



**4K Operational Guidelines**  
as of May 29, 2026





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## 1. 4K Resource Web Page

The forms referenced throughout this document may be found at [www.firststeps.org/first-steps-4k-resources/](http://www.firststeps.org/first-steps-4k-resources/).

Please visit the page as often as possible for updates and other additional resources.



## 2. 4K Site Administrator Requirements

The goal of the South Carolina Child Early Reading Development and Education Program (CERDEP) is to provide children and their families with the developmental and learning support necessary for long-term school success. 4K Site Administrators are the essential director-level roles as a Provider that support the implementation and the continuous quality improvement of the 4K Program. They are tasked with adhering to all aspects of the 4K Operational Guidelines and ensure Lead Teachers implement all requirements outlined in the 4K Classroom Guidelines.

4K Site Administrators do not have specific educational or professional background requirements for the 4K Program, but a 4K Site Administrator is expected to understand the business development needs of the Provider. If a 4K Site Administrator feels they need additional support, they should contact the First Steps Director of 4K Professional Development to learn about professional development opportunities offered through the 4K program.

Given the central role of the 4K Site Administrator in program operations, each 4K Provider must designate at least one additional staff member to maintain access to the 4K Operational Guidelines. This ensures continuity in the event of an unexpected administrative departure (see 44. Staffing and Ratios).

In such an event, this designated individual will serve as the acting 4K Site Administrator. Their immediate responsibilities include notifying First Steps of the personnel change and overseeing program operations until a permanent 4K Site Administrator is appointed.

Failure to maintain a designated point of contact or to promptly notify First Steps of a 4K Site Administrator vacancy may result in an Operations Improvement Plan, up to and including potential termination of the contract.

### **3. 4K and 4K+ Child Care Scholarship**

First Steps 4K Sites are encouraged to provide before- and after-school care to accommodate the needs of working families.

If a Medicaid-eligible First Steps 4K enrolled student requires child care beyond the contracted service length (6.5 hours or 8 hours) of the First Steps 4K instructional day, they may qualify for a half-time child care scholarship through the First Steps partnership with DSS. This partnership and added benefit to families is called First Steps 4K+ Child Care Scholarships. These scholarships are honored at any ABC Quality provider.

4K+ Child Care Scholarships are subject to availability, dependent on state/federal funding. If the 4K Site Administrator is working with a prospective family who is interested in the 4K+ Child Care Scholarship program, they should direct the family to contact [Free4KSC@scfirststeps.org](mailto:Free4KSC@scfirststeps.org) to learn more.

Families should communicate with their 4K Site Administrator and child care center upon receiving notification that they have been approved for a 4K+ Child Care Scholarship. The child care center will need to submit a Connections Card to the SC Child Care Scholarship Program. Once approvals and connections are completed, the child care sites are reimbursed via the Service Voucher Log (SVL) (the same way that they are reimbursed for all other scholarship recipients). 4K Sites will see the eligible children on their SVL and will record hours attended and any absences just like they do for other children using scholarships issued by the SC Child Care Scholarship Program.

### **4. 4K-to-5K Transition Planning and Kindergarten Readiness**

All children are ready for kindergarten when they are five years old by September 1 of that school year. Kindergarten readiness is more than a matter of age. For a strong start in school, children need positive relationships and supportive learning environments beginning at birth. Research shows that nearly 75% of children who enter kindergarten with demonstrated readiness will either meet or exceed 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Math and Literacy benchmarks. It is our responsibility as families, caregivers, and communities to nurture the health and development necessary for school success.

South Carolina's Profile of the Ready Kindergartner describes the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional signs of school readiness. Because each child develops differently, each child will be ready in different ways. That is why 4K Site Administrators and instructional staff must also be ready.

#### **A. Approaches to Learning and Inquiry**

- Demonstrates eagerness to learn and shows curiosity through questioning
- Maintains attention and persists in tasks that are challenging
- Shows creativity and imagination through pretend play

## **B. Physical Development, Self-Help, and Motor Skills**

- Holds writing tools with a proper grip and uses scissors with control
- Demonstrates balance and coordination (e.g., jumping, running, and climbing)
- Independently performs self-help tasks such as bathroom needs, hand washing, tooth brushing, and dressing

## **C. Emotional and Social Development**

- Shows caring and understanding of others' feelings and respects the property of others
- Makes friends and interacts with familiar adults
- Manages emotions and follows classroom rules and routines with minimal support
- Interacts positively with peers, takes turns, and shares materials
- Uses words to seek help, answer questions, and resolve conflicts

## **D. Mathematical Thinking**

- Number Sense:
  - Counts in sequence up to 20
  - Counts up to 10 objects, using one number for each object
  - Compares sets of objects by quantity. Describes and compares objects by size, length, and weight
- Matching, Sorting, and Classifying:
  - Identifies basic shapes, colors, and patterns
  - Describes positions of objects using the terms above and below
  - Sorts and classifies up to 10 objects into categories

## **E. Language and Literacy Development**

- Listening, Speaking, and Understanding
  - Speaks in complete sentences (6-8 words) and expresses ideas or needs clearly
  - Follows multi-step directions and listens to stories with focus
  - Asks "how" and "why" questions about the world and stories
  - Makes simple predictions about what might happen next in a story
- Early Reading
  - Knows that print carries meaning and moves from left to right
  - Recognizes their written name and familiar signs/logos
  - Identifies rhyming words and some upper/lowercase letters and sounds
- Early Writing
  - Draws pictures to tell a story and writes their name independently
  - Writes using a combination of letters, letter-like shapes, and scribbles
  - Uses drawing and writing during play

It is the responsibility of 4K Sites to meet the individual needs of students at all levels of school readiness and get them on a trajectory towards kindergarten readiness. This means providing whatever support and services are needed for a high quality 4K experience.

## **5. Anti-Discrimination Requirements**

Approved First Steps 4K Sites 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.

## **6. Attendance Policies**

The goal of 4K is to provide children and their families with the developmental and learning support necessary for long-term school success. This goal can only be achieved if students are consistently attending 4K.

### **A. Attendance**

Research shows that attendance is an important factor in student achievement. All First Steps 4K-funded students are expected to attend regularly and for the full instructional day. Attendance requirements must be explained to families during the enrollment process and at orientation. The importance of consistent attendance must also be reinforced at each subsequent Family-Teacher Conference and all interactions between 4K staff and families.

To support monitoring for chronic absenteeism, classroom attendance shall be recorded daily, maintained on site (within the First Steps 4K classroom), and submitted daily in the data system. Attendance is the responsibility of the Lead Teacher in each classroom, but 4K Site Administrators must confirm attendance is accurate and timely by completing the weekly mandatory "Tuition Verification Request" form.

### **B. Chronic Absenteeism, Tardiness, or Early Departure**

Children can't learn and prepare for kindergarten if they are not attending school daily. Chronic absenteeism occurs when a child misses 10 or more days of instruction, and research has shown that chronic absenteeism can have long-term effects on a child's academic success. Therefore, it is a shared responsibility of 4K teachers, 4K Site Administrators, and the First Steps 4K state office to closely monitor absences and follow-up with families when children are absent from school.

Families are only allowed a total of 10 unexcused absences in a year. Exceeding this allowance may trigger the loss of the academic scholarship. To keep families aware of

the attendance policy, notices will be generated by the data system and sent to families when a child reaches 5 and 9 absences. However, staff at the 4K Site should also discuss any absences with a family member of the affected child.

We do not want or expect children to come to school with illness. Medical absences will happen, and in these instances, the Classroom Guidelines state that a Lead Teacher should encourage parents to submit proof of medical absence, in the form of a doctor's note, to avoid these absences counting against the 10 allowances. If a family submits proof of an excused absence, this should be uploaded to the data system as a Case Note for the absent child. 4K Site Administrators will have the ability to view family case notes through the data system portal.

Once a child has reached 10 absences, the family may appeal the loss of their academic scholarship. If a family wishes to appeal, the Lead Teacher or 4K Site Administrator instructs the family to reach out [4koperations@scfirststeps.org](mailto:4koperations@scfirststeps.org) and request an appeal form to begin the appeal process. Children may attend while the appeal is processing. The 4K Site Administrator should communicate with families that appeals are only granted on rare occasion.

### **C. Attendance Policy Family Signatures**

Lead Teachers and 4K Site Administrators must coordinate with all families to make sure that a signed copy of the attendance policy is uploaded into the data system as a Case Note for each child.

The policy form that each family must sign can be found on our First Steps 4K Resources webpage. This policy form should first be provided to families at Orientation, filled out and collected during the first week of school, and uploaded into the data system upon receiving the form. A hard copy of the policy signatures should also be maintained on-site.

## **7. Calendar and Days of Service**

### **A. Length 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.

The Provider's service length option will be selected by the Provider during pre-contracting and will be in effect for the entire academic year of the contract. 4K Sites may select only one of the options below:

- Traditional Day and Year (180 school days, 6.5 hours daily)
- Extended Day and Traditional Year (180 school days, 8.0 hours)
- Traditional Day and Summer School (220 days, 6.5 hours daily)
- Extended Day and Summer School (220 days, 8.0 hours)

## **B. Length of Service Amendments**

Programs wishing to extend their length of service, either going from a six and a half (6.5) hour to an eight (8) hour instructional day or from a 180-day to a 220-day academic year, must submit a Service Change Request form through the data system portal. These requests will be reviewed by First Steps 4K state office and, if approved, an amendment to the contract will be issued for the remainder of the school year. Approval of these requests is not guaranteed and will be decided based on prior 4K Provider performance.

4K Sites cannot make any operational changes to their length of service until the contract amendment has been signed by both SC First Steps and the 4K Site Leader.

## **C. Closures**

Approved 4K programs must follow the First Steps 4K calendar. If you wish to follow the Thanksgiving, Winter, and Spring holiday closure schedule of the school district in which it is located, a calendar change request must be submitted prior.

4K Sites wishing to provide service on these days may do so on an optional basis- parents may be charged or programs may provide this service at no charge. These are not considered First Steps 4K tuition days. Any changes to holiday closures should be submitted to First Steps 4K for approval using the Calendar Change Request form.

## **D. Inclement Weather**

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, and so inclement weather dates will be considered “closed” for the First Steps 4K classrooms. You must submit a Calendar Change Request form to make up inclement weather days. By legislation, three designated weather make-up days are on the 4K school calendar. However, you may use any named holiday you prefer. In case of inclement weather, these make up days become normal school days, if needed. If no weather make-up days are required, these days will be holidays for First Steps 4K classes.

