 school days shall be funded on a pro-rated basis commensurate with the length of their enrollment. Tuition reimbursement is the responsibility of the First Steps 4K and is based on the provider's reports and verification of eligible students by the 4K Coach. With approval by First Steps 4K, providers may select one of four program options detailed in Section 1.2 (A). Tuition and transportation payments will be adjusted on a pro rata basis for providers electing beyond 180 days at 6.5 hrs. daily.

10.2 Equipment and Materials Grants

Approved First Steps 4K providers must maintain materials, supplies, and furnishings to accommodate the number of children enrolled in the First Steps 4K classroom(s). Based upon the availability of funds, First Steps 4K reserves the right to offer material/equipment grants to 4K providers. Approved First Steps 4K providers enrolling between one (1) and six (6) eligible children may receive a materials/equipment grant at a minimum of \$1,000 per child. Approved First Steps 4K Providers enrolling seven (7) or more eligible children may receive a material/equipment grant at a minimum of \$10,000. This grant funding shall be used to purchase items identified in consultation with the First Steps 4K program director/administrator, the 4K Teacher, the First Steps 4K Materials Manager, and the 4K Coach to support a high-quality learning environment. This grant funding is made directly to the vendor from which the order is to be obtained (see Appendix E). All materials purchased with grant funds shall be maintained in the First Steps 4K classroom.

10.3 Transportation Funds



Programs providing transportation to eligible students shall be reimbursed for expenses incurred per child up to \$704 for 180-day options. Transportation payments will be adjusted on a pro rata basis for First Steps 4K providers electing a 220-day option.

10.4 Fiscal Procedures

Pending First Steps 4K approval from First Steps 4K and enrollment of eligible children, a Grant Agreement shall be established with the First Steps 4K provider. Contracts will be issued through a Cognito online form, completed, and submitted. Executed contracts with the signatures of the First Steps 4K State Director and the SC First Steps Executive Director will be emailed in return to each First Steps 4K provider

Appendix A

South Carolina General Assembly Part 1B SECTION 1A - H630 - DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION-EIA 2025-2026 Appropriation Act

SECTION 1A - H630 - DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION-EIA

1.47. (SDE: Full-Day 4K)

(A) Eligible students residing in any school district or attending any charter school authorized by the South Carolina Public Charter School District or an approved institution of higher education may participate in the South Carolina Early Reading Development and Education program (CERDEP) pending the availability of space and funding. Student eligibility as defined by Section 59-156-130 of the 1976 Code is an annual family income of one hundred eighty-five percent or less of the federal poverty guidelines as promulgated annually by the United States Department of Health and Human Services or a statement of Medicaid eligibility.

(B) A parent or guardian may choose to enroll their child in a public school participating in the program and approved by the Department of Education pursuant to Section 59-156-210 or in a private provider participating in the program and approved by the Office of First Steps pursuant to Section 59-156-200. A private provider includes, but is not limited to, a child care center, a military child care facility regulated by the United States Department of Defense, or a non-profit independent school. State funds appropriated for the provision of CERDEP services in military child care facilities may not be used to supplant existing federal child care funds. No school district can be denied participation in CERDEP or be denied CERDEP funding pursuant to the terms of this provision.

(C) 4K programs in public schools and non-profit independent schools participating in CERDEP are not required to be approved, registered, or licensed by the Department of Social Services in order to participate in CERDEP. Instead, the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps are responsible for ensuring that providers deliver high-quality educational programs pursuant to Section 59-156-160.



