



Classroom Guidelines

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Welcome to First Steps 4K

Welcome to First Steps 4K, South Carolina's state-funded 4-year-old kindergarten program. First Steps 4K is designed to provide high-quality early learning experiences that support children's growth across all developmental domains and prepare them for success in kindergarten and beyond.

First Steps 4K classrooms are built on the understanding that young children learn best through meaningful relationships, purposeful play, active exploration, and engaging learning experiences. Teachers create safe, nurturing, and stimulating environments where children feel valued, capable, and connected.

As a First Steps 4K teacher, you play a critical role in helping children develop the social-emotional, language, literacy, cognitive, and problem-solving skills that form the foundation for lifelong learning. Through intentional interactions, thoughtful planning, and strong partnerships with families, you help ensure every child has opportunities to thrive.

Thank you for your commitment to South Carolina's youngest learners!

Purpose of the Guidelines

The First Steps 4K Classroom Guidelines document has been designed as a companion to your *CLASS® Interactions Dimensions Guide* and the *Creative Curriculum for Preschoolers: The Foundation* books. Throughout the 4K Classroom Guidelines, you will see references to the *CLASS® Dimensions Guide* and *Creative Curriculum* book. If you have not yet received a copy of either book, please email 4KOperations@scfirststeps.org.

The goal of the 4K Classroom Guidelines is to support teachers in creating high-quality learning environments that consistently support reading, math, and emotional readiness for success in kindergarten and beyond.

This guide serves as a resource for understanding the expectations, practices, and requirements of a First Steps 4K classroom. It combines research-based instructional practices, program requirements, and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) framework to support effective teaching and positive outcomes for children.

The guidelines are intended to:

- Support high-quality teacher-child interactions.
- Promote developmentally appropriate practices.
- Provide clear expectations for classroom implementation.
- Empower strong partnerships between teachers, families, administrators, and coaches.

While every classroom is unique, these guidelines provide a shared vision for what high-quality teaching and learning look like in a First Steps 4K classroom.

Understanding 4 Year-Old Children

It is important to recognize and know what is developmentally appropriate for 4-year-olds. The following 4-year-old milestones are indicated in the Teaching Strategies Gold® Objectives for Development and Learning.

1. Social Emotional Development

- Self-Regulation: Manages classroom rules, routines, and transitions with only occasional reminders and can sometimes delay gratification by choosing an alternative when a desired area is full.
- Responsibility: Takes responsibility for personal well-being by completing chosen tasks and taking care of personal belongings.
- Relationship Building: Engages with trusted adults to share mutual interests or as resources for help and establishes special friendships with peers that may last for short periods.

2. Physical Development

- Traveling Skills: Moves purposefully with control, avoiding obstacles while running, and begins to gallop, though not yet smoothly.
- Balancing: Sustains balance during simple movements, such as jumping off a low step and landing on two feet or jumping over small objects.
- Gross-Motor Skills: Manipulates objects with flexible body movements, such as tossing a beanbag into a basket or kicking a ball forward by running up to it.
- Fine-Motor Control: Holds drawing and writing tools using a three-point finger grip, though they may still hold the instrument too close to the end.

3. Language and Literacy

- Comprehension: Responds appropriately to complex vocabulary and simple stories, including using gestures to compare sizes or relating a story to personal experiences.
- Following Directions: Follows simple requests that are two or more steps, such as putting balls in a basket when told.
- Social Rules: Uses acceptable language and basic social rules during communication, such as taking turns in a conversation or regulating voice volume when reminded.
- Print Concepts: Shows an understanding that text is meaningful and can be read, often pointing to words on signs or labels.
- Phonological Awareness: Notices and discriminates rhyme and alliteration in spoken language.

4. Cognitive

- Approaches to Learning: Shows flexibility by changing plans if a better idea is proposed and uses creativity to build “tents” or “necklaces” during play.
- Symbolic Thinking: Engages in sociodramatic play and uses props to stand for something else and assigning and assuming roles during pretend play.

5. Mathematics

- Number Concepts: Verbally counts to 20 and counts 10 to 20 objects accurately while knowing that the last number counted states how many in all.
- Patterns: Copies simple repeating patterns, such as matching a repeating movement pattern or stringing beads in a specific color sequence.

To learn more about 4-year-old milestones, we recommend reading Chapter 1 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book. You can learn more about each area of development on the following pages:

- Social-Emotional Development (pages 37 – 38)
- Physical Development (pages 38 – 40)
- Language Development (pages 40 – 42)
- Cognitive Development (pages 42 – 43)
- Process Skills (pages 43 – 44)

How to Use the 4K Classroom Guide

The First Steps 4K Classroom Guidelines are organized around the CLASS® framework and First Steps 4K practices. Each CLASS® dimension includes examples of effective teaching practices and the First Steps 4K requirements that support those practices. While some requirements may support multiple dimensions, they are listed under the area where they have the greatest impact on children's learning and development.

The 4K Classroom Guide is designed to provide information on various topics as needed throughout the day or school year.

How CLASS® Aligns with First Steps 4K

First Steps 4K is committed to providing high-quality early learning experiences that support children's development and school readiness. One of the most important factors influencing children's success is the *quality of interactions* they experience with teachers each day.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) provides a framework for understanding and strengthening these interactions. CLASS® focuses on interactions that help children feel safe, engaged, supported, and challenged as learners. These include:

Emotional Support

Emotional Support focuses on creating a classroom where children feel safe, valued, respected, and connected. Positive relationships, responsiveness, and opportunities for children to have a voice in their learning help build a strong classroom community.

Classroom Organization

Classroom Organization focuses on creating predictable routines, effective behavior support systems, and engaging learning experiences that maximize children's participation and learning throughout the day.

Instructional Support

Instructional Support focuses on promoting children's language development, critical thinking, problem-solving, and understanding of concepts through meaningful conversations and intentional teaching practices.

Throughout this guide, you will see how First Steps 4K requirements support the CLASS® domains.