## **E. Start Date**

The 2026-27 School Year starts on August 5<sup>th</sup>. August 5<sup>th</sup> may be used as a drop-in day for families, orientation day, or a regular school day. Attendance will be recorded on this day. Late start dates may be approved for certain school districts, charter schools, and the Diocese of Charleston Catholic schools. **This will not shift your entire calendar, but the number of days requested to start late must be built into your site’s yearly calendar. All 180-day programs will end on May 24, 2027 and 220-day programs will end on July 21, 2027.**

## 8. Calendar Change Request

The Calendar Change Request form can be used by 4K Sites to submit requests for changes to their center's school year calendar. This form must be submitted by the 4K provider to Steps 4K through the data system portal to adjust their First Steps 4K calendar.

### A. Requesting a Calendar Change

Calendar change requests must be submitted prior to the date of closure (except in emergency or weather-related closures). You may not select a date as a make-up day if the date has already passed.

In the event of scheduling a make-up day or substituting days for holiday closures, a calendar change request form must be submitted at least two (2) business days prior to the requested new day of operation. Requests for an operating day will not be approved if the current number of projected days of operation already meets the maximum service length (180 days or 220 days).

If the 4K Provider does not submit a calendar change request at least (2) business days prior to the requested new day of operation, First Steps cannot guarantee it will be approved by the requested operating day. Only make-up operating days that have been approved in advance will be eligible for tuition.

### B. Professional Development Days

Professional Development Days, as outlined in the 4K Training Calendar (see 35. Professional Development), **will not be approved for any calendar change requests.**

### C. Emergency Operations

Should First Steps 4K determine that an emergency exists for the operations of the Provider and the provider may not be able to continue normal operations, First Steps 4K can, at their sole discretion, decide as to whether the emergency would warrant continued payment to the Provider. If First Steps 4K determines that payments should continue to be made, the following will be expected of the provider to continue to receive payments.

1. Pay the salaries of the 4K Lead Teacher and the 4K Assistant Teacher during any emergency closure period during which Provider is receiving either an advance payment or tuition payments from First Steps 4K. Provider shall pay the 4K Lead Teacher and 4K Assistant Teacher salaries at the same hourly rate and for the hours per week of the greater of either of the following: (i) average hours per week for the last 4 weeks prior to the Effective Date of the emergency, or (ii) the same hours for the last week worked prior to the Effective Date of the emergency. This emergency pay will continue until Provider is either (i) no longer receiving payments, (ii) the emergency is ended, or (iii) until notified by First Steps 4K.

2. Not charge for any Services covered by the 4K Program to parents or children enrolled in the First Steps 4K Program during a time the Provider is receiving either an advance payment, or tuition reimbursement from First Steps 4K. This includes any emergency periods where the Provider is receiving payments from First Steps 4K.
3. Provide all Services required by First Steps 4K to the children enrolled in the Program during the emergency. This shall include virtual education opportunities, outreach to parents, or other Services as determined by First Steps. First Steps 4K will provide training and resources for the Provider as determined by First Steps 4K.
4. Any other requirements determined by First Steps 4K to be needed during the emergency.

## **9. Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting and Investigations**

All First Steps 4K programs are mandated by law to report suspicion of child abuse or neglect. The law requires reporting the following:

- Any physical injury, sexual or emotional abuse inflicted on a child other than by accidental means by those responsible for his/her care, custody and control shall be construed to be abuse.
- Failure to provide by those responsible for the care, custody and control of the child the proper necessary support, education as required by law, medical, surgical or any other care necessary for his/her well-being shall be classified as neglect.

Families may not be informed of reporting if such confidence may hinder a full investigation.

To report suspected child abuse or neglect, contact the SCDSS 24-hour, toll-free hotline at 1-888-CARE4US or 1-888-227-3487. This hotline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Intake staff will assist the person making the report and assess the information provided.

## **10. Children Speaking English as a Second Language**

If English is not the primary language spoken in the home of an eligible child, the First Steps 4K provider, with the assistance of First Steps 4K state office, 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.

## 11. Children with Special Needs

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. If there is a child at your site requiring additional supports, please notify First Steps 4K office at [4koperations@scfirststeps.org](mailto:4koperations@scfirststeps.org) with the subject line-additional supports needed.

First Steps 4K staff will facilitate collaboration between 4K Sites 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. When First Steps 4K Sites 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.

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, service providers or therapists may visit your 4K site to provide approved services to children enrolled in your class.

### *Serving Children with Special Needs*

First Steps 4K Sites 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.

## 12. CLASS®

The quality of interactions between 4K teachers and children is measured through use of the nationally recognized CLASS tool. CLASS stands for Classroom Assessment Scoring System and was developed at the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL).

The CLASS tool is used in First Steps 4K because it provides a rigorous and consistent approach to observing and measuring teacher-child interactions during critical developmental periods, while still providing a context-specific and developmentally sensitive metric for each age group. In addition:

- CLASS is the most researched and validated observation measure of early childhood teaching and classroom quality. Over 200 published studies show that students who attend classrooms with higher CLASS scores have better social and academic outcomes.
- All children benefit socially and academically from being in classrooms with high quality teacher-child interactions as measured by CLASS, including classrooms and family day homes with diverse populations: Dual Language Learners (DLL),

children from migrant families, tribal communities, children with special needs, and children from diverse cultural backgrounds.

- Interactions, when measured by CLASS, promote incremental improvement that motivates educators at every level in the system. CLASS provides actionable feedback for every classroom and can be used with all educators, regardless of background, setting, or credential.

4K classes will be observed by a trained CLASS observer in both the fall and the spring. Following these observations, lead teachers will receive scores in three domains:

- Emotional support
- Classroom organization
- Instructional support

### **A. Certified CLASS Observers**

First Steps 4K will utilize certified CLASS observers to conduct CLASS observations. 4K Sites must allow these observers timely access to the facility during regular operating hours. The First Steps 4K state office will let programs know a window of time in which observations could occur. Programs will be asked to submit up to 5 black-out dates during that window. Black-out dates would be considered off limit days for observers to come.

### **B. Observation Cycles**

Each cycle of observation for Pre-K CLASS consists of a 20-minute period during which the observer watches classroom interaction and takes notes followed by a 10-minute period for recording scores.

### **C. CLASS Dimensions**

The CLASS tool organizes effective classroom interactions into domains, which are further subdivided into dimensions. These dimensions are based solely on observed interactions between teachers and children in classrooms. This system does not evaluate the presence of materials, the physical environment or safety, or the adoption of a specific curriculum. CLASS observations include all applicable dimensions for each age-level tool as listed below.

Emotional Support:

- Positive Climate (PC)
- Negative Climate (NC)
- Teacher/Educator Sensitivity (TS)
- Regard for Student Perspectives (RSP)

#### Classroom Organization:

- Behavior Management (BM)
- Productivity (PR)
- Instructional Learning Formats (ILF)

#### Instructional Support:

- Concept Development (CD)
- Quality of Feedback (QF)
- Language Modeling (LM)

### **D. Scoring with CLASS**

In accordance with the manual, CLASS observers capture lower quality and higher quality behaviors that are demonstrated in classrooms. CLASS requires the observer to assign one score for each dimension per observation cycle based on the degree to which certain behavioral markers characterize the classroom during that cycle. A score from 1 (minimally characteristic) to 7 (highly characteristic) is given for each dimension and represents the extent to which that dimension is characteristic of that classroom. First Steps 4K uses the following score scales for each dimension:

- “Needs Support” (scores of 1-2) are assigned when behaviors associated with a dimension were demonstrated in a low-quality manner, were lacking, or were rarely present in the classroom interactions.
- “Intermediate” (scores of 3-5) are assigned when the classroom interactions associated with a dimension were somewhat present during the classroom observation or a part of some children’s experience.
- “Advanced” (scores of 6-7) are assigned when the classroom interactions were highly characteristic of a dimension during the observation. High-range behaviors are those that are meaningful, consistent, sustained, and reflective of everyone’s experience in the classroom

### **E. CLASS Support for Ongoing Improvement**

Results from CLASS observations are used by 4K Coaches to inform ongoing professional development and to drive a Quality Improvement Plan. Increasing capacity and knowledge of quality interactions at the local level promotes shared understandings of the strong principles of high-quality teaching in early childhood settings that are highlighted in the CLASS tool.

Site Leaders and Coaches can use the CLASS score ranges below to determine next steps when focusing on classroom-level improvement.

- “Advanced” CLASS scores indicate areas of strength. Classrooms with domain/dimension scores in the high range should share their effective teaching practices with peers.

- “Intermediate” CLASS scores indicate areas to build upon. Classrooms with domain/dimension scores in the mid-range should build upon the effective practices that they are already using to strengthen their teacher-child interactions.
- “Needs Support” CLASS scores indicate areas for improvement. Classrooms with domain/dimension scores in the low range should learn about effective teaching practices by participating in foundational CLASS training.

The following strategies may be used by First Steps 4K Coaches and staff to help improve the quality of teacher-child interactions as measured by the CLASS tool.

- Participating in practice-focused professional development introduces key knowledge pieces for a specific CLASS domain or dimension and then help teachers plan for and practice improvements.
- Engaging in action planning in coaching followed by regular feedback/analysis loops and reflection with First Steps 4K Coaches where teachers reflect on what worked in their classrooms and how to incrementally improve.
- Coaches conducting informal “walk-throughs” or “focused observations” targeted to specific action plan areas (e.g., one CLASS dimension) so that teachers can focus on improving one practice at a time and receive frequent feedback on that practice.
- First Step 4K staff utilizing CLASS data alongside other data sources (curriculum use, environment, child outcomes) to identify common needs. Research suggests that children benefit the most when interactions and instruction, guided by a strong curriculum, are maximized.

## **F. CLASS Pilot**

As First Steps expands the utilization of the CLASS tool across the First Steps 4K network, 4K Sites may be selected, at random, to participate in CLASS pilots, which will provide additional trainings and professional development opportunities to instructional staff. If a site has been selected as a pilot Provider, it is the expectation of First Steps that the 4K Site Administrators will advocate for the instructional staff’s participation in these opportunities. While we understand that unforeseen circumstances may result in teachers being unable to attend specific aspects of CLASS pilot trainings, a 4K Provider’s consistent absence from CLASS pilot activities may negatively affect their standings during contract renewal reviews.

## **13. Coaching**

Approved First Steps 4K Sites enrolling eligible students shall each be assigned a First Steps 4K Coach. Additionally, 4K Sites may receive visits from a contract CLASS Coach or other contract appointees on behalf of First Steps.