(D) Public and private providers shall be funded for instructional costs at a minimum rate of \$5,100 per student enrolled. Eligible students enrolling during the school year or withdrawing during the school year shall be funded on a pro rata basis determined by the length of their enrollment. Private providers transporting eligible children to and from school shall also be eligible for reimbursement at a minimum of \$620 per eligible child transported. First Steps and the Department of Education must provide an equitable distribution above the minimum between public and private providers. First Steps and the Department of Education must provide a quarterly report beginning October 1 detailing funding above the minimum made to any provider to the Governor, the Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. All providers who are reimbursed are required to retain records as required by their fiscal agent. New providers participating for the first time in the current fiscal year and enrolling between one and six eligible children shall be eligible to receive at a minimum of \$1,000 per child in materials and equipment funding, with providers enrolling seven or more such children eligible for funding at a minimum of \$10,000. The Department of Education and the Office of First Steps Readiness are authorized to utilize carry forward funds and federal funds to supplement the amount expended for materials and equipment. Providers receiving equipment funding are expected to participate in the program and provide high-quality, center-based programs as defined herein for a minimum of three years. Failure to participate for three years will require the provider to return a portion of the equipment allocation at a level determined by the Department of Education and the Office of School Readiness. Funding to providers is contingent upon receipt of data as requested by the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps. The Department of Education shall only provide funding for public school students whose complete records have been entered into PowerSchool based on the one hundred- and thirty-five-day student average daily membership. For the current fiscal year, providers may enroll pay-lunch children who score at or below the twenty-fifth national percentile on two of the three DIAL-3 subscales by July 1 if at least seventy-five percent of the total number of children eligible or the Child Early Reading Development and Education Program in a district or county are projected to be enrolled in that program, Head Start, or ABC Child Care Program as determined by the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps, Child Early Reading Development and Education Program. Providers may receive reimbursement for these children if funds are available. By September 1, the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps must collect the documented waiting lists, share the lists, and determine a process to notify parents of eligible students of available slots in all approved providers. The Department of Education is required to offer waivers allowing students with disabilities to be served in multi-categorical classroom settings based on similar cognition and abilities. Funding appropriated for CERDEP may be carried forward and expended for the same purpose.

(E) Annually, the Department of Education is directed to audit the annual allocations to public providers to ensure that allocations are accurate and aligned to the appropriate pro rata per student allocation, materials, and equipment funding. In the event the department, during the audit process determines that the annual allocations of the prior fiscal year are not accurate, the department must adjust the allocations for the current fiscal year to account for the audit findings. The department must provide the results of the annual audit findings to the General Assembly no later than December first. Likewise, in the event the Office of First Steps determines that the annual allocations of the prior fiscal year to private providers are not accurate, the Office of First Steps must adjust the allocations for the current fiscal year to account for the findings.



(F) Of the funds appropriated, \$300,000 shall be allocated to the Education Oversight Committee to conduct an annual evaluation of the South Carolina Early Reading Development and Education Program (CERDEP) and to issue findings in a report to the General Assembly by March first of each year. To aid in this evaluation, the Education Oversight Committee shall determine and obtain the data necessary and both public and private providers are required to submit the necessary data as a condition of continued participation in and funding of the program, including average daily attendance data, so that consistent enrollment may be determined. This data shall include developmentally appropriate measures of student progress. Additionally, the Department of Education shall issue a unique student identifier for each child receiving services from a public or private provider including those funded by CERDEP, Head Start, SC Child Care Scholarships, EIA, Title I, district-funded, and all other federal, state, or local public sources. The Department of Education shall be responsible for the collection and maintenance of data on the public state funded full day and half-day four-year-old kindergarten programs. The Office of First Steps to School Readiness shall be responsible for the collection and maintenance of data on the state funded programs provided through private providers. The Education Oversight Committee shall use this data and all other collected and maintained data necessary to conduct a research-based review of the program's implementation and assessment of student success in the early elementary grades along with information, recommendations, and a timeline for how the state can increase the number of students served in high-quality programs. To aid in the accurate reporting of four-year-olds in poverty served in formal education programs in public schools in South Carolina, the Department of Education must provide to the EOC data related to four-year-olds served in formal education programs funded with other state, local, or federal funds, including Title 1 and EIA-District-funded programs, denoting full- or partial-day status.

(G) For eligible children residing in school districts that do not participate in CERDEP, the Department of Education is required to develop and implement inter-district transfer policies that give parents or guardians the option of their eligible child attending an out-of-district school that participates in CERDEP.

(H) For the current fiscal year, the Office of First Steps may expend: (1) up to \$2,000,000 to pilot a program to provide higher reimbursement rates to high-quality providers. The reimbursement rate for students enrolled by child care providers rated B or higher in the ABC Quality System operated by the Department of Social Services may be increased by up to 10% of the per-student base following guidelines developed by the Office of First Steps; and (2) up to \$250,000 to provide one-time supplemental, needs-based incentive grants in an amount not to exceed \$30,000 for newly created and/or newly approved private providers proposing to expand service to ten or more CERDEP eligible children in communities unable to enroll all eligible students in a public, private, or Head Start setting during the prior fiscal year. These grants are designed to address building renovations, documented as necessary to bring proposed classrooms into compliance with licensing regulations, materials and staffing costs, and/or other obstacles currently preventing their participation in the program. The First Steps Board of Trustees shall develop and approve an application process that incorporates formal review and fiscal safeguards designed to ensure grant funds are used solely to address documented barriers to program participation. Providers receiving this one-time supplement shall be expected to participate in the program and provide high-quality, center-based programs as defined herein for a minimum of three years. Failure to participate for three years shall require the provider to return a portion of the supplemental allocation at a level determined by the Office of First Steps