Please note: CLASS® is not a curriculum. Instead, CLASS® provides a lens for understanding how effective interactions strengthen learning and support positive outcomes for children. Together, curriculum, assessment, and teacher-child interactions work to create engaging learning experiences that help every child grow, learn, and succeed. There are measurable “dimensions” with each CLASS® domain. In the following sections, the three CLASS® domains and the related dimensions are described.

About Emotional Support (CLASS® Domain)

Emotional Support is the educators' support of children's social and emotional functioning in a learning setting. Children are developing their sense of self and relationships with others in their communities, and educators support this development in a responsive way. You can learn more about the Emotional Support domain on page 5 of the *CLASS® Interactions Dimensions Guide*.

There are three dimensions within the *Emotional Support Domain*:

1. Positive Climate
2. Educator Sensitivity
3. Regard for Child Perspective

Positive Climate (CLASS® Dimension)

Positive Climate reflects the warmth, respect, enjoyment, and connection that children and adults share in the classroom. Children should feel welcomed, valued, safe, and like they belong. You can read all about Positive Climate and why it is important in your *CLASS® Dimensions Guide*, starting on page 6.

What Positive Climate looks like in a First Steps 4K Classroom

- **Warm Greetings:** Greet children by name, engage in conversations with families, and help children feel welcomed as they arrive each day.
- **Respectful Communication:** Use calm, respectful language and speak to children in ways that are kind and that build children's confidence.
- **Classroom Community:** Children have opportunities to help contribute to their classroom, have a feeling of ownership over the classroom, help others, participate in classroom jobs, and feel like important members of the group.
- **Positive Relationships:** Intentionally build strong relationships with each child and support friendship and kindness among peers.
- **Joy and Engagement:** The classroom includes laughter, smiles, shared experiences, and opportunities for children to enjoy learning together. Children's ideas are celebrated.
- **Family Partnerships:** Events are set up to include families and help them become an integral part of children's learning.

4K Responsibilities Related to Positive Climate

FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS: Parents are a child's first and most important teachers. Their involvement is critical to the success of their children. To strengthen parental involvement in the learning process, each provider will host Family Engagement Activities for 4K families. Each event that is attended must be documented and uploaded to the data system. We will provide

more information on these in an upcoming lesson on the Learning Management System (LMS), but you should work with your 4K Administrator to ensure that this plan includes the following opportunities for family engagement:

- **Family Orientation:** The Family Orientation should be completed before the first day of school or before a child begins in the 4K classroom.
- **Family Conferences:** Family conferences should occur after each reporting period.
- **Family Engagement Events:** Two family engagement events will be held throughout the year. One should be planned for fall and one for spring.
- **ReadyRosie Participation:** Families need to sign up and receive weekly playlists.
- **Ongoing Family Communication:** Families should receive regular communications from you and your 4K Administrator.

COMMUNITY BUILDING: Children and adults should feel a sense of community in their classrooms. They should treat each other with respect and kindness. This community needs to be built and maintained throughout the year.

- **Daily Greetings:** Greet children and families at the door each morning by name, say good morning and, if time permits, have a brief conversation with them.
- **Brain Smart Start:** The purpose of the Brain Smart Start is to awaken yourself and your brain, make connections, and commit for the day. This creates a sense of belonging in the classroom.
- **Group Meetings:** Group meetings are a time when read aloud or group discussions can happen. Group meetings help to build a classroom community and should be kept short for children. Children should not be in group meetings any longer than 15 minutes.
- **Classroom Jobs:** Classroom jobs promote self-worth and contribution. Each child should have a job in the classroom that can help them meaningfully contribute to the classroom. Begin the process of teaching jobs at the beginning of the year so children are familiar with the job responsibilities because it takes time. Children should be included in deciding which jobs are needed and understanding the importance of each job. Job assignments are inclusive and consistent, allowing all children to participate. Classroom jobs should not be used as reward or punishment. A classroom helper or job chart should be displayed where it is visible and can be referred to throughout the day. Using photos of children fosters ownership within the community.
- **Opportunities for Peer Interaction:** Children learn from each other. The classroom is a place for children to take ownership. Children should be encouraged to learn from each other, speak and play with each other, and form friendships with each other.

WELCOMING CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT: Children thrive when they are supported by safe, caring environments that help them build positive relationships with others. You help build a classroom community by supporting relationships among students and providing a predictable environment where all children are contributing members. A welcoming First Steps 4K classroom includes:

- **Family Photos:** Having family and friends' photos available in your classroom helps children to feel safe and comforted. It helps relay the message that family is a part of the classroom and classroom community.
- **Inclusive Materials:** Materials that are inclusive foster a sense of belonging and identify to children. It ensures equitable access to learning and boosts social-emotional development. These materials allow every child, regardless of ability or background, to participate meaningfully in play and learning.
- **Cozy Spaces:** The classroom should be set up with cozy spaces for connection and conversations. Plain colored rugs are best for children. Including pillows, couches, chairs, and areas in the classroom where conversations are encouraged will help to make the environment warm and inviting.
- **An Established Safe Place:** The safe place should be established and introduced after breathing techniques are taught. Items can be added to the safe place after they have been introduced, and you have explained their use to the students. This area should not be used for "time out" and must be visible to the teacher at all times. The safe space is a protected area that teaches children how to regulate big feelings (anger, sadness, frustration, too much excitement, etc.). A chair, beanbag, throw rug, or pillow serves as a base for the safe place. Fill the safe place area with tools and activities that lead children to shift from an upset to a composed state. Tools could include stuffed animals for comfort, fidgets, and tools for breathing exercises. Teach the tools before children get upset.
- **Displays of Children's Work:** Children's work should reflect the children's interest and should be their own creations. They should be provided opportunities to choose what they want to display (example: when a child completes work, ask them if they want to display or take it home). Each child should have their own labeled area to display their work. However, this should not be the only place that their work is displayed.

Educator Sensitivity (CLASS® Dimension)

The Educator Sensitivity dimension reflects an educator's awareness of and responsiveness to children's academic, social, emotional, and physical needs. Your students should feel that you notice them, understand them, support them, and are available to help when needed. You can learn more about Educator Sensitivity and why it is important in your CLASS® Dimensions book, starting on page 12.