Instructional coaching will occur in individual classrooms, during the school day, between the 4K Coach and the instructional staff. These visits will be driven by CLASS observations and support a teacher’s Quality Improvement Plan. Coach visits will be a

minimum of twice monthly, for 90 - 120 minutes each, which will include coaching and a time for the teacher to reflect with their Coach. All coaching sessions will be documented in the data system, which can be viewed by the 4K Site Administrator, the Lead Teacher, and the First Steps 4K office.

During a coaching visit, the Provider must provide the 4K Coach with access to the requested classroom. Failure to permit timely facility access to First Steps 4K staff or contract coaches from SC First Steps during normal business/operating hours may be cause for corrective action, up to and including the termination of provider eligibility.

**Remember:** 4K Coaches are considered “mandated reporters.” Regulatory deficiencies noted on site will be reported to DSS as a matter of policy.

## 14. Compliance, 4K Success Monitors, and Operational Improvement Plans

4K Success Monitors are First Steps contractors that complete unannounced classroom visits to evaluate classroom and site alignment with the 4K contract and operational guidelines. Written feedback will be provided to the 4K Site Administrator in the data system portal following a 4K Success Monitor visit.

If a 4K Success Monitor notes fractional misalignments with the 4K contract or operational guidelines during a visit, the Director of Compliance and Classroom Resources will issue a warning to the 4K Site Administrator and reach out to discuss ways to make improvements to 4K program implementation. The formal warning and notes on the follow-up communication will be documented by the Director of Compliance and Classroom Resources in the data system, which will be available for viewing by the 4K Site Administrator and First Steps 4K state office staff.

Significant misalignments with the 4K contract or operational guidelines, as noted by the 4K Success Monitors, will lead to a Provider receiving an Operations Improvement Plan from the Director of Compliance and Classroom Resources. Operations Improvement Plans can include, but are not limited to, a warning, probation, mandatory participation in a First Steps Business Development training cohort, curriculum trainings, and/or termination of provider eligibility. Information on a Provider’s Operations Improvement Plan, including outlined deadlines for demonstrated progress, will be available in the data system for the 4K Site Administrator and First Steps 4K state office staff to reference.

**Remember:** 4K Success Monitors are 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 4K Success Monitors and other First Steps staff during normal business/operating hours may be cause for corrective action, up to and including the termination of provider eligibility.

## *Operations Improvement Plan Definitions and Requirements*

The following are general definitions of the different types of Operations Improvement Plans. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list and other forms of corrective action may be implemented based on 4K Success Monitor's visit notes.

- **Warning:** When noncompliance is found, programs will be notified in a formal email and given a deadline to demonstrate progress on the area of contract or operational misalignment.
- **Probation:** On-going and repeated misalignment with the 4K contract or operational guidelines may lead to programs being placed on probation for a specified amount of time. Probation may include, but is not limited to, increased monitoring, program quality assessments, and deadlines for demonstrating progress.
- **Repayment of Funds:** If a Provider's data is found to be incorrect or the data is not submitted by the required deadlines, an Operations Improvement Plan may be put in place that either adjusts future payments to the Provider or requires a repayment of funds.
- **Mandatory Business Development/Curriculum Trainings:** Following significant or on-going misalignment with the 4K contract or operational guidelines, 4K Sites may be notified that they are required to participate in an upcoming cohort of Business Development trainings and/or curriculum trainings. More information will be provided on the trainings and the 4K Site Administrator's participation requirements at that time.
- **Termination:** Programs may be defunded, and partnership immediately terminated in cases of severe violations. First Steps 4K may terminate this Agreement immediately in its sole discretion upon findings of violation of any term of the 4K contract, or in the event First Steps 4K becomes aware of any child safety issues.

## **15. Criminal Background Checks**

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

## **16. Curriculum**

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.

The 4K Provider will choose one of the following curriculums for use in the classroom. The choice of curriculum will be made during the precontracting process and cannot be changed during the school year. 4K Sites may only elect to change their curriculum during the reapplication process for the following school year.

### **A. The Creative Curriculum for Preschool – Guided Edition**

The Creative Curriculum for Preschool is a comprehensive, research-based curriculum that features exploration and discovery as a way of learning, enabling children to develop confidence, creativity, and life-long critical thinking skills. It emphasizes establishing a partnership with families and offers practical ideas for explaining. For more details visit [teachingstrategies.com](http://teachingstrategies.com).

### **B. HighScope Preschool Curriculum**

In the HighScope approach adult-child interactions are very important, both in small groups and individually. Large group time should be meaningful to the children and limited to a small amount of time in the daily schedule. Children PLAN their learning, DO or interact with the learning in small groups or individually, then come back to group time to REVIEW what they did and learned that day. HighScope is based on the search by Dr. David Weikart. For more information visit, [highscope.org](http://highscope.org).

### **C. The Montessori Method**

The Montessori Method emphasizes learning as a process that cannot be determined by a child's age. Instead, learning is a process that is determined by the rate and speed at which a child acquires one skill before moving on to another skill. The method is based on respect of the child, families, and environment. Montessori classrooms offer child-centered schedules, enhanced individual and small group learning, promote a community classroom learning atmosphere, and commonly have mixed-aged groupings. For more information visit [Montessori.org](http://Montessori.org).

### **D. Alternative Supplemental Curriculums**

In rare instances, 4K Sites may be granted permission by First Steps to use an alternative, supplemental research-based preschool program in their 4K classroom. During pre-contracting, the Provider should work with the Strategic Site Recruitment Manager to submit a request for an alternative supplemental curriculum for review and approval by First Steps 4K state office staff.

Request submissions shall include:

- A copy of the published program and all supporting resource materials, purchased at the Provider's expense.
- Published, peer-reviewed research supporting the efficacy of the model in promoting kindergarten readiness.
- 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:
  - Early literacy
  - Numeracy of Social/Emotional Development
  - Physical Development
- A summary of training opportunities available for 4K Sites seeking to use this model.
- Evidence that the model aligns with all legislative requirements of the state-funded, CERDEP program.

Based on the information submitted with the request, First Steps 4K may choose to pilot the alternative supplemental curriculum at the Provider. 4K Sites piloting alternative supplemental curriculums may be required to enter an additional data sharing agreement with First Steps to ensure the 4K state office has access to all data necessary to evaluate the outcomes of the alternative curriculum.

## **17. Daily Schedules**

4K Site Administrators, in collaboration with Lead Teachers, should develop a daily schedule based on one of the templates provided by First Steps 4K (see-Daily Schedule in the 4K Classroom Guidelines) and the needs of a class.

For example, if a classroom is assigned a certain time for lunch, the daily schedule template in the 4K Program Guidelines can be adjusted to meet this timing requirement. The 4K Site Administrators must upload a copy of each classroom’s daily schedule in the data system portal prior to the first day of instruction. The current daily schedule can be accessed by 4K Site Administrators, Lead Teachers, and First Steps 4K staff for reference through the data system.

If changes need to be made to the daily schedule during the school year, the 4K Site Administrator must submit a Daily Schedule Change Form through the data system portal. All changes must be reviewed and approved by a member of the First Steps 4K program before going into effect. If approved, the data system portal will include the new version of the daily schedule for reference. CLASS observers (see 12. CLASS) will use the active Daily Schedule on file for their visit so it is extremely important that the 4K Site Administrator keeps this information up-to-date in the data system.

## 18. Data Submission and Retention

Approved First Steps 4K Sites must comply with all programmatic, reporting, and assessment data submission requirements, as established by First Steps. These requirements include:

- 4K Student Data:
  - 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
  - Proof of excused absences
  - ASQ-3 or other approved developmental screening scores
  - Teacher observations, documentation, and rating of skills with Gold© by Teaching Strategies
  - Instructional assessment data, including but not limited to:
    - GOLD Checkpoints during fall, winter, spring, and summer (if applicable)
    - GOLD Progressions
    - Assessment Opportunity Cards
- Family Data
  - Records of parent/teacher contact and conferences and family engagement events
  - Signed Disciplinary Policy Statement
  - Signed Attendance Policy Statement
  - Usage rates and feedback from the ReadyRosie platform
  - Information on individuals approved to pick-up the child during dismissal
  - Records of who completed pick-up for each day
- Staff Data
  - Lead teacher and instructional assistant qualifications
  - Teaching staff departures
  - 4K Site Administrator departures
  - 4K Site Administrator hires
  - Training registrations and attendance
- Classroom Data
  - Active Daily Schedule
  - Site closures and make-up days
  - Tuition Verification Requests
  - Weekly data on the number of non-4K students in a class

In addition to keeping a copy of all required data on-site, many of these data points must be entered or uploaded into the data system portals. Information on what data

needs to be entered into the data system and how to enter the data will be made available through the First Steps Learning Management System (LMS), following the mandatory 4K Site Administrator and Lead Teacher trainings.

### **A. Health Records and Screenings**

All licensed First Steps 4K Sites shall comply with the DSS Licensing Regulations for Private and Public Child Day Care Health, Safety and Sanitation requirements. All First Steps 4K Sites, 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 Sites should reach out to their local First Steps Partnership, school district, health department and/or a local health care provider to discuss coordinating 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 the child's family.

### **B. Tuition Verification Requests**

The 4K Site Administrator is required to submit a mandatory weekly online Tuition Verification Request to the First Steps 4K state office to report enrollment data. This information will be submitted through the data system portal and automated reminders of due dates will be sent via email to the 4K Site Administrator. Consistent failure to submit this information in a timely manner may be ground for an operations improvement plan.

### **C. Non-First Steps 4K Student Data**

While 4K Sites may enroll non-First Steps 4K students in a 4K classroom, the student-level data on students who are not funded by First Steps 4K should not be entered into the First Steps data system. However, the Lead Teacher will be required to submit the total number of non-First Steps 4K students enrolled in a classroom through the data system on a weekly basis. The 4K Site Administrator must ensure this information is

submitted by the Lead Teacher so that First Steps can monitor classroom ratios and available capacity.

**Remember:** Only 4-year-old students that have turned 4 on or before September 1, *regardless of funding type*, are allowed in First Steps 4K classrooms.

## **19. Data System Policies**

### **A. Data System Registration**

4K Site Administrators will automatically be registered in the data system by First Steps 4K program staff once their contract has been completed and signed by all parties. 4K Site Administrators will receive an email with their data system log-in information and a link to the data system's portal.