to School Readiness. First Steps shall submit a report detailing its process, expenditures and expanded enrollment to the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and the Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee by March 15.

(I) If by August first, the Department of Education or the Office of First Steps determines that appropriations will exceed expenditures, available funds may be used to fund an extended program and to increase the length of the program to a maximum of eight and a half hours per day or two hundred and twenty days per year or to fund summer programs. If a district chooses to fund summer enrollment, the program funding shall conform to the funding in this act for full year programs; however, it shall be reduced on a pro rata basis to conform with the length of the program. A summer program shall be no more than eight and a half hours per day and shall be not more than ten weeks in length. The per pupil allocation and classroom grant must conform with the appropriated amount contained in this act and end of year adjustments shall be based on the one hundred and thirty-five-day student average daily membership or later student average daily membership for districts choosing to extend the program past one hundred and eighty days. Funds may also be used to provide parent engagement, professional development, and quality evaluations of programs. No later than April first, the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps shall report to the Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee on the expenditure of these funds to include the following information: the amount of money used and specific steps and measures taken to enhance the quality of the 4K program and the amount of money used for professional development as well as the types of professional development offered and the number of participants. The Office of First Steps is directed to determine if the provision of extended programs in private centers improves the ability of parents to enter the workforce or to pursue postsecondary training or industry credentials.

(J) On or before November 15, the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps shall share data that identifies the total number of children enrolled in CERDEP in both public and private providers. If available appropriations exceed the instructional costs of serving children enrolled in the program and if a waiting list of eligible children can be documented by the Department of Education and by the Office of First Steps, then the Executive Budget Office may authorize the transfer of funds between the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps.

(K) The Office of First Steps and the Department of Education shall collaborate with the South Carolina Head Start State Collaboration Office to inform parents of all publicly funded full-day 4K programs including Head Start by participating in PalmettoPreK and First5SC.

1A.9. (SDE-EIA: Teacher Supplies)

(A) All certified and non-certified public school teachers identified in PCS, certified special school classroom teachers, certified media specialists, certified guidance counselors, and career specialists who are employed by a school district, a charter school, or lead teachers employed in a publicly funded full day 4K classroom approved by the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness, as of November thirtieth of the current fiscal year, based on the public decision of the school board may receive reimbursement of \$400 each school year to offset expenses incurred by them for teaching supplies and materials. Funds shall be disbursed by the department to School districts by July fifteenth based on the last reconciled Professional Certified Staff (PCS) listing from the previous year. With remaining funds for this program, any deviation in the PCS and actual teacher count will be reconciled by December thirty-first or as



soon as practicable thereafter. Based on the public decision of the school district and no later than May fifteenth annually, the district shall notify all individuals entitled to receive these funds the manner in which the funds will be disbursed. Funds may be disbursed to each teacher via check in a manner separate and distinct from their payroll check on the first day teachers, by contract, are required to be in attendance at school for the current contract year, or the funds may be disbursed to each teacher via direct deposit as long as the funds are handled in a manner to be separate and distinct from their payroll check. This reimbursement shall not be considered by the state as taxable income. Special schools include the Governor's School for Science and Math, the Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities, Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School, Governor's School for Agriculture at John de la Howe, School for the Deaf and the Blind, Felton Lab, Department of Juvenile Justice, and Palmetto Unified School District. Funds distributed to school districts or allocated to schools must not supplant existing supply money paid to teachers from other sources. If a school district requires receipts for tax purposes the receipts may not be required before December thirty-first. Districts that do not wish to require receipts may have teachers retain the receipts and certify for the district they have received the allocation for purchase of teaching supplies and/or materials and that they have purchased or will purchase supplies and/or materials during the fiscal year for the amount of the allocation. Districts shall not have an audit exception related to non-retention of receipts in any instances where a similar instrument is utilized. Any district requiring receipts must notify any teacher from whom receipts have not been submitted between November twenty-fifth and December sixth that receipts must be submitted to the district. Districts may not add any additional requirement not listed herein related to this reimbursement.