In a First Steps 4K classroom, educator sensitivity means creating an environment where every child feels seen, heard, valued, and supported. Teachers build trusting relationships, respond to children's individual needs, and provide the encouragement and assistance necessary for children to be successful learners.

What Educator Sensitivity looks like in a First Steps 4K Classroom

- **Recognizing Children's Needs:** Intentionally observe children throughout the day and respond to verbal and nonverbal cues. You should notice when children need comfort,

encouragement, additional support, a challenge, or assistance navigating social situations.

- **Responsive Support:** Be available and approachable. When children seek help, you should respond promptly and consistently, providing reassurance, guidance, and encouragement that helps children feel safe and supported.
- **Individualized Learning:** Recognize that children develop at different rates and have unique strengths, interests, and needs. Instruction, materials, and interactions should be adjusted to provide appropriate support and challenge for each child.
- **Supporting Emotional Development:** Help children recognize, express, and manage emotions. You should provide guidance during conflicts, model problem-solving skills, and teach strategies that help children develop self-regulation and resilience.
- **Building Trusting Relationships:** Take time to learn about each child and their family. Engage in meaningful conversations, show genuine interest in children's experiences, and create strong relationships built on trust and respect.
- **Encouraging Independence:** You should provide support when needed while also encouraging children to solve problems, make choices, take responsibility, and develop confidence in their abilities.
- **Monitoring Engagement:** Continually observe children's participation and involvement throughout the day. As needed, adjust instruction, pacing, and support to ensure all children remain engaged and successful.
- **Inclusive Practices:** Create a classroom environment where every child feels welcomed and valued. Children with varying abilities, backgrounds, languages, and experiences are supported and included in all aspects of classroom life.
- **Partnerships with Families:** Collaborate with families to better understand children's strengths, interests, and needs. Information shared by families is used to support children's success and ensure consistency between home and school.

4K Responsibilities Related to Educator Sensitivity

INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT: Early education and 4K do not work with a one-size-fits-all approach. Each child enters the classroom with a unique blend of skills, interests, and developmental readiness. By intentionally tailoring teaching strategies, the classroom environment, and learning opportunities to meet a child's specific strengths and needs, you can engage children and prevent challenging behaviors before they stem from frustration or discomfort. A First Steps 4K classroom designed with individualized support includes:

- **Developmental Screenings:** Developmental screenings are required when children enroll in a First Steps 4K classroom. Screenings shall be conducted with the ASQ-3 (Ages and Stages Questionnaire, Third Edition) and ASQ SE with the results maintained in the child's assessment folder and reported SC First Steps 4K.
- **Teaching Strategies GOLD® Documentation:** GOLD® is a performance-based assessment requiring the ongoing documentation of student performance and progress.

- **Ongoing Observations:** It is important to keep ongoing observations of children. Observations can be informal and happen during play, group work, or individual work. Observations should be documented daily in Teaching Strategies GOLD®.
- **Individualized Instructional Planning:** Using GOLD® and keeping documentation, you can work with children on individual, specific, developmentally appropriate skills.

SPECIALIZED SUPPORTS: While individualized teaching helps every child grow, specialized supports are the tools, routines, and strategies you can put in place for children with unique needs. Think of these as intentional bridges. Implementing specialized supports focuses on adjusting the environment or the activity so that every child can actively participate rather than sit on the sidelines.

- **ChildFind/Special Needs Referrals:** If there is a child in your classroom requiring additional supports, please have your 4K Administrator email 4KOperations@scfirststeps.org and someone will be in contact to help support. A dedicated First Steps 4K staff member will then facilitate collaboration between you, your 4K Administrator, the child's parents or guardians, and the child's school district of residence (or service) in determining whether a child may have special needs that would qualify him or her for special education services.
- **Collaboration with Interventionists and Specialists:** Children identified as needing early intervention services and/or related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are a welcomed part of the First Steps community and shall not be denied access to the First Steps 4K program. If there is a child in your classroom requiring additional supports, please have your 4K Administrator email 4KOperations@scfirststeps.org and your email will get forwarded to the appropriate staff member to help you.

Regard for Child Perspectives (CLASS® Dimension)

The Regard for Child Perspectives dimension reflects the extent to which teachers value children's ideas, interests, motivations, and independence. Children should have opportunities to make choices, express their thoughts, take on leadership roles, and actively participate in their learning. You can learn more about Regard for Child Perspective in your *CLASS® Dimensions Guide*, starting on page 15.

In a First Steps 4K classroom, regard for child perspectives means creating a learning environment where children are encouraged to explore, make decisions, solve problems, and contribute to the classroom community. Teachers recognize that children learn best when they are actively engaged and have meaningful opportunities to direct and extend their own learning.

What Regard for Child Perspective looks like in a First Steps 4K Classroom

- **Child Choice:** Children have opportunities throughout the day to make meaningful choices about materials, activities, learning centers, and how they engage in learning experiences.
- **Learning through Play:** Children have large, uninterrupted blocks of time to explore, create, investigate, and engage in purposeful play. You can support learning by following children's interests and extending their thinking through interactions and conversations.
- **Flexible Learning Opportunities:** You balance planned activities with opportunities to follow children's ideas, questions, and interests. Learning experiences are adapted when children demonstrate curiosity or a desire to explore a topic more deeply.
- **Children's Ideas and Voices:** Encourage children to share their thoughts, opinions, experiences, and solutions. Children's ideas are acknowledged, valued, and incorporated into classroom discussions, investigations, and activities.
- **Leadership Opportunities:** Children are encouraged to take responsibility, participate in classroom jobs, help peers, lead activities, and contribute to classroom decision-making.
- **Independence and Responsibility:** You provide opportunities for children to complete tasks independently, solve problems, care for materials, manage routines, and develop confidence in their abilities.
- **Student Engagement:** Learning experiences actively involve children through movement, discussion, exploration, hands-on materials, and opportunities for participation. Children are actively engaged rather than passively receiving information.
- **Meaningful Conversations:** Engaging children in back-and-forth conversations that encourage children's thinking, reasoning, predicting, questioning, and sharing ideas rather than focusing primarily on teacher-directed talk.
- **Respect for Individual Interests:** You observe children's interests and use them to guide planning, investigations, center enhancements, read aloud selections, and learning opportunities.