4K Site Administrators must share this portal link with their 4K Lead Teachers during their onboarding. Teachers will use the "Register" option on the portal to register for a login to the data system. After the teaching staff has submitted their registration, First Steps 4K program staff will verify the teacher has been approved using the Lead Teacher Qualification form (see 32. Lead Teacher Qualifications). If a new teacher is hired during the school year, they will also be verified using the Lead Teacher Qualification form, which must be submitted and approved before a teacher can register for the data system.

### **B. Data System Access and Attendance Tracking**

Both 4K Site Administrators and Teachers will be able to access the First Steps data system using the portal link shared during onboarding. This portal will allow users to perform several actions, including but not limited to, entering daily attendance, reviewing family contact information, and submitting students' assessment scores. Instructions for performing these actions are available through the First Steps Learning Management System (LMS). If you need help accessing the First Steps LMS, please reach out to the Director of 4K Professional Development or send an email to [4kprogram@scfirststeps.org](mailto:4kprogram@scfirststeps.org).

Teachers will only have access to information for the classroom to which they are assigned. Leaders will have access to all classrooms at their 4K Sites. If a teacher is out for a brief absence, it is recommended that the Leader input attendance through the portal.

### **C. Sharing Data System Logins**

Data collected on young children requires the highest level of security and must comply with all applicable federal and state confidentiality and data protection laws, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), where applicable, as outlined in the Agreement between each Provider and SC First Steps. Therefore, the sharing of data system logins is strictly prohibited. 4K Site Administrators and Lead Teachers must use

their own login to access the data system to ensure accurate auditing of data submission and access.

If a teacher departs from a 4K Provider, it is the responsibility of the 4K Site Administrator to immediately notify SC First Steps (see 44. Staffing and Ratios) so that the former teacher's access to the data system can be discontinued. If a 4K Site Administrator departs, it is the responsibility of the Owner or 4K Site Leader to immediately notify First Steps 4K so that the former administrator's access to the data system can be discontinued.

Evidence of a 4K Provider using a single data system login across multiple users or failing to communicate staff departure to First Steps may be cause for corrective action, up to and including the termination of provider eligibility.

#### **D. Data System Report Requests**

4K Site Administrators can request custom data reports from SC First Steps to help monitor and review success metrics of their 4K Sites and classrooms from the First Steps data system. If a 4K Site Administrator would like to request a custom report, they should contact the First Steps Data Insights Coordinator and will receive a form to complete on their requested report. Please note, the completion of a custom report is expected to take an average of 2 – 4 weeks, depending on the current queue and the nature of the request.

#### **E. Data System Support**

If a 4K Site Administrator or Lead Teacher has questions about registering, accessing, or using the data system, they should email [4koperations@scfirststeps.org](mailto:4koperations@scfirststeps.org) with the subject line: Data System Support.

Additionally, it is recommended that those needing immediate support visit the LMS, which will host a range of videos and step-by-step instructions to support daily operations with the data system. If a 4K Site Administrator or Lead Teacher needs help accessing the LMS, please contact the 4K Director of Professional Development.

## **20. Developmental Screening (ASQ-3)**

4K Sites 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 First Steps 4K. First Steps 4K shall provide access to training and testing materials for eligible 4K Sites.

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.

## **21. Discipline Policy**

Corporal punishment is defined as any treatment that humiliates or treats the child disrespectfully. This includes, but is not limited to spanking, belittling, shaming, shaking, depriving food, water, naps, outside time, or bathroom facilities, unsupervised isolation, or improperly restricting the movements of the child.

The First Steps 4K program does not allow corporal punishment by any staff or parent/guardian. It is our strong belief that these methods work against healthy growth and development of a child.

Provider staff should not:

- Use time-out or isolation as a form of punishment
- Make threats or use intimidation
- Close learning areas or withdraw playtime as a consequence
- Use behavior charts, “spotlights,” or any public display of behavior tracking that may shame or single out a child

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 and submitted to the data system (see Corporal Punishment of the 4K Classroom Guidelines).

If an incident involving corporal punishment occurs, it must be reported in accordance with DSS reporting procedures immediately.

## **22. Dismissal List**

The Provider must record and maintain documentation of pick-ups during dismissal from the 4K classroom and make this information available to First Steps 4K upon request. While 4K Sites should follow their own dismissal processes, it is required that the 4K Site Administrator and/or Lead Teacher maintains a list of adult individuals allowed to pick-up 4K students during dismissal and that daily dismissal processes include verifying pick-ups against this list.

## **23. Environment**

All 4K Sites must maintain appropriate classroom space, equipment, materials, and supplies provided by First Steps 4K. All classrooms will be fully equipped to serve the designated number of students per class.

**Remember:** 4K classrooms must be at least 350 sq. ft. for 10 students and 700 sq. ft. for 20 students.

A well-designed classroom includes clearly defined learning centers for activities like reading, art, dramatic play, sensory exploration, and block building. These areas are thoughtfully organized, labeled, and visually inviting to encourage children to explore. The space is furnished with child-sized tables, chairs, and shelves so children can easily access materials and build independence. It also includes calm, cozy corners where children can relax, self-regulate, and recharge when needed.

A high-quality 4K environment is designed to foster young children's development in all of the below requirements:

1. Safety practices must meet SCDSS regulations.
2. The classroom must be clean and organized.
3. Curriculum materials, Conscious Discipline materials and furnishings should be well maintained and cleaned on a regular basis.
4. Classrooms **MUST** be carefully arranged to allow the appropriate supervision of all students at all times.
5. All materials within student reach should be for student use.

All 4K materials purchased by First Steps must stay in the 4K classroom. Using 4K materials in other, non-4K classrooms at the Provider is strictly prohibited. If a program has chosen an 180-day service length, all materials should be packed up to avoid materials being broken or lost during the summer. First Steps is not responsible for replacing items. Additionally, 4K materials may be reclaimed at the end of a Provider contract, or 4K Sites may seek to purchase materials from First Steps at a discounted rate following the end of their contract. Please reach out to [4kprogram@scfirststeps.org](mailto:4kprogram@scfirststeps.org) for more information.

## **24. Equipment and Materials Grants**

Approved First Steps 4K Sites 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 and a site's performance to-date, First Steps 4K may offer equipment and materials grants to 4K Sites at different times of the school year. Typically, approved First Steps 4K Sites enrolling between one (1) and six (6) eligible children may receive a materials/equipment grant at a minimum of \$1,000 per child, while approved First Steps 4K Sites enrolling seven (7) or more eligible children may receive a material/equipment grant at a minimum of \$10,000.

If you have questions on this, please contact the Director of Compliance and Classroom Resources. If a 4K Site is eligible for a grant, First Steps 4K staff will reach out with more information on allowable materials, how to complete the ordering process, and required

deadlines. Materials, inventory and ownership details will be provided to 4K Sites receiving a related grant.

## **25. Expansion Grants**

Occasionally, First Steps may award 4K Sites with a one-time, supplement needs-based incentive grant, not to exceed \$30,000, for proposed expansion. Typically, expansion means adding at least one new 4K classroom for at least three years to an existing, high-quality 4K Provider. The expansion must result in serving at least ten (10) new First Steps 4K children in communities with demonstrated need for additional state-funded 4K spaces.

These grants are designed to address building renovations, documented as necessary to bring proposed classrooms into compliance with licensing or accreditation regulations, materials costs, and/or other obstacles currently preventing additional 4K classrooms at the Provider site.

4K Sites wishing to learn more about the Expansion Grant and/or check their eligibility for applying to an Expansion Grant should contact the Manager of Strategic Site Recruitment for more information on upcoming opportunities for applying to expansion grants.

## **26. Family Engagement and Orientation**

Parents are young children'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.

The 4K Site Administrator works with instructional staff to ensure that this plan includes the following opportunities for family engagement:

- 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. 220 Day programs will hold four family-teacher conferences.
- Documentation of the guardian(s) participation in all events
- Two (2) family engagement events, one focused on literacy and the other focused on math
- Opportunities and written operating policies for ongoing family involvement (volunteerism, classroom visits, etc.)

The Lead Teacher will be required to submit records of these events into the data system.

### **A. 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 Lead Teacher, the Instructional Assistant (if applicable), and the 4K Site Administrator when possible.

During the family orientation, guardians shall receive a First Steps 4K Family Handbook. 4K Site Administrators should review the 4K Classroom Guidelines for more information on the First Steps 4K Orientation Checklist (see -Family Engagement and Communication Plan in the 4K Classroom Guidelines).

### **B. Family Education Workshops**

In addition to at least Family-Teacher Conferences, the 4K Provider shall offer at least three Family Education Workshops during the school year. The first of these workshops may be the initial orientation/open house. At least one of the two remaining workshops must focus upon interactive literacy and the other workshop must focus on math. Ready Rosie has ready-made workshops for these events.

Documentation of the Family Education Workshops, including agendas and attendance records, shall be maintained on-site, as shall documentation of all family-teacher conferences.

## **27. Family Fees**

Regardless of program option, First Steps 4K Sites 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 First Steps for the First Steps 4K program. Additionally, 4K Sites may not require families to pay enrollment fees for participation in First Steps 4K.

4K Sites may charge tuition and fees only for extended programming or wrap-around care that exceeds the service length defined in the Provider's contract unless the child is enrolled in 4K+. For example, if a 4K student was enrolled in a Provider's six and a half (6.5) hour 4K Program but remains for one (1) additional hour of after-school care, only the additional hour of care would be eligible for tuition-based fees. However, a family's ability to participate in the state-funded 4K program cannot be contingent upon enrollment in any other tuition-based services.

**Remember:** 4K Sites are also strictly prohibited from removing enrolled state-funded students from 4K classrooms to create capacity vacancies for tuition-based students.

4K Sites found to be charging prohibited family fees, conducting unauthorized enrollment practices, or following discriminatory tuition-based admissions processes

will be placed on immediate Operations Improvement Plan. Serious or repeated violations may lead to the termination of the Provider's participation in the 4K Program.

## **28. Food Service**

All First Steps 4K funded students shall be offered breakfast, lunch, and a snack that meet USDA requirements.

First Steps 4K Sites not participating in the USDA Food Program must create daily meal plans that align with the following requirements:

- The Child and Adult Care Food Program (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp>)
- ABC Grow Healthy Standards (if 4K Sites participate in the ABC Quality Program)

Weekly menus must be dated, posted prominently, and available upon request to First Steps. Changes to the posted menu must be documented on the menu. All health and sanitation procedures outlined by DSS and the Child and Adult Care Food Program will be adhered to before, during and after meal service and/or preparation of food.