(B) Any classroom teacher, including a classroom teacher at a South Carolina private school, that is not eligible for the reimbursement allowed by this provision, may claim a refundable income tax credit on the teacher's 2025 tax return, provided that the return or any amended return claiming the credit is filed prior to the end of the fiscal year. The credit is equal to \$400, or the amount the teacher expends on teacher supplies and materials, whichever is less. If any expenditures eligible for a credit are made after December thirty-first, the teacher may include the expenditures on his initial return or may file an amended 2025 return claiming the credit, so long as the return or amended return is filed in this fiscal year. The Department of Revenue may require whatever proof it deems necessary to implement the credit provided by this part of this provision. Any person receiving the reimbursement provided by this proviso is ineligible to take the income tax credit allowed by this proviso.

1A.44. (SDE-EIA: CERDEP Student Information and Reporting) For the current fiscal year, the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps to School Readiness must acquire unique student identifiers or SUNS numbers for each student enrolled in the CERDEP program no later than the 45th day and must provide a report of such to the House Ways and Means Committee, the House Education Committee, the Senate Finance Committee, the Senate Education Committee and the Education Oversight Committee by November thirtieth. The Department of Education and the Office of First Steps to School Readiness must provide any information required by the Education Oversight Committee for the annual CERDEP report no later than November thirtieth



1A.49 (SDE-EIA: 4K Early Literacy Competencies Assessments) Of the funds carried forward from the full-day 4K program from the previous fiscal year, the Department of Education is authorized to expend up to \$800,000 on assessments and professional development to analyze the early literacy competencies of children in publicly funded prekindergarten. If these funds are not available, funds appropriated and/or authorized for assessment shall be used to administer the prekindergarten assessments. The department shall manage the administration of assessments that analyze the early literacy and language development of children in publicly funded prekindergarten as done in the prior fiscal year. Each school district and private provider participating in a publicly funded prekindergarten program will administer one of the formative assessments selected by the department to each child eligible for and enrolled in a publicly funded prekindergarten program during the first forty-five days of the school year and during the last forty-five days of the school year. Accommodations that do not invalidate the results of these assessments must be provided in the manner set forth by the students Individualized Education Program or 504 Accommodations Plan and for students who are Limited English Proficient according to their LEP Plan. The department will provide the assessment data to the Education Oversight Committee. The results of the assessment and the developmental intervention strategies recommended or services needed to address the child's identified needs must also be provided, in writing, to the parent or guardian. The assessment may not be used to deny a student admission to prekindergarten.

Furthermore, up to \$2,000,000 of the funds appropriated for half-day programs for four-year-olds and funds carried forward from assessment must be expended by the Department of Education to administer the KRA to each child entering kindergarten in the public schools. The assessment of kindergarten students must be administered at a minimum of once during the first forty-five days of the school year with the results collected by the department. The results of the assessments and the developmental intervention strategies recommended or services needed to address each child's identified needs must also be provided, in writing, to the parent or guardian. The assessment may not be used to deny a student admission to kindergarten. Accommodations that do not invalidate the results of these assessments must be provided in the manner set forth by the students Individualized Education Program, 504 Accommodations Plan, or LEP Plan. Districts are given the option of designating up to two days of the one hundred eighty day school calendar to administer the assessment to kindergarten students. The department will also provide the results of the assessment of kindergarten students to the Education Oversight Committee. With available funds, the department will also provide or secure training for appropriate educators in how to administer the assessment.

For all students assessed with the KRA, the Department of Education is required to collect data from schools and school districts on the prior early learning experience of each student. The data would include whether the kindergartener had attended in the prior school year a Head Start program, a South Carolina Early Reading Development and Education Program in a public school or a private center, a half-day 4K program in a public school, a full-day 4K program in a public school, a child care center (registered faith-based, registered family home, group home, or exempt provider), or informal child care.



(SDE-EIA: CERDEP Foundational Literacy Skill Training)

(A) Beginning in the 2025-26 Fiscal Year, with funds available, the Department of Education will train public school educators and class aides working with children in the South Carolina Early Reading Development and Education program (CERDEP) and staff the Office of First Steps to School Readiness in foundational literacy skills. Each school district with CERDEP classrooms shall participate in the implementation of this foundational literacy skills training.