4K Responsibilities Related to Regard for Child Perspective

LEARNING CENTERS: Learning centers are the heart of a First Steps 4K classroom, offering defined interest areas like blocks, dramatic play, and art where children guide their own hands-on exploration. Learning centers are an opportunity for students to choose their activities and areas based on their interests and needs. Interactions and observations happen during this time with individual children to extend play and learning. You can learn more about interest areas in Chapter 2 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book on page 67.

- **Two Large, Uninterrupted Blocks of Time:** During interest areas, there should be time available for children to have child choice, uninterrupted play. The recommended time is at least 60-90 minutes during interest areas.
- **Lesson Plans and Learning Centers:** You should utilize your lesson plans during Learning Center sections of the Daily Schedule. Lesson plans provide ideas for documentation, conversations, and possible activities or areas of focus for learning centers. Utilizing a writing component during Learning Centers can be a useful addition.
- **Wrap-Up Warning:** At the conclusion of learning centers, make sure to give a 5-minute warning before it is time to clean up.

- **Child Choice Opportunities:** There should be multiple opportunities for child choice throughout the day. Children should at least have a choice during interest areas and during outside play, whenever possible. This choice will also help to manage behaviors.
- **Open-Ended Materials:** Open-ended materials lack a fixed purpose, allowing children to manipulate them in limitless ways. With no “right” or “wrong” way to play with materials, children focus on the process of exploration, which develops skills across all areas of early childhood development.
- **Interest Area Organization:** You should utilize shelves and have all interest area materials labeled with pictures and words for children.

CHILD LEADERSHIP: Child leadership involves giving every child daily opportunities to make meaningful choices, take ownership of tasks, and guide their own learning through exploration. You can foster this by stepping back from total control and taking on the role of facilitator, whether that means letting a child co-creating a classroom rule or direct the storyline in dramatic play during learning centers. Intentionally building these moments into a child’s day can boost self-confidence, strengthen their problem-solving, and shows the students that their voices and ideas truly matter in the classroom community.

- **Classroom Jobs:** Each child should have a classroom job. You can learn more about classroom jobs on pages 76 and 77 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book.
- **Decision-Making Opportunities:** Children should be given opportunities for decision-making. If they don’t have a chance to practice this skill, they may struggle with this skill. Key opportunities include free-play selection, choosing art materials, picking books to read, classroom voting, and classroom jobs.
- **Active Participation in Routines:** Children are invited to actively participate in the classroom rather than passively listening. Active participation will also promote students collaborating and engaging with their peers on activities and routines.

PLAY-BASED LEARNING: Play-based learning is the primary vehicle through which young children make sense of the world and experience social growth. For teachers, this approach means shifting away from rigid, passive seatwork and instead intentionally designing a classroom space where concepts like early math, literacy, and science are discovered naturally. Using play-based learning means capitalizing on children’s natural curiosity to build strong brain connections, critical thinking skills, and a love of learning.

- **Exploration and Discovery:** Children learn through hands-on experiences that encourage them to investigate materials, ask questions, test ideas, and make sense of the world around them. You can provide opportunities for children to explore concepts through play and active engagement.
- **Outdoor Exploration Opportunities:** Outdoor learning extends children's opportunities for discovery, movement, problem-solving, and observation. Intentionally use outdoor environments to support learning across developmental domains.
- **Child-Directed Investigations:** Encourage children to pursue their interests, ask questions, and explore topics that are meaningful to them. Children's curiosity should be used as a starting point for learning experiences and classroom investigations.

- **Flexible Learning Opportunities:** Balance planned instruction with opportunities to follow children's ideas, interests, and discoveries. Learning experiences can and should be adapted to meet children's needs while maintaining instructional goals.

RESPONSIVE PLANNING: Responsive planning is the practice of shaping daily lessons and activities around children's interests, their questions, and any behaviors you observe. This means being close observers during children's play and their conversations with peers. You can then use those observations to enhance and expand upcoming plans. By following a curriculum that responds to children, you can maximize their engagement and validate their ideas.

- **Following Children's Interests:** You can observe children's interests and use them to inform lesson planning, center enhancements, classroom discussions, and learning experiences. Children's interests help make learning meaningful and engaging.
- **Study-Based Investigations (Creative Curriculum):** Studies should encourage children to explore topics in-depth through questioning, research, play, observation, and discussion. Studies provide opportunities for children to build knowledge and make meaningful connections across learning domains and to their daily lives.
- **Flexible Instructional Opportunities:** Try adjusting instruction based on children's engagement, understanding, and developmental needs. Learning experiences may be extended, modified, or enhanced to support children's growth and curiosity.
- **Choice within Activities:** Children should be provided opportunities to make meaningful choices about materials, participation, learning centers, and how they demonstrate their learning. Giving a child choices promotes independence, engagement, and ownership of learning.

About Classroom Organization (CLASS® Domain)

The Classroom Organization domain is the educators' support of children's behavior, time, and engagement in the learning setting. Through Classroom Organization, children learn how to organize and manage their time, attention, and behavior to achieve tasks while you provide support for that learning. There are three dimensions covered in these guidelines under the Classroom Organization. They are Behavior Management, Productivity, and Instructional Learning Formats. You can learn more about Classroom Organization domain and the associated dimensions in your *CLASS® Dimensions Guide*, starting with page 19.

Behavior Management (CLASS® Dimension)

Behavior Management reflects how effectively teachers promote positive behavior, set clear expectations, and prevent and respond to challenging behaviors. Effective behavior management helps children understand expectations, develop self-regulation skills, and participate successfully in classroom activities.

In a First Steps 4K classroom, behavior management focuses on teaching children the social-emotional skills they need to be successful rather than relying on punishment. Teachers create

predictable environments, establish positive expectations, and guide children in developing responsibility, problem-solving skills, and self-control.