## **29. Hours of Operation**

The educational program shall operate for six and one-half (6.5) hours daily or eight (8) hours daily, depending on the service length option selected during annual pre-contracting with First Steps.

Tuition and transportation payments will be adjusted on a pro rata basis for First Steps 4K Sites electing Extended Day and Summer school options. First Steps 4K Sites 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.

Hours of operations must be clearly communicated to families during enrollment and again at the family orientation event.

For attendance purposes, 4K Site Administrators should instruct Lead Teachers to indicate in the data system when children are "tardy" (arriving after the start of the school day) or have left before the end of the school day.

## **30. Instructional Assessment (GOLD®)**

First Steps 4K Sites participating in the First Steps 4K program shall use GOLD® by Teaching Strategies as their primary method of student assessment.

GOLD® is a performance-assessment requiring the ongoing documentation of student performance and progress.

More information on student assessment processes, documentation, and other classroom requirements can be found in section- Instructional Assessment (GOLD®) of the 4K Classroom Guidelines.

## **31. Instructional Assistant Qualifications**

4K Sites must employ a full-time instructional assistant for each classroom enrolling eleven (11) or more students. Instructional assistant candidates possessing at least a two-year degree with experience and preservice 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 assistant qualifications will be reviewed and approved by First Steps 4K state office staff using the Teacher Qualification Submission form (see 32. Lead Teacher Qualifications).

Instructional assistants should have completed the Early Childhood Development Credential (ECD 101). If an instructional assistant has not completed this requirement prior to working in a 4K classroom, they must enroll and complete this course within twelve months of the First Steps 4K contract award. To learn more about how an employee can complete this requirement, the 4K Site Administrator should reach out to SC Endeavors.

All 4K instructional staff must possess sufficient proficiency in English to deliver instruction, communicate with students and families, and fulfill all professional responsibilities.

## **32. Lead Teacher Qualifications**

First Steps 4K Sites shall employ a qualified Lead Teacher in each First Steps 4K classroom. Lead teacher candidates holding a four-year-degree or higher in Early Childhood Education are preferred, but the following credentials shall be deemed acceptable for lead teachers during the current academic year:

- A four-year or graduate teacher education degree with an emphasis in early childhood education.
- A four-year or graduate degree (in any field) with at least five years of documented previous professional experience at the 4K Provider and/or another early care and education provider.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

- 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 child care provider.

4K Sites 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.

All 4K instructional staff must possess sufficient proficiency in English to deliver instruction, communicate with students and families, and fulfill all professional responsibilities.

#### **A. Enrollment Requirements for Two-Year Degree Holders**

The First Steps 4K proviso requires that each lead teacher possesses, at minimum, a two-year degree in early childhood education or a related field. All lead teachers with a two-year degree must be enrolled and demonstrating progress toward the completion of a teacher education program within four years.

Throughout the year, in alignment with the end of traditional postsecondary calendars, Lead teachers with two-year degrees will be asked to provide evidence of their progress toward the completion of a teacher education program. 4K Site Administrators must ensure an applicable lead teacher provides this information in the data system by the stated deadline and should also monitor their teacher's progress toward the completion of a four-year degree.

A Provider's failure to submit evidence of a lead teacher with a two-year degree demonstrating progress towards the completion of a four-year degree may be grounds for termination of the Provider's 4K contract.

#### **B. Documented Previous Professional Experience for Degrees in Another Field**

First Steps will consider lead teachers with a four-year or graduate degree in any field so long as they demonstrate significant previous professional experience working in early care and education. Lead teacher candidates with at least five (5) years of previous experience at the 4K Provider are preferred, but previous professional experience at another child care provider will also be considered.

Proof of previous professional experience must be submitted through the Lead Teacher Qualification submission form. Proof of professional experience can include W-2 forms, pay stubs, or an employment verification letter from HR that confirms job titles, dates, and duties. For questions on this, please contact the Director of Compliance and Classroom Resources.

To ensure instructional competency and an up-to-date understanding of child development, the previous professional experience must be recent and preferably uninterrupted at the time of the application. Generally, any gap in professional experience at an early care and education provider immediately preceding the submission of the Teacher Qualification form will disqualify prior experience from meeting this requirement. However, an exception to this rule may be made for a gap of up to four (4) months, to account for a break in services during the summer months, provided the employer was not operating during that time. The Director of Compliance and Classroom Resources will review Teacher Qualification submissions containing recent professional experience gaps of no more than four (4) months to determine if the lead teacher candidate qualifies for this exception.

### **C. Montessori Credentials**

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.

### **D. Teacher Qualification Submission Form**

The Teacher Qualification Submission form will be used to submit instructional staff's qualifications for review and approval by First Steps 4K state office staff. This form can be accessed and submitted in the 4K Site Administrator's data system portal.

Following a signed contract and prior to the start of the school year, the 4K Site Administrator must submit the Teacher Qualification Submission form for the 4K Lead Teacher (and Instructional Assistant, if applicable). The approval of these qualifications is a prerequisite for the Lead Teacher's registration in the data system portal, both the qualification form and the portal registration should be submitted no fewer than five (5) business days prior to the first day of school. This lead time ensures the registration can be reviewed and approved, granting the teacher necessary access to input attendance on the first day.

The 4K Site Administrator will need to submit a separate form for each member of the instructional staff. During the submission of the Teacher Qualification form, the 4K Site Administrator will need digital copies of a teacher or assistant's transcripts, degree or other documentation of their education, and proof of professional experience, if applicable. The staff's W-9 and SC Endeavors number will also be submitted through the form. Please ensure access to all outlined information during the form submission.

Should a Provider need to replace a 4K Lead Teacher or Instructional Assistant during the school year, following instructional staff departure, the 4K Site Administrator must also use the Teacher Qualification Submission Form for First Steps 4K state office to approve new hires before the instructors can begin working in a 4K classroom.

### 33. Lesson Plans

Detailed information on classroom lesson plans can be found in the Lesson Plans section of the 4K Classroom Guidelines.

Lesson plans will be completed online using SmartTeach by Teaching Strategies. Lesson plans should show evidence of the lead teacher's deliberate and thorough efforts to prepare for the week's instructional activities. It is an expectation that teachers use the plans that are provided.

To ensure lesson plans reflect what is happening in an individual classroom, Lead Teachers must be provided with an inclusive daily hour of paid planning time (44. Staffing and Ratios).

### 34. Marketing and Branding

It is the responsibility of the 4K Provider to market their 4K classroom to the community and to engage with prospective families prior to enrollment. To champion this work, First Steps provides Business Development support, including in-person training and on-demand resources in the LMS, for 4K Site Administrators to learn best practices around program marketing and branding.

As outlined in the 4K Program Agreement, 4K Sites must restrict use of the SC First Steps and/or First Steps 4K logo, name or likeness to only temporary, approved marketing and informational materials, including but not limited to:

- Flyers
- Brochures
- Digital media
- Portable yard signs

4K Sites seeking approval on marketing and informational materials that fall under one of the above categories can submit a draft to [4koperations@scfirststeps.org](mailto:4koperations@scfirststeps.org). Typically, it may take up to three (3) business days for First Steps to review and provide feedback on a draft.

**Remember:** Approvals of marketing drafts by First Steps is not guaranteed. 4K Sites should not print final versions of the materials until they have received written approval from First Steps on the draft.

4K Sites are prohibited from incorporating, painting, or permanently affixing the SC First Steps and/or First Steps 4K branding onto any physical structures, building exteriors, or permanent fixtures that are not easily removable or disposable.

### 35. Outdoor Learning Environment

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 also be age appropriate and accessible to all 4K students, including any enrolled student with special needs. Outdoor equipment should be arranged so that children are able to always be seen by instructional staff.

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. 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.

The following represent key components of a high-quality outdoor space for 4K Sites. 4K Site Administrators should work with instructional staff to ensure the outdoor learning environment is aligned with these key components.

### **A. 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.

### **B. 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.

### **C. 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.

## **D. 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.

## **E. 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.

## **F. 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.

## **G. 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.

### *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.

## **36. Professional Development**

The 4K Site Administrator will receive an annual 4K Training Calendar, with specific details coming closer to the dates, once the 4K Agreement has been signed by both First Steps and the Provider. The training calendar outlines the mandatory and voluntary professional development opportunities available to the 4K Site Administrator and instructional staff for the upcoming school year.

Prior to the completion of the contract, prospective 4K partners may also receive a save the date alert for upcoming, mandatory training. Receipt of a save the date does not indicate that a provider's contract will be approved, but rather, the alert is a courtesy to allow you to plan for these events. 4K Site Administrators, Lead Teachers, and Instructional Assistants will receive links to register for these events. Attendance at these events will be monitored by First Steps 4K state office and consistent absence from events will be considered during contract renewal application reviews.

First Steps has intentionally designed a mixed delivery training schedule that covers all essential information needed to successfully implement the 4K Program and deliver high-quality education to 4K students. 4K Site Administrators and instructional staff are required to participate in all mandatory professional development over the course of the school year.

This year, the professional development topics include but are not limited to:

- CLASS (see section 12. CLASS)
- Creating clear behavioral expectations
- Curriculum fundamentals and fidelity (see 16. Curriculum)
- Instructional Assessments (see section 30. Instructional Assessments)
- Self-care strategies for staff
- Use of CaseWorthy, the new First Steps data system

## **A. SC Endeavors**

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

## **B. Staff Training Attendance**

As a staffing requirement, attendance at 4K Site Administrator and Instructional Staff trainings are mandatory for participation in the 4K Program. These trainings occur from the summer through the spring and follow a training calendar developed in advance of the current academic year.

For questions on mandatory training or training attendance requirements, 4K Site Administrators should contact the Director of 4K Professional Development.

## **37. Provider Eligibility, Contract Renewals, and Enrollment Requirements**

To be eligible for participation in the First Steps 4K Program, prospective 4K Sites must have the following licensing, 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, the contract will be terminated
2. OR be a non-profit independent school with an accredited group approved by First Steps 4K.

Additionally, prospective 4K Sites 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
- 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.
- Meet the outlined staffing requirements (see 31. Instructional Assistant Qualifications and 32. Lead Teacher Qualifications)
- Possess Commercial General Liability Insurance, including coverage for bodily injury, property damage, personal injury, and sexual abuse and molestation (either included or provided by separate endorsement), with limits of not less than \$1,000,000 per occurrence and \$2,000,000 aggregate
- Possess Automobile Liability Insurance (if transporting children), including bodily injury and property damage, with limits of not less than \$1,000,000 per occurrence

- Possess Workers' Compensation Insurance in amounts as required by South Carolina law

**Remember:** Contracts will not be executed with new or continuing 4K Sites unless First Steps has an up-to-date copy of the Provider's required insurance that covers the upcoming year.