(B) Selected educators shall participate in foundational literacy skills training provided and paid for by the Department of Education. Successful completion of this training shall satisfy the requirements of the literacy teacher endorsement. Educators who successfully complete the training, as determined by the department, shall receive a monetary stipend.

(C) The Department of Education is authorized to carry forward and expend any balance of funds authorized in the prior fiscal year for training for the same purposes in the current fiscal year.

Appendix B: First Steps 4K Lead Teacher Qualifications



Providers shall employ qualified lead teachers in each First Steps 4K classroom. Teachers holding a four-year degree or higher in Early Childhood Education are preferred.

The Proviso requires that each lead teacher possess, at minimum, a two-year degree in early childhood education or a related field. All lead teachers must have completed or be enrolled and demonstrating progress toward the completion of a teacher education program within four-years.

The following credentials shall be deemed acceptable for lead teachers during the school year:

1. A four-year or graduate teacher education degree with an emphasis in early childhood education.
2. A four-year or graduate teacher education degree (in a field other than early childhood) with at least six documented credit hours in early childhood education and/or child development.
3. A four-year college degree (in any field) with at least six documented credit hours in early childhood education and/or child development and evidence of the teacher's current enrollment in a four-year or graduate teacher education program with an emphasis on early childhood education.
4. A two-year Associate of Public Service (APS) Degree in Early Care and Education (or its out of state equivalent) and evidence of the teacher's current enrollment in a four-year teacher education program with an emphasis on early childhood education.
5. A two-year degree in a field other than early childhood education, plus a Child Development Associate's (CDA), 27 credit hour Early Childhood Development Certificate, or Montessori diploma and evidence of the teacher's current enrollment in a four-year teacher education program with an emphasis on early childhood education.
6. A fourth-year student in a teacher education degree with an emphasis in early childhood education in a final year of academic preparation or is co-enrolled in student teaching or an internship with the childcare provider.

Appendix C: First Steps 4K Approved Curricula



Three research and evidence-based preschool curriculum models are approved for use in First Steps 4K classrooms:

1. Creative Curriculum by Teaching Strategies
2. HighScope Preschool Curriculum
3. Montessori Method

Providers seeking to use another research-based preschool program for supplemental use must seek prior approval from First Steps 4K.

Request submissions shall include:

- A copy of the published program and all supporting resource materials.
- Published, peer-reviewed research supporting the efficacy of the model in promoting school success.
- Evidence that the model is child-centered and supports the active learning of young children.
- Goals for the knowledge and skills to be acquired by the children that are consistent with the SC Prekindergarten Content Standards, and focus upon critical developmental and learning supports including, but not limited to:
 - o Early literacy
 - o Numeracy o Social/Emotional Development
 - o Physical Development
- A summary of training opportunities available for providers seeking to use this model.

Requests for review of supplemental materials shall be addressed to:

Martha M. Strickland, 4K State Director
South Carolina First Steps
636 Rosewood Drive
Columbia, SC 29201



Appendix D:

First Steps 4K Approved Developmental Screening Tools:

1. Ages & Stages Questionnaire, Third Edition (ASQ-3) Jane Squires, Ph.D., & Duane Bricker, Ph.D. Copyright 2009, by Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co.
2. Ages & Stages, Social/Emotional Edition

First Steps 4K Approved Student Assessment:

GOLD by Teaching Strategies, LLC

Appendix E: First Steps 4K Classroom Grants Criteria



Approved providers must maintain material, supplies, and furnishings to accommodate the number of children enrolled in the 4K classroom(s). Based upon the availability of funds, SC First Steps 4K reserves the right to offer material/equipment grants to 4K providers. Approved providers enrolling between one and six eligible children may receive a materials/equipment grant at a minimum of \$1,000 per child. Approved providers enrolling seven or more eligible children may receive a material/equipment grant at a minimum of \$10,000. This grant funding shall be used to purchase items identified in consultation with a First Steps 4K Coach and the First Steps 4K Materials Coordinator to support a high-quality learning environment. All 4K materials are to remain in the 4K classroom.