What Behavior Management looks like in a First Steps 4K Classroom

- **Clear Expectations:** You should establish a small number of positively framed classroom expectations. Consistently teach, model, and practice these expectations throughout the year.
- **Proactive Support:** Anticipate challenges and provide support before behaviors escalate by using routines, visual supports, reminders, and engaging learning experiences.
- **Teaching Self-Regulation:** Children are taught strategies to recognize emotions, manage frustration, solve problems, and regulate their behavior with adult guidance and support.
- **Consistent Guidance:** Respond to behavior challenges calmly, respectfully, and consistently. Children understand expectations when adults respond in predictable ways.
- **Problem-Solving and Conflict Resolution:** You should guide children through conflicts by helping them identify feelings, communicate needs, listen to others, and work toward solutions.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Focus on the positive behaviors in your classroom by recognizing effort, growth, cooperation, and positive choices. This will encourage desired behaviors.
- **Respectful Interactions:** Preserve children's dignity when addressing behavior concerns. It is important to avoid practices that shame, embarrass, or isolate children in response to behavior concerns.
- **Safe and Supportive Environment:** The classroom should promote emotional safety where children feel comfortable taking risks, making mistakes, and learning from experiences.

4K Responsibilities Related to Behavior Management

SELF-REGULATION SUPPORTS: Intentional tools, predictable routines, comforting spaces, and breathing techniques are part of a self-regulation approach. These supports help children in noticing and managing their big emotions. You can support self-regulation by introducing strategies into the classroom community and allowing children to safely reset when they feel overwhelmed. You can learn more about self-regulation and positive guidance strategies on page 153 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book.

- **Safe Place:** A Safe Place is a designated area where children can go to calm their bodies, manage emotions, and practice self-regulation skills. Safe Place is a teaching tool, not a form of punishment or isolation.
- **Breathing Techniques:** STAR Breathing, Balloon Breathing, Pretzel Breathing, and Drain Breathing are all techniques that help children calm their bodies and regain focus when experiencing strong emotions or stress.

- **“I Love You” Rituals:** Rituals build connection, belonging, and trust through playful interactions, songs, chants, and activities that strengthen relationships between adults and children.
- **Co-regulation Strategies:** You can intentionally support children in managing emotions and behavior by modeling calmness, offering reassurance, and guiding children through co-regulation strategies. The process is done by providing warm, responsive support to children to help them manage emotions, calm down, and focus.

POSITIVE GUIDANCE: Children learn better when they are taught what to do rather than focusing on what not to do. This approach shifts the classroom dynamic from discipline and control to a more encouraging environment focused on skill-building. Use clear, affirmative phrases and proactively setting expectations, you can create an emotionally safe environment where children learn to manage their own emotions and solve problems.

- **Emotional Regulation Instruction:** Intentionally teach children how to recognize, express, and manage emotions in healthy and appropriate ways. This type of teaching should be highly visible, play-based, and integrated into daily routines.
- **Conflict Resolution Strategies:** Children should be guided through conflicts with your help in identify feelings, communicate respectfully, listen to others, and work together to find solutions. Act as a neutral coach, helping children to verbalize their needs, regulate their emotions, identify solutions, and repair relationships.
- **Problem-Solving Instruction:** Teach children strategies for identifying problems, generating solutions, making decisions, and reflecting on outcomes during everyday interactions and learning experiences. This often happens during guided play rather than formal lessons. Try scaffolding critical thinking through open-ended questioning, intentional pauses to let children struggle, and the use of visual cues to help children navigate social and cognitive challenges.

BEHAVIOR EXPECTATIONS: Classrooms benefit from behavior expectations that are clear, simple, and positively framed. These guidelines help children understand what it looks like to be safe, kind, responsible, and a part of the classroom community. You should keep boundaries consistent and predictable across routines, removing guesswork for students. Clearly defined behavior expectations reduce anxiety which can lead to fewer behavior challenges while giving students a better understanding of social and academic success.

- **Classroom Commitments:** Work with your students to establish shared expectations that promote safety, kindness, responsibility, and respect within the classroom community.
- **Modeling:** Model your classroom expectations by demonstrating the social, emotional, and physical behaviors that are expected of them. These actions can be taught through songs, visuals, and daily practice.

Productivity (CLASS® Dimension)

The Productivity CLASS® dimension reflects how effectively teachers manage time, routines, transitions, and classroom activities to maximize learning opportunities. Productive classrooms are well organized, allowing children to spend more time engaged in meaningful learning and less time waiting. You can learn more about the Productivity dimension in your *CLASS® Dimensions Guide*, starting on page 23.

In a First Steps 4K classroom, productivity means creating efficient routines and smooth transitions that support learning while maintaining a predictable and engaging environment for children.

What Productivity looks like in a First Steps 4K Classroom

- **Smooth Transitions:** Plan and implement your transitions throughout the day so that they are efficient, engaging, and minimize children's waiting time.
- **Established Routines:** Daily routines are predictable, which help children understand expectations and move independently through the day.
- **Maximized Learning Time:** Children should spend the majority of their day actively engaged in learning experiences, conversations, play, and exploration.
- **Prepared Environments:** Materials are organized, accessible, and ready for use, reducing downtime and interruptions.
- **Effective Planning:** You should prepare materials, learning experiences, and classroom environments in advance to ensure activities run smoothly.
- **Active Engagement During Routines:** Use routines such as arrival, meals, handwashing, and transitions as opportunities for conversation, learning, and relationship building among students.
- **Children's Independence:** Children should be encouraged to manage routines, care for materials, and complete classroom responsibilities with increasing independence.
- **Collaborative Teamwork:** Teachers and instructional assistants work together to ensure supervision, instruction, and classroom management responsibilities are shared effectively.

4K Responsibilities Related to Productivity

DAILY SCHEDULE: A predictable daily schedule is the backbone of a productive 4K classroom, providing children with a sense of safety in knowing what to expect next. An effective daily schedule will balance active and quiet moments, child-driven play opportunities, and teacher-guided group interactions. By maintaining consistency, and even anchoring it in a visual schedule, you can drastically reduce anxiety and minimize down-time, when challenging behaviors are most likely to occur. To learn more about the essentials for a daily schedule, review page 90 of your *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book.