### **A. Contract Renewals**

4K Sites must reapply to participate in the 4K Program each year. The application for contract renewal will open in the spring and contract renewal reviews will begin in March. 4K Sites must fill out the application for contract renewal by the stated deadline to indicate an interest in continuing their participation in the 4K Program. Once a contract renewal application is received, the Provider's previous performance will be reviewed by First Steps 4K state office staff to determine if the Provider will be offered a new contract for the upcoming year.

In reviewing the Provider's previous performance, First Steps 4K state office staff will consider overall compliance with the 4K Operations and Classroom Guidelines as well as the quality of the 4K Program's implementation. Considerations will include but are not limited to:

- Rates of instructional staff turnover
- Staff attendance at mandatory trainings and professional development
- Rates of student chronic absenteeism
- Adherence to data and request submission deadlines
- Teacher documentation
- Number of Operations Improvement Plans and demonstrated progress (if applicable)
- Adherence to daily schedules
- Issues identified during 4K Success Monitors visits
- Quality of data submissions
- Capacity and vacancy rates

### **B. Required Capacity and Enrollment Rates**

After a contract has been signed between a Provider and First Steps, the Provider will be responsible for ensuring that at least seven (7) children are enrolled in the 4K classroom by the first day of school. If a provider enrolls less than seven (7) children on the first day, they will be put on an Operations Improvement Plan. 4K Sites that are enrolling less than ten (10) children but at least seven (7) children in a 4K classroom on the first day of school will have thirty (30) days to increase enrollment to at least ten (10) students. Following the first thirty (30) days, any Provider with a classroom serving less than ten (10) students will be put on an operations improvement plan for required capacity and enrollment rates.

Tuition-paying students in a 4K classroom can be counted towards the required capacity and enrollment rate of ten (10) children. However, the 4K Site Administrator

must ensure the Lead Teacher submits weekly data on the number of tuition-paying students in their class (see 18. Data Submission and Retention) on or before the form's weekly deadline, else these students will not be factored into capacity rates. If the form is not submitted by the deadline, the Provider may be put on an Operations Improvement Plan for required capacity and enrollment rates, even if the sum of state-funded students and tuition-paying student meets or exceeds the ten (10) student requirement.

### **C. Insufficient Funding**

If at any time sufficient funds are not available to First Steps 4K to compensate Provider in accordance with the terms of this Agreement, First Steps 4K may immediately terminate this Agreement by providing notice of termination to Provider.

## **38. Regulatory Violations**

Maintaining student safety and dignity is a fundamental responsibility of all educators, and adherence to this policy is mandatory.

4K Sites must notify First Steps in writing 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. Reports of violations must be sent to [4koperations@scfirststeps.org](mailto:4koperations@scfirststeps.org) with the 4K State Director copied on the message. First Steps 4K will occasionally monitor the DSS SC Child Care website for unreported regulatory violations. Any Provider who has failed to report a founded regulatory violation will be issued an Operations Improvement Plan.

4K Site Administrators should also report any complaint, regulatory violation, law enforcement contact, criminal charge or conviction, investigation, suspension, restriction, adverse action, or safety concern not covered in the above description but related to the Provider or any of its employees or contractors, regardless of whether the event occurred at the Program site, directly to SC First Steps within one (1) business day of the event.

Approved 4K Sites must resolve all regulatory violations with DSS Child Care Licensing and provide progress updates to the Manager of Partnership Success, including copies of the written Operations Improvement Plan. 4K Sites displaying a pattern of regulatory infractions or who are cited for endangering the safety and/or well-being of students may receive additional Operations Improvement Plans from First Steps, up to and including contract termination (see 14. Compliance, 4K Success Monitors, and Operations Improvement Plans).

4K Sites must provide additional information to First Steps 4K as it becomes available, including a copy of the DHEC and Fire Marshall's report available upon DSS license renewal process and a copy of the renewed license (front and back). The 4K Site

Administrator can upload these documents to the data system portal under the “Provider Documents” section.

### **39. Request to Repeat 4K**

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 Administrator 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/or 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.

### **40. Rest Time**

The opportunity for a brief rest time must be incorporated into each instructional day. Rest time may not exceed forty-five minutes per day, except as necessary to address the specific individual needs of children. During rest time, the student-teacher ratio must be maintained (see 44. Staffing and Ratios). 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.

### **41. Rising 4’s (Summer Extension)**

4K Sites offering the summer extension and who have an approved contract for the following year may have 4K classes made up of rising 5K students (4-years-old by Sept 1, 2025) and/or rising 4K students (4-years-old by Sept 1, 2026).

4K Sites with a summer extension service length option and who have renewed contracts with First Steps for the following academic year:

1. Keep currently enrolled four-year-olds for the summer term. These students are called “Rising kindergartners” as they will enter kindergarten in August.
2. May enroll other eligible Rising kindergartners who were previously served through state-funded programs without a summer term, such as Public School 4K and/or Head Start.
3. May offer any unused slots to approved students who will be attending the Provider’s 4K program starting in August. These students are called “Rising 4’s”.

4. Transition the Rising 4's from the summer term to the fall term starting in August. Other 4K students who were approved for 4K but did not attend summer school may also begin in August alongside the Rising 4's.
5. Should not fill summer slot vacancies with Rising 4's who are likely to attend another school in August. The purpose of allowing Rising 4's to participate in the summer session is to transition Rising 4's to the 4K Program and introduce students to their 4K class at the Provider location.
6. Will not start providing services to approved and enrolled 4K+ siblings of Rising 4's until August.

Approved Rising 4s will start on the first day of summer term and learn alongside your Rising kindergartners. First Steps will pay tuition for the approved Rising 4's and the Rising Kindergartners for the summer.

## **42. SCEIS 4K Program Staff Vendor Registration**

To receive stipends from First Steps for attending trainings or other approved activities, instructional staff must register as a vendor in the South Carolina Enterprise Information System (SCEIS). Instructions for registering as a vendor in SCEIS can be found under SCEIS Vendor Registration of the 4K Classroom Guidelines. 4K Site Administrators should refer instructional staff to these directions if they have questions or need support with registering as a vendor in SCEIS.

## **43. Selling a Provider Site**

Per the First Steps Agreement, a 4K Provider's contract may not be transferred to a new owner or entity as a result of change in ownership, control, or operation.

The First Steps 4K program contract does not transfer to a new owner following the sale, transfer, or other change in ownership of a Provider. Following the transfer of ownership, the contract will be terminated, and the new owner can reapply for program participation. In the case of an owner acting as the 4K Site Administrator, the departure of the Owner and 4K Site Administrator will lead to contract termination rather than a probationary Operations Improvement Plan.

## **44. Staffing and Ratios**

Each First Steps 4K classroom of 11 or more students must be always staffed by a lead teacher and an instructional assistant. Classrooms enrolling 10 students may elect to only employ a single lead teacher. Lead teachers and instructional assistants may not serve dual work roles within the 4K Provider.

Lead teachers and instructional assistants must be recruited by the first week of July at the latest.

**Remember:** It can take 3-4 weeks for the criminal background check to be completed so 4K Site Administrators should plan for this during their recruitment of instructional staff.

The Lead Teacher must be hired no later than August 1, 2026, to ensure that classroom set-up occurs by August 4<sup>th</sup> and school begins on August 5<sup>th</sup>.

### **A. Teacher Compensation and Planning Time**

Teachers shall be employed for a minimum of 180 instructional days, seven and one-half (7 ½) hour days. The times of employment will directly correspond to the service length option chosen.

Each lead teacher shall be compensated for at least one hour of unencumbered, instructional planning time daily. The hour planning time is included in the teacher's 8-hour day.

The breakdown of a teacher's daily paid schedule for the six and a half (6.5) hour service length option should be as follows:

- 6.5 hours of 4K classroom instruction
- 1 hour of planning time

During the planning time portion of the day, a 4K lead teacher 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. It is recommended that vacations should be taken outside of the employment days of the 4K program.

### **B. Teaching Staff Departures**

When a Lead Teacher or Instructional Assistant departs from a 4K Provider during the school year, the 4K Site Administrator must immediately notify First Steps within three (3) business days of the departure. The 4K Site Administrator notifies First Steps using the Teaching Staff Departure form, which can be found in the 4K Site Administrator's data system portal. Failure to communicate the departure of a Lead Teacher within three (3) business days may lead to a Provider's termination of program eligibility.

Per the First Steps 4K program's contract, 4K classrooms can only operate without a 4K lead teacher for a maximum of twenty (20) business days. This will be monitored using the Teaching Staff Departure form and the Teacher Qualification Submission form (see 32. Lead Teacher Qualifications).

**Remember:** The Teacher Qualification Submission form must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by First Steps 4K state office during the twenty (20) business days. Review and approval of this form by First Steps 4K staff can take up to two (2) business days. It is the responsibility of the 4K Site Administrator to submit the Teacher Qualification Submission with enough time left to allow for the review and approval of teacher qualifications.

If a classroom has been without a qualified, approved lead teacher for more than twenty (20) days, the 4K Provider will be eligible for immediate provider contract termination. Once the Provider is fully staffed, the Administrator can then reapply for participation in the 4K Program during the next application review cycle.

### **C. 4K Site Administrator Departures**

The 4K Site Administrator role is the director-level position that oversees the implementation and daily operations of the 4K program at a Provider. The 4K Site Administrator is typically a distinct role from the Owner of the center or site. 4K Site Administrators play an important role in the 4K network, as they oversee the business development of the Provider. Thus, the quality of the site's implementation of the 4K program can be dependent on the 4K Site Administrator.

When a 4K Site Administrator departs from a Provider, acting leadership at the Provider must reach out to First Steps 4K state office within three (3) business days of the departure using [4kprogram@scfirststeps.org](mailto:4kprogram@scfirststeps.org). Failure to communicate the departure of a 4K Site Administrator within three (3) business days may lead to a Provider's termination of program eligibility. Similarly, the hiring of a new 4K Site Administrator must also be communicated to First Steps using the [4kprogram@scfirststeps.org](mailto:4kprogram@scfirststeps.org) email address.

When a 4K Site Administrator departs from a 4K Provider or a new 4K Site Administrator is hired, the Provider will be immediately put on a thirty (30) day probationary Operations Improvement Plan.