The First Steps 4K Coach and the First Steps 4K Materials Coordinator will complete a baseline Materials and Equipment Inventory/Needs Assessment. The equipment and materials needs identified in collaboration with the Center Director/Principal shall form the basis of the program's grant funding request. Final 4K Program approval and approval of 4K students will trigger the ordering process.

Step 1: In collaboration with the 4K Coach, the director/administrator will utilize the completed Materials and Equipment Inventory/Needs Assessment to identify and prioritize a list of needed materials and equipment. All requested expenditures must promote the research-based practice and contribute to the program's improved environmental quality as measured by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-3), the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO), and the Fidelity Checklist.

Step 2: The First Steps 4K Materials Coordinator and the 4K Coach shall complete the vendor online shopping cart(s) of the 4K program's preference. Vendor contract offers will be shared with the 4K program director/administrator for selection of the vendor(s).

Step 3: The 4K program director/administrator will grant his/her approval and submission. (Note: All requested expenditures must reflect needs collaboratively identified on the Materials and Equipment Inventory/Needs Assessment.) The director/administrator of the First Steps 4K Provider will sign off on the final order for submission.

Step 4: The First Steps 4K Materials Coordinator shall submit the digital order forms to the appropriate vendor(s) for approval by the 4K Manager and the 4K State Director.

Step 5: Materials will be shipped directly to the First Steps 4K Provider. Orders are often delivered on one day with the date selected. The 4K Team will use this as a teaching opportunity to coach on room arrangement and use of materials. If materials arrive later, the 4K program will notify the 4K Materials Coordinator when the order is fully received.

Step 6: The 4K Materials Coordinator will notify our First Steps 4K Fiscal Manager the invoice is complete and ready for payment.



Appendix F: Jacob's Law – SC Section 56-5-195 – School Bus Safety Standards

(A) Effective July 1, 2000, any entity transporting preprimary, primary, or secondary school students to or from school, school-related activities, or child care, and utilizing a vehicle defined as a "school bus" under 49 U.S.C. Section 30125, as defined on April 5, 2000, must transport these students in a vehicle meeting federal school bus safety standards, as contained in 49 U.S.C. Section 30101, et seq., or any successor statutes, and all applicable federal regulations. Nothing in this section prohibits the transportation of children to or from child care in nonconforming vehicles by a State of South Carolina human service provider or public transportation authority as long as each child is accompanied by a parent or legal guardian whose transportation is in connection with his work, education, or training.

(B) Notwithstanding subsection (A) of this section, any vehicle that is purchased before July 1, 2000, and is utilized to transport preprimary, primary, or secondary students to or from school, school-related activities, or child care is not subject to the requirements contained in subsection (A) of this section until July 1, 2006. A vehicle that is purchased on or after July 1, 2000, and is utilized to transport preprimary, primary, or secondary students to or from school, school-related activities, or child care is subject to the requirements contained in subsection (A) of this section once the vehicle is utilized for those purposes.

(C) Before July 1, 2006, nothing in this section may be construed to create a duty or other obligation to cease utilizing nonconforming vehicles purchased before the effective date of this act.

(D) To facilitate compliance with the provisions contained in this section, any entity contained in this section may purchase conforming vehicles under the State of South Carolina contracts for purchase of these vehicles.

(E) Nothing in the section prohibits the transportation of students by common carriers that are not exclusively engaged in the transportation of school students or by the entities subject to this section which own or operate these vehicles. However, the motor carriage used by the common carrier or entity to transport students must be designed to carry thirty or more passengers.

2025-2026 Family Income Eligibility Table



Students eligible for 4K must provide evidence of either Medicaid, SNAP or TANF eligibility **OR** a documented family income at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty definition circulated annually by the US Department of Health and Human Services **OR** are experiencing homelessness, transiency or in foster care.

Persons in Family or Household	2025-2026 100% of Federal Poverty	4K Eligibility 2025-2026 185% of Federal Poverty (Free and Reduced Lunch Eligibility)
2	\$21,150.00	\$39,127.50
3	\$26,650.00	\$49,302.50
4	\$32,150.00	\$59,477.50
5	\$37,650.00	\$69,652.50
6	\$43,150.00	\$79,827.50
7	\$48,650.00	\$90,002.50
8	\$54,150.00	\$100,177.50

For each additional household member add: +\$5,500

+ \$10,175

Adapted from the 2025 US Department of Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines, Effective July 1, 2025 to June 30, 2026

(Federal Register/Vol. 90, No. 11/Friday, January 17, 2025/Notices, pp. 5917-5918)

2025-2026 CALENDAR

This is a Year-Round Modified School Calendar in accordance with SC Law Section 59-1-425.