- **Approved Classroom Schedule:** A daily schedule, including times, should be posted for adults (parents, leaders, coaches, etc.) to view. Your 4K Administrator must submit your schedule into CaseWorthy for approval before the first day of school for approval. All First Steps 4K classrooms are expected to have a daily schedule that meets the program's requirements. Example schedules can be found in the appendix of this document.
- **Posted Picture or Visual Schedule:** A posted visual schedule serves as a chronological reminder of what happens throughout the school day. Classrooms are required to have a picture schedule with daily routines posted horizontally, at the student's level. Additional visual support such as charts, pictures, schedules, and cues help children remember routines, expectations, and self-regulation strategies.
- **Predictable Routines:** Consistent daily routines help children feel secure, understand expectations, and successfully navigate the classroom environment with increasing independence.
- **Balanced Daily Structure:** As you will see in the example daily schedules provided, an appropriate daily schedule includes a balance of teacher-guided instruction, child-initiated learning, active play, outdoor experiences, and opportunities for rest and reflection.
- **Daily Learning Blocks:** Your daily schedule should provide dedicated blocks of time for meaningful learning experiences, including learning centers, small groups, large groups, outdoor learning, and literacy instruction.
- **Consistent Routines:** By following your daily schedule consistently, you are helping your class develop predictable routines which provide structure and security. Routines help children understand expectations and successfully navigate their day.

BEHAVIOR POLICIES: Behavior policies are the framework that determines how you respond to a child's actions. Unlike a list of rules, First Steps 4K behavior policies shifts the focus away from old-school punitive measures and instead focuses on appropriate, restorative practices. Pages 154 to 161 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book provide guidance and strategies for supportive behavior policies.

- **No Corporal Punishment:** First Steps 4K prohibits any form of corporal punishment, humiliation, or disciplinary practice that may harm a child's physical or emotional well-being.
- **No Punitive Time-Outs:** Children may not be isolated or removed from learning experiences as a punishment. Instead, use positive guidance and self-regulation strategies to encourage appropriate behavior.
- **No Public Behavior Charts:** Behavior tracking systems publicly display children's behavior which can shame, embarrass, or compare children. These behavior policies are not permitted in First Steps 4K classrooms.
- **No Exclusion from Learning Opportunities:** Children should not be excluded from classroom activities, centers, outdoor play, or learning experiences as a consequence for behavior. Please review additional information provided in the 4K Operational Guidelines.

TRANSITIONS: Transitions are the glue that holds the daily schedule together. Students need to transition between activities throughout the day. These moments can be high risks for classroom and behavior challenges, but they are also opportunities for learning self-regulation and independence. You can make transitions successful by using predictable cues and treating the scheduled shifts as intention, playful learning opportunities rather than time children spend waiting.

- **Planned Transition Activities:** Transitions should be intentionally planned to keep children engaged, reduce disruptions, and maintain a positive learning environment. Mighty Minutes are a valuable tool that provide quick, engaging activities that reinforce literacy, language, mathematics, and social-emotional skills throughout the day.
- **Transition Songs and Games:** Songs, chants, movement activities, and interactive games help children move smoothly between activities while maintaining engagement and focus. You can learn more about Transitions on page 87 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book.
- **Small Group Transitions (when possible):** Transitioning children in smaller groups can reduce wait time, support supervision, and create more opportunities for meaningful interactions.
- **Minimizing Wait Time:** By organizing routines and preparing materials in advance, you can ensure children spend more time actively engaged in learning and less time waiting.

MATERIALS AND SPACES: The layout of the physical classroom space and the materials used guide how children move, interact, and learn. Intentionally organizing the class environment means defining clear, uncluttered learning centers with distinct visual boundaries. Additionally, high-quality materials that are easily accessible minimize friction and invite meaningful exploration. You can learn more about setting up your classroom starting on page 70 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book.

- **Accessible Materials:** Classroom materials are organized and displayed so children can independently locate, use, and return items during learning experiences and center time.
- **Organized Learning Spaces:** Learning areas are clearly defined, labeled, and arranged to support exploration, engagement, safety, and independence.
- **Prepared Instructional Materials:** Prepare materials and learning experiences in advance to ensure activities run smoothly and maximize instructional time. This preparation should include pre-reading and planning read aloud times.

CLASSROOM AND PROGRAM OPERATIONS: The structures, administrative protocols, and daily routines that keep learning environments running safely and smoothly are essential. These operations transform a busy building into a highly functional learning environment. When program operations are clear and consistently managed, it can remove guesswork and logistical stress. This operational stability is critical because it protects your time and mental energy, allowing time to step away from administrative chaos and focus on your students.

- **Attendance Policy:** Attendance matters. Children benefit from consistent learning experiences, routines, and relationships built in the 4K classroom each day. Children may have no more than ten (10) unexcused absences during the school year. Exceeding this limit may result in the loss of the child's academic scholarship.
- **Attendance Policy Appeals:** If a child reaches 10 absences, the family may appeal the loss of their academic scholarship by reaching out to 4kOperations@scfirststeps.org to learn more about the appeal process.
- **Attendance Procedures – Data System:** As the lead teacher, you are responsible for ensuring attendance is entered accurately and consistently, every day, into the data system. You should only access the data system using your personal username. Login information is not allowed to be shared, and each staff member must use their own account. If you are absent from the class for a day, the 4K Administrator may enter attendance on behalf of the classroom when necessary. Otherwise, the Instructional Assistant or substitute should write down the attendance for that day so that you can enter it into the data system upon your return.
- **Attendance Procedures – Timelines:** Attendance must be entered within 24 hours of the school day, unless in the case of a teacher absence. For this reason, the classroom must maintain an accurate attendance log that is available upon request. The data system will not allow you to enter attendance for future dates. If needed, attendance records may be updated during the payment period, but the state office will be able to see who has made changes to the data system during this time.
- **Excused Absences:** Medical absences are considered excused. Children who are sick should remain at home. Families should be encouraged to provide documentation, such as a doctor's note, when a child is absent due to illness. If a family provides documentation for an excused absence, the documentation should be uploaded to the data system.
- **Supervision Requirements:** Children must be actively supervised at all times to ensure their safety, well-being, and engagement throughout the school day. The classroom should be set up to allow for constant supervision of all areas and children.
- **Maintaining Ratios:** The First Steps 4K program requires that adult-to-child ratios are maintained throughout the day to provide appropriate supervision, support, and meaningful interactions. As the lead teacher, if you are in a classroom of 11 to 20 students, you must also have an instructional assistant. Classrooms enrolling 10 students only require a lead teacher. In classrooms of 11 or children, you should work collaboratively with your instructional assistant to manage classroom responsibilities, maintain learning environments, and support children's development and learning.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION: Planning and preparation can set up a team for success before the children even step through the classroom door. This means moving past last-minute scrambles and instead intentionally mapping out learning goals and assigning specific roles for each part of the upcoming day. A collaborative game plan means eliminating empty downtime where specific behaviors typically escalate. You can learn more about preparing for the first few days of the school year by reading pages 149 and 150 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book.