During the thirty (30) days, the Provider will be closely monitored by First Steps 4K state office to determine if the quality of the 4K program has been impacted by this leadership turnover. This monitoring can include, but is not limited to, at least one unannounced visit from a 4K Success Monitor. If there is evidence of 4K Site Administrator turnover impacting program quality, First Steps 4K state office may choose to implement contract termination.

**Remember:** The First Steps 4K program contract does not transfer to a new owner following the sale, transfer, or other change in ownership of a Provider. Following the transfer of ownership, the contract will be terminated, and the new owner can reapply for program participation. In the case of an owner acting as the 4K Site Administrator, the departure of the Owner and 4K Site Administrator will lead to contract termination rather than a probationary Operations Improvement Plan.

### **D. Ratios**

Eligible 4K Sites must maintain a classroom of at least ten (10) four-year-old children, but not more than 20 four-year-old children with a 1:10 adult-to-child ratio. 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.

## 45. Student Application Communications

Families can complete the First Steps 4K Student Application at [www.Free4KSC.org](http://www.Free4KSC.org). Once an application has been submitted, First Steps 4K Eligibility Specialists review the application to determine eligibility.

- If the student is eligible, First Steps will then contact both the Parent and the 4K Provider via email with the student's application status. 4K Sites will also be able to view information on the 4K+ section of the application.
- If the student is deemed ineligible for First Steps 4K, the office will email the Parent and the Provider. 4K Site Administrators are encouraged to reach out to the family if other funding or resources are available.

If a 4K Provider has an open seat for the approved student to attend the First Steps 4K class, the 4K Site Administrator must email and call the family within two (2) business days upon approval to thank them for choosing the Provider's site and welcome the student to their First Steps 4K Program. If families are not contacted promptly by the 4K Site Administrator, they may opt to attend another Provider instead. Additionally, First Steps will consider a Provider's rates of communication with approved families when reviewing contract renewal applications.

If a 4K Provider does not have an open seat for the approved student, the 4K Site Administrator must reply to the status email and let First Steps know immediately. The First Steps 4K state office will then contact the family to help them find another First Steps 4K Provider in their area.

## 46. Student Eligibility Requirements

Students must meet age, family income or circumstance, and residency requirements to be eligible for enrollment in First Steps 4K.

### A. Age Requirements

Children must be four years of age on or before September 1, based on acceptable documentation, which should be kept on file by the 4K Provider. Acceptable documentation includes birth certificates, passports, or official documents from other countries.

### B. Family Income or Circumstance Requirements

Approved 4K Sites shall receive reimbursement from First Steps 4K for educational services to students whose documented family incomes or circumstances qualify them for either:

- Medicaid, SNAP, or TANF services
- The free- and reduced-price lunch program (available to families at 185% of federal poverty level)

- A proviso has been proposed for 2026-2027 for students at 300% of the Federal Poverty Level to begin on July 1, 2026. This change in eligibility will be confirmed by July 1, 2026.

Families experiencing homelessness, transiency, or children who are in foster care are also eligible to participate in First Steps 4K.

An income eligibility statement or verification of Medicaid eligibility (for all Medicaid participants) shall be retained in the file of each student by the 4K Provider. Proof of income-eligibility must be on file before the child begins attending the 4K Program. Acceptable forms of verification include, pay stubs, tax returns and/or documentation of eligibility for SNAP, TANF and SSI.

4K Sites may continue to enroll and charge tuition for students outside these eligibility and circumstance thresholds, provided that total class size does not exceed 20 students and the instructional program offered to all children meets the requirements outlined in the 4K Operational and Classroom Guidelines.

**Remember:** State funding will only be provided for approved students who meet the income and circumstance eligibility.

### **Residency Requirements**

Age and income-eligible children must provide documentation of their legal residency in South Carolina. State issued identification or one of the following documents shall be retained on file for each child receiving state funds.

- Current tax bills
- Utility bills
- Rental agreement

Eligible students residing in any school district may participate in First Steps 4K pending the availability of space and funding. 4K Sites should note that the First Steps 4K Program is designed to expand services to eligible children residing in South Carolina regardless of county or school district. Therefore, families may choose to enroll at a 4K Provider outside of their home district or school zone.

## **47. Substitute Instructional Staff**

A qualified substitute teacher and/or substitute teaching assistant shall be present and working in the 4K Classroom for each day where a teacher and/or instructional assistant is absent, whether due to illness, required training, personal leave, or departure. 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 two or more weeks must meet lead teacher qualifications (see 32. Lead Teacher Qualifications). Teachers must possess sufficient proficiency in English to deliver instruction, communicate with students and families, and fulfill all professional responsibilities.

Substitutes are expected to follow the day's lesson plan, as developed by the teacher and documented in Teaching Strategies (see section 33. Lesson Plans).

#### *4K Substitute Teacher Reimbursement*

In some instances, First Steps will require Lead Teacher participation in a training, and the 4K Provider will need to hire a substitute to cover the 4K class. First Steps will reimburse the 4K Provider when this occurs so long as the 4K Site Administrator promptly submits the [First Steps 4K Substitute Teacher Reimbursement](#) form. The hired substitute must be someone who does not regularly work in the 4K classroom to qualify for reimbursement. To receive a reimbursement for substitute coverage, the 4K Site Administrator must submit the reimbursement form within five (5) business days of when the training occurred.

## **48. Suspension or Disenrollment of a Child**

Challenging behavior is any repeated pattern of behavior, or adult perception of behavior, that interferes with, or is at risk of interfering with, optimal learning or engagement in positive interactions with peers and adults. Young children often display challenging behavior as they are learning new skills and developing relationships. Challenging behavior is part of the developmental trajectory of young children.

Requests to disenroll a child must be directed to the 4K State Director by following the steps below. The approach will be to work with the family to potentially find a new placement within a program that is better prepared to provide additional support.

### **A. Disenrollment**

Developmentally appropriate behavior management techniques should be always utilized when a child is exhibiting challenging behavior. Disenrollment will only 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 family.

The following procedures shall be followed for a request for suspension and/or disenrollment of a child from the First Steps 4K class:

1. The 4K Site Administrator and Lead Teacher must co-create a list of the reason(s) why suspension or disenrollment is being requested;
2. The Lead Teacher lists the interventions used to help the child benefit from the class;
3. All written correspondence and meeting notes showing the ongoing involvement with the child's family are to be included in the request;
4. The Lead Teacher and 4K Site Administrator should ensure that past case notes and observations of the child in the data system support the reasons for the requested suspension or disenrollment.
5. If the child has special needs, the request should include 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);

6. The 4K Site Administrator and Lead Teacher must submit all documentation to the First Steps 4K State Director using the [Exclusionary Report form](#).

No state-funded students may be disenrolled without the express written permission of the 4K State Director.

## **B. Suspension**

There are two types of suspension in the First Steps 4K Program: Immediate Suspension and Extended Suspension.

The 4K Site Administrator and Lead Teacher may elect to suspend a child for up to two (2) days any time the child is causing harm to himself/herself or others. No prior approval from First Steps 4K is needed for this type of immediate suspension, but the First Steps 4K State Director must be notified in writing on the first day of the suspension and a case note must be added to the student's file in the data system that outlines the reason for the immediate suspension.

Extended suspension is defined as either:

- A suspension that lasts longer than two (2) days
- Three (3) or more incidents of immediate suspension

Extended suspension requires prior written permission from the 4K State Director before going into effect, and the 4K Site Administrator must submit the same information as they would for disenrollment.

## **49. Transportation**

Licensed First Steps 4K Sites may offer (and will receive reimbursement for) transportation for students funded through First Steps 4K. First Steps 4K Sites receiving reimbursement for transportation must have their current South Carolina Department of Social Services (DSS) transportation file available for review by First Steps 4K state office staff. The transportation file, at a minimum, must contain the following documents:

- Current auto and liability insurance documentation
- Driver's license of staff designated to provide transport children
- Driving record of staff designated to transport children
- A list of 4K children receiving transportation
- A route map
- A SLED check of each eligible driver
- Current First Aid and CPR documentation of staff designated to transport children
- Proof of a first aid kit and fire extinguisher on the vehicle

- Tracking sheets depicting when 4K children are transported
- Operable seat restraint for every child and driver on the vehicle

First Steps 4K Sites 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 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. 4K Sites shall not be responsible for the transportation of any student living outside of these established boundaries.

Transportation forms signed by the student's parent or guardian must be on file and provided to the 4K Data Coordinator before disbursement 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 must be submitted to [4koperations@scfirststeps.org](mailto:4koperations@scfirststeps.org) for approval before any transportation is offered.

#### **A. Jacob's Law**

All transportation services provided must adhere with the following requirements detailed in South Carolina Jacob's Law:

##### 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.

## **B. Transportation Funding Rates**

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

4K Sites may not charge 4K eligible families fees for transportation.

## **50. Teacher Supplies**

Eligible lead teachers, including lead teachers in approved publicly-funded full-day 4K Programs, may receive state funded classroom supply money up to \$400 each school year to offset out-of-pocket expenses for classroom supplies and instructional materials. These funds are provided to support instructional needs and are not intended to replace any other supply funds already provided by the school or district.

**Remember:** Supplies purchased as a part of the reimbursement program may not be used for another classroom or be taken from the center if the teacher departs. Additionally, this reimbursement payment is made only once per year per classroom, even if there is teacher turnover.

Payments will be provided separately from regular payroll. This reimbursement is not considered taxable income.

Lead teachers are responsible for:

- Retaining receipts for all classroom materials and supplies purchased during the school year. All receipts must be submitted to the 4K Site Administrator by December 31, 2026.
- Send related inquiries to [operations@scfirststeps.org](mailto:operations@scfirststeps.org)

### *Refundable Income Tax Credit*

Any classroom teacher, including a classroom teacher at a South Carolina private school, that is not eligible for the reimbursement allowed by the 1A.9 SDE-EIA provision, may claim a refundable income tax credit on the teacher's 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 31, the teacher may include the expenditure on his initial return or may file an amended tax 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.

## **51. Technology and Screen Time Regulations**

The use of active or participatory instructional technology, such as age-appropriate computer or tablet software, shall be limited to no more than 30 minutes per week. The regular viewing of television programming or video materials in a 4K classroom is prohibited.

4K Site Administrators must ensure that their Lead Teacher is previewing all video materials to ensure the video is appropriate for use in a preschool classroom and discuss what will be viewed by 4K students. 4K Sites must also ensure equal access to active instructional technology for all children.