07 July	08 August	09 September	10 October
SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT	SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT	SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT	SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT
1 2 3 4 5	1 2	1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4
6 7 8 9 10 11 12	3 4 5 6 7 8 9	7 8 9 10 11 12 13	5 6 7 8 9 10 11
13 14 15 16 17 18 19	10 11 12 13 14 15 16	14 15 16 17 18 19 20	12 13 14 15 16 17 18
20 21 22 23 24 25 26	17 18 19 20 21 22 23	21 22 23 24 25 26 27	19 20 21 22 23 24 25
27 28 29 30 31	24 25 26 27 28 29 30	28 29 30	26 27 28 29 30 31
	31		

11 November	12 December	01 January	02 February
SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT	SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT	SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT	SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT
1	1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2 3 4 5 6 7 8	7 8 9 10 11 12 13	4 5 6 7 8 9 10	8 9 10 11 12 13 14
9 10 11 12 13 14 15	14 15 16 17 18 19 20	11 12 13 14 15 16 17	15 16 17 18 19 20 21
16 17 18 19 20 21 22	21 22 23 24 25 26 27	18 19 20 21 22 23 24	22 23 24 25 26 27 28
23 24 25 26 27 28 29	28 29 30 31	25 26 27 28 29 30 31	
30			

03 March	04 April	05 May	06 June
SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT	SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT	SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT	SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT
1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4	1 2	1 2 3 4 5 6
8 9 10 11 12 13 14	5 6 7 8 9 10 11	3 4 5 6 7 8 9	7 8 9 10 11 12 13
15 16 17 18 19 20 21	12 13 14 15 16 17 18	10 11 12 13 14 15 16	14 15 16 17 18 19 20
22 23 24 25 26 27 28	19 20 21 22 23 24 25	17 18 19 20 21 22 23	21 22 23 24 25 26 27
29 30 31	26 27 28 29 30	24 25 26 27 28 29 30	28 29 30
		31	

07 July
SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT
1 2 3 4
5 6 7 8 9 10 11
12 13 14 15 16 17 18
19 20 21 22 23 24 25
26 27 28 29 30 31



Checkpoints

Oct. 28: Fall Gold Assessment Closes
 Feb. 12: Winter Gold Assessment Closes
 May 19: Spring Gold Assessment Closes
 July 16: Summer Gold Assessment Closes

***Inclement Weather Make-Up Days:** January 1, February 16, May 25

Professional Development Days

July 28 - 30: New Teacher Training (Virtual)
 July 29: Leader Trainings (Virtual - PM only)
 July 30: Leader Training (Virtual - AM only)
 July 31: All Teacher Training (Regional)
 Aug. 1: Teacher Workday in Classroom
 Sept. 5: PD Day (Virtual)
 Oct 7-8: Leadership Academy
 October 8-9: Teacher Academy
 October 10: Teacher Workday
 Jan. 9: New Leader Training (Virtual)
 Jan. 16: New Leader Training (Virtual)
 Jan. 14-16: New Teacher Academy (Virtual)
 March 6: PD Day (Regional or Virtual)

Important Dates

Aug. 4: Day #1- Family Drop-In (First Day of School)
 Aug. 5-6: Staggered Start Schedule - Group A
 Aug. 7-8: Staggered Start Schedule - Group B
 Oct. 14: Day #45
 Nov. 4: Day #60 (1st progress reports, conference week)
 Jan. 6: Day #90
 Jan. 21 Day #100 Celebration
 Feb. 19: Day #120 (2nd progress reports, conference week)
 May 22: Day #180 (3rd progress reports)
 May 26: Day #181 (Summer Session begins)
 July 21: Day #220

Holidays

Sept. 1: Labor Day
 Oct. 6-10: Fall Break for 4K students
 Nov. 24-28: Thanksgiving Break
 Dec. 22 - Jan. 2: Winter Break
 Jan. 19: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
 Feb. 16: Presidents' Day
 April 6-10: Spring Break
 May 25: Memorial Day
 July 3: 4th of July Observance

First Steps 4K Classrooms are closed for Professional Development Days and Holidays