- **Daily Planning Time:** Dedicated planning time allows you to reflect on children's progress, prepare meaningful learning experiences, analyze assessment data, meet with your 4K Coach, and ensure instruction meets the needs of all learners. As written in the 4K Operational Guidelines, a condition of participation in the First Steps 4K program is that all 4K lead teachers receive an hour of daily planning time. During this time, you should:
 - Enter and update daily documentation
 - Work on lesson plans
 - Complete Teaching Strategies GOLD courses in Smart Teach
 - Set and monitor instructional goals
 - Edit and update plans for following week
 - Create and schedule ReadyRosie playlists
 - Gather materials for instruction
 - Attend meetings with your 4K Coach or other First Steps state office staff
 - Check and confirm attendance has been entered in the data system.
- **Lesson Preparation and Plans from Teaching Strategies:** During lesson planning, you should intentionally plan learning experiences aligned with curriculum goals, children's developmental needs, and the South Carolina Early Learning Standards. Plans should also reflect what is happening in your classroom. With the online Cloud license, Teaching Strategies auto-generates lessons. Lesson plans are also provided in the curriculum study books. It is an expectation that you use the plans that are provided by Teaching Strategies.
- **Additional Lesson Planning:** There are also components that the lesson plan from Teaching Strategies does not cover. Components like Brain Smart Start, Music and Movement, the second Read Aloud, Spotlight Letter, comprehension focus, vocabulary, and questions should be added to your lesson plan during the daily planning time.
- **Documentation:** You should maintain current, daily documentation, observations, assessment records, and required program information to support instructional planning and monitor children's growth and development. Learn more about observations and documentation in your *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book, starting on page 180.

Instructional Learning Formats (CLASS® Dimension)

The Instructional Learning Formats CLASS® dimension reflects how effectively teachers engage children in learning experiences through a variety of activities, materials, and instructional approaches. Children learn best when they are actively involved, interested, and engaged in meaningful experiences. You can read more about the Instructional Learning Formats dimension in the *CLASS® Dimensions Guide*, starting on page 26.

In a First Steps 4K classroom, instructional learning formats provide opportunities for children to learn through play, exploration, movement, discussion, investigation, and hands-on experiences. Teachers intentionally plan learning opportunities that capture children's interest and promote active participation.

What Instructional Learning Formats look like in a First Steps 4K Classroom

- **Active Engagement:** Children are actively involved in learning through hands-on experiences, exploration, movement, discussion, and play.
- **Variety of Learning Opportunities:** Provide a balance of whole-group, small-group, individual, indoor, outdoor, teacher-guided, and child-initiated learning experiences.
- **Interesting and Relevant Materials:** Classroom materials should be accessible, developmentally appropriate, and connected to children's interests and current learning experiences.
- **Learning Through Play:** Children need opportunities to explore concepts, practice skills, solve problems, and build understanding through purposeful play.
- **Multi-Sensory Learning:** Incorporate visual, auditory, tactile, and movement-based experiences to support diverse learning styles.
- **Meaningful Participation:** You should encourage children to talk, question, create, investigate, predict, experiment, and actively contribute to learning experiences.
- **Movement and Exploration:** Learning should include opportunities for children to move, interact with materials, and physically engage with concepts and ideas.
- **Intentional Teacher Facilitation:** You should actively participate in learning experiences by asking questions, extending thinking, introducing new vocabulary, and supporting children's exploration.

4K Responsibilities Related to Instructional Learning Formats

ENGAGING LEARNING EXPERIENCES: Engaging learning experiences are the magical moments where a child's natural curiosity connects with your intentional teaching. This turns an ordinary classroom activity into a powerful lesson. Using engaging learning experience, you can move away from rigid worksheets or passive listening and instead design active, hands-on experiences that invite children to touch, build, question, and experiment. By capturing children's interests in this way, classroom management becomes natural and joyful because children are actively engaged and deeply invested in their own learning.

- **Large Group Experiences:** Large group experiences provide opportunities for children to build community, develop listening and communication skills, and engage in shared learning through meaningful and interactive instruction. In the First Steps 4K Daily Schedule, there are large group lesson plans included for both the morning and the afternoon. It is an expectation that these large group plans are followed, and large groups should last no more than 15 minutes.
- **Small Group Experiences:** Small group instruction allows teachers to provide targeted support, engaging children in meaningful conversations and hands-on experiences based on their developmental needs. In the First Steps 4K Daily Schedule template, it is an expectation that small group instruction happens daily. If documentation is current and up to date, small groups will be differentiated for teachers in their plans giving modifications for each group. Each small group should last 10-20 minutes. Small groups

are not free choice times. If there is another adult in the room, teachers may choose to conduct multiple small groups at once.