### *iPad Devices*

First Steps 4K supplies each First Steps lead teacher with an iPad device to utilize for daily instruction, documentation, data entry, and lesson planning. These iPad devices are the property of First Steps and may not be used for any activities that are not related to the administration of the First Steps 4K Program. If an iPad is lost or destroyed at a 4K site, the cost of the replacement may be taken out of the Provider's next tuition payment.

## **52. Tuition**

A formal contract between First Steps and a Provider must be signed and executed, with proof of required insurance, before the Provider can begin accepting and enrolling First Steps funded students.

### **A. Tuition Per Student**

First Steps 4K shall provide the 4K Provider with a minimum of \$5,100 in funding per eligible and approved student served during the contracted school year. Approved 4K students enrolled for less than 180 school days shall be funded on a pro-rated basis that is dependent on the length of the child's enrollment. Tuition and transportation payments will further be adjusted to account for extended Provider service lengths beyond 180 days and 6.5 hours per day.

Tuition reimbursement is the responsibility of the First Steps 4K and is based on the Provider's attendance and enrollment reports and verification of eligible students by First Steps 4K state office staff.

### **B. Tuition Payment Policy**

The following policy outlines typical payment processes. However, as noted in the First Steps 4K contract and highlighted in other sections of the 4K Operational Guidelines, a

Provider's compliance issues and/or regulatory violations may result in Operations Improvement Plans (see 14. Compliance, 4K Success Monitors, and Operations Improvement Plans). Operations Improvement Plans may include withheld 4K payments and/or termination of a 4K Provider's contract.

The current First Steps 4K payment processes have been designed to offer advanced tuition payments to 4K Sites. First Steps is not contractually obligated to offer advanced tuition payments. Rather, these payment processes are an advantage of being in good standing with the First Steps 4K program. Following any severe regulatory violations, delayed or missing data submissions, and/or Provider activities that lead to Operations Improvement Plans, First Steps reserves the right to revoke advanced tuition payments and revert the Provider's payment schedule to a reimbursement-only process. If First Steps decides to move a Provider to reimbursement payments, the 4K Site Administrator will be notified in writing that the change will go into effect in thirty (30) days.

4K Site Administrators will receive the current First Steps 4K payment schedule during their summer training. For each payment's "Enrolled Student Count" deadline day, as outlined in the payment schedule, the First Steps 4K state office will run an enrollment report showing the number of students actively enrolled in the Provider's 4K program. That number will be multiplied by the number of days in the payment period and then multiplied by the contracted daily rate for the 4K Provider.

The First Steps finance team reviews monthly attendance data to adjust the payment based on student attendance, not enrollment. Tuition starts for students on the first day they are marked present and will only cover the following attendance codes:

- P – Present
- A – Absent
- T – Tardy
- B – Best Interest

Tuition does NOT cover the following:

- Missing attendance for the classroom or an individual student
- Inclement weather days
- Classroom closures
- Teacher Workdays
- Holidays

Since tuition is prorated, if a student starts or drops after the student count is determined for that payment period, those adjustments will be reflected in a future payment.

### **C. Advanced Tuition Payment Example**

Below is an example of advanced tuition payment following First Steps processes:

Payment #6 is for 11/1 – 11/30, and there are 16 school days during that period. On October 23rd the enrolled student count is finalized, and the following formula is applied to determine the payment amount.

Assuming a center has 10 students enrolled:

$10 \text{ (students)} \times 16 \text{ (school days)} \times \$32.44 \text{ (various contract daily rates)} = \$5,190.40$

### **D. Tuition Verification Request**

A mandatory weekly reconciliation form, known as the Tuition Verification Request, will be available to 4K Site Administrators each Friday through the First Steps data system. The Tuition Verification Request form has a Wednesday afternoon deadline. If the Tuition Verification form is not submitted by Wednesday's end-of-day deadline, the 4K Provider's payment may not be issued.

This Tuition Verification Form helps First Steps gather important information regarding 4K classroom capacity and any students who need to be removed or added to your roster. A 4K Provider's eligibility for advance tuition payments is based on the 4K Site Administrator's ability to complete the Tuition Verification report by the deadline each week. While completing the Tuition Verification form, the 4K Site Administrator should also review the First Steps data system portal for any student updates, such as children missing from the roster or children who are still on the roster after they've left the 4K Provider.

### **E. Best Interest Days**

If there are additional inclement weather days, beyond the initial three days that have been rescheduled, the days will be marked as 'Best Interest' and will be paid.

### **F. First Payment Installment**

Tuition will only be paid for ENROLLED students, not approved student applications. This will lessen reconciliation of funding for students who do not ever attend. 4K Site Administrators will verify attendance only for those students who actually attend, and their status is changed from Approved to Enrolled.

### **G. Fiscal Reconciliation**

If enrollment doesn't support the continuation of the program, any advance funds must be repaid.

Tuition will be adjusted for missing attendance and/or a child who has not attended school for ten (10) consecutive days. In the case of missing attendance, a First Steps Eligibility Specialist may reach out once to request an update to attendance records. If

the attendance is still missing from the data system after this contact, First Steps will deduct the difference in a tuition payment through fiscal reconciliation.

## **H. Tuition Payment Schedule**

Please see Appendix. A, under the Additional Resources section, for the 2026-2027 4K Tuition Payment Schedule.

## **53. 4K Contact Information**

The First Steps 4K staff are here to support you. Please visit the 4K Resource web page for current contact information.

### **Phone:**

(803) 734-0479

### **Email for 4K Business Matters:**

[Operations@SCFirstSteps.org](mailto:Operations@SCFirstSteps.org)

### **Email for Families:**

[Free4KSC@SCFirstSteps.org](mailto:Free4KSC@SCFirstSteps.org)

### **Mailing address:**

SC First Steps  
636 Rosewood Dr.  
Columbia, SC 29201

### **Website:**

[www.SCFirstSteps.org](http://www.SCFirstSteps.org)

## **54. Additional Resources**

- Print a South Carolina's Profile of the Ready Kindergartner (English) flyer: <https://www.scfirststeps.org/media/c0apmcnt/first-steps-sc-ready-kindergartner-flyer.pdf>
- Print a South Carolina's Profile of the Ready Kindergartner (Spanish) flyer: <https://www.scfirststeps.org/media/bpif5vkk/first-steps-sc-ready-kindergartner-flyer-spanish.pdf>
- Submit a report to the DSS Portal for Reporting Abuse and Neglect: <https://benefitsportal.dss.sc.gov/#/ran/home>
- Learn more about CLASS: <https://teachstone.com/class/>
- Learn more about the Creative Curriculum for Preschool: <https://teachingstrategies.com/product/the-creative-curriculum-for-preschool/>

- Learn more about HighScope Preschool Curriculum: <https://highscope.org/what-we-offer/the-highscope-curriculum/preschool-curriculum/>
- Learn more about the Montessori Method: <https://amshq.org/about-us/inside-the-montessori-classroom/early-childhood/>
- Learn more about ASQ-3 Online: <https://agesandstages.com/asq-online/>
- Review SC DSS Safety Regulations and Licensing Requirements: <https://www.scchildcare.org/providers/licensing-requirements/>
- Learn more about the Child and Adult Care Food Program: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cacfp>
- Review ABC Grow Healthy Standards: [https://www.scchildcare.org/media/1712/GH\\_Nutrition\\_Standards.pdf](https://www.scchildcare.org/media/1712/GH_Nutrition_Standards.pdf)
- Lookup SC Department of Education's School District Closure Announcements: <https://ed.sc.gov/districts-schools/schools/district-and-school-closures/>
- Learn more about Teaching Strategies GOLD: <https://teachingstrategies.com/product/gold/>
- Learn more about the Early Childhood Development Certificate (Midlands Tech): <https://www.midlandstech.edu/programs-and-courses/education-and-public-service/early-childhood-development-academic-certificate>
- Find a MACTE accredited credentialing program: <https://www.macte.org/accredited-programs>
- Learn more about SC Endeavors: <https://scendeavors.org/>
- Complete the SCEIS Vendor Registration: <https://procurement.sc.gov/doing-biz/registration>
- Share the First Steps 4K Student Application: [www.Free4KSC.org](http://www.Free4KSC.org)
- Learn more about SC Jacob's Law: <https://www.scchildcare.org/media/m2jd0j4i/jacobs-law.doc>
- Review the Classroom Teacher Expense Credit form: [https://dor.sc.gov/sites/dor/files/forms/l360\\_2024.pdf](https://dor.sc.gov/sites/dor/files/forms/l360_2024.pdf)

**2026-2027**

**First Steps 4K Tuition Payment Schedule**

As of May 29, 2026

<b>Date attendance is calculated for payment. Data entry should be current.</b>	<b>Approved/ Signed</b>	<b>Payment Date</b>	<b># of school days</b>	<b>Attendance Period</b>	<b>Reconciliation Period</b>	<b>Notes</b>
8/10/2026	8/12/2026	8/17/2026	8	8/5-8/14	-	The initial payment is based on enrollment to help your site cover the first payroll. If attendance is lower than enrollment, adjustments will be made monthly.
8/24/2026	8/26/2026	8/31/2026	11	8/17-8/31	-	
9/9/2026	9/11/2026	9/16/2026	10	9/1-9/15	-	
9/23/2026	9/25/2026	9/30/2026	11	9/16-9/30	-	
10/9/2026	10/13/2026	10/16/2026	20	10/1-10/31	8/5-8/31	Payment for month of Oct. includes the first adjustments for over/under payments in Aug. Going forward, tuition is based on monthly attendance.
10/23/2026	10/27/2026	10/30/2026	16	11/1-11/30	9/1-9/30	Payment doesn't include week of Thanksgiving.
11/18/2026	11/20/2026	11/25/2026	14	12/1-12/31	10/1-10/31	This payment doesn't include Christmas break.
12/11/2026	12/15/2026	12/18/2026	18	1/1-1/31	11/1-11/30	
1/22/2027	1/26/2027	1/29/2027	18	2/1-2/28	12/1-12/31	
2/29/2027	2/23/2027	2/26/2027	19	3/1-3/31	1/1-1/31	
3/24/2027	3/26/2027	3/31/2027	19	4/1-4/30	2/1-2/28	
4/23/2026	4/27/2027	4/30/2027	16	5/1-5/24	3/1-3/31	End of 180-day school year.

**Summer Session Dates (subject to change)**

5/28/2027	6/1/2027	6/4/2027	13	5/25-6/11	4/1-4/30	
6/11/2027	6/15/2027	6/18/2027	13	6/14-6/30	5/1-5/24	
6/25/2027	6/29/2027	7/2/2027	14	7/1-7/21	-	End of 220-day school year.