- **Learning Centers and Interest Areas:** Classroom environments will have interest areas that are thoughtfully planned, clearly defined, and labeled with a sign that states the name of the area with a picture. The area should have shelves and storage bins labeled with words and pictures to support easy access and independent clean up. You can learn more about learning centers and interest areas starting on page 70 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book.
- **Intentional Teaching Experiences:** Teachers plan and facilitate purposeful learning experiences that support developmental goals and curriculum objectives. Intentional Teaching Experiences are included in daily plans and are to be used for daily documentation.
- **Outdoor Learning:** Outdoor learning extends classroom experiences by providing opportunities for exploration, investigation, movement, and discovery in a natural environment. During outdoor learning, you will supervise children who are using the playground, toys, and equipment. You should observe and interact with children as they play, lead activities related to a study, assist in games and movement activities, and promote large-muscle development. A gross-motor intentional teaching experience should be included in the lesson plan daily. However, outdoor learning can only occur on weather-permitting days. If there is inclement weather, have a gross motor activity planned or back up area for play if available.

MOVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT: Recognizing that young children naturally think, learn, and express themselves with physical movement is a cornerstone of the First Steps 4K program. A proper classroom environment does not expect children to sit still for long stretches and instead intentionally embed physical movement into every part of the day. You can encourage movement and engagement with high-energy music and motion transitions, active gross-motor math games, and hands-on sensory exploration. Channeling a child's natural physical energy into the learning process, rather than fighting against it, dramatically increases young learners' attention spans. You should design a classroom environment that encourages movement. This keeps learning joyful, satisfies students' physical development needs, and proactively prevents restlessness that can lead to challenging behavior.

- **Music and Movement:** Music, songs, fingerplays, and movement activities engage children in learning while supporting language development, self-regulation, social interaction, and physical coordination.
- **Gross Motor Activities:** Children need to participate in daily opportunities to develop strength, balance, coordination, and body awareness through active play and structured movement experiences. The daily lesson plans provided by Teaching Strategies include gross motor Intentional Teaching Experiences.
- **Active Participation Opportunities:** Intentionally engage children as active participants in learning through discussion, exploration, problem-solving, questioning, and collaborative experiences.

- **Hands-On Learning Experiences:** Children learn best through direct interaction with materials and experiences that allow them to investigate, create, manipulate, and discover. Studies and investigations should foster hands-on learning experiences.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: The learning environment is the atmosphere of the classroom, which shapes how children feel, behave, and learn. To create a space that feels like a warm extension of home, you should set up the environment in a predictable layout where every child sees themselves reflected and where every material has its place. When children enter an environment that feels calm, stable, and theirs, students' stress drops and their confidence grows. You can learn more about setting up and maintaining your classroom starting on page 67 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book.

- **Developmentally Appropriate Materials:** Materials are intentionally selected in the First Steps 4K program to match children's developmental levels, interests, and learning goals. Materials should be rotated and refreshed regularly to maintain engagement and encourage new learning opportunities. This should happen with the start of new studies.
- **Interactive Learning Displays:** Classroom displays should encourage children to interact, revisit learning, make connections, and engage with concepts through meaningful and purposeful materials. Displays should reflect the current study. Teaching displays including environmental print and symbols such as logos, and maps and photos from the surrounding area and local community are encouraged. On the other hand, using sight words on a word wall is not considered a developmentally appropriate practice.
- **Interest Area Enhancements:** Consider enhancing learning centers based on children's interests, current studies, classroom investigations, and ongoing observations to promote deeper engagement and exploration. There are ideas and suggestions in the curriculum materials to enhance each study. The ideal First Steps 4K classroom environment includes open-ended materials and experiences that encourage curiosity, creativity, problem-solving, and independent discovery.

CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION: Curriculum implementation means translating the First Steps 4K program's educational standards and learning-based framework into daily, vibrant classroom realities. This does not mean you are just reading scripts of following a rigid checklist. Instead, you should actively use your daily lesson plan as a flexible guide to design meaningful, integrated studies that reflect children's real-world interests. By weaving foundational language, math, and social-emotional skills into daily routines, interest areas, and play-based projects, you can ensure intentional and highly individualized teaching occurs in your classroom. By confidently implementing the program's curriculum, you can balance structure and responsiveness, guaranteeing that every child receives a high-quality educational experience that prepares them for kindergarten.

- **Curriculum Fidelity:** As a First Steps 4K lead teacher, you are expected to implement the approved curriculum with fidelity while meeting the needs, interests, and developmental levels of children. Conduct daily read aloud times, small group

instruction, phonological awareness activities, alphabet knowledge experiences, and intentional teaching experiences as outlined in the guidelines.

- **Intentional Teaching Experiences:** Plan and facilitate purposeful learning experiences that support developmental goals, curriculum objectives, and the South Carolina Early Learning Standards. Intentional teaching experiences are included in plans daily and are to be used for daily documentation.
- **Integrated Learning:** Learning experiences should connect multiple domains of development and content areas, allowing children to build understanding through meaningful and connected experiences.
- **Data-Driven Instruction:** Use ongoing assessment and observation data to plan engaging and developmentally appropriate learning experiences. A data-driven approach to teaching ensures that all children receive targeted instruction that helps prepare them for kindergarten.

About Instructional Support (CLASS® Domain)

The Instructional Support CLASS® domain reflects how teachers promote children's thinking, language, problem-solving, and understanding of concepts. High-quality instructional support helps children make connections between ideas, develop reasoning skills, engage in meaningful conversations, and apply what they know to new situations. You can learn more about the Instructional Support domain on page 29 of the *CLASS® Dimensions Guide*.

In a First Steps 4K classroom, instructional support goes beyond teaching facts and skills. Teachers intentionally use interactions, conversations, play experiences, and learning opportunities to deepen children's understanding, encourage critical thinking, and build language and literacy skills. Children are encouraged to ask questions, solve problems, explain their thinking, and make meaningful connections to the world around them.

Concept Development (CLASS® Dimension)

The Concept Development dimension focuses on promoting children's higher-order thinking skills rather than rote memorization. Teachers help children analyze, predict, investigate, solve problems, make connections, and apply learning to real-life situations. You can learn more about Concept Development, and why it is important, in your *CLASS® Dimensions Guide* starting on page 30.

In a First Steps 4K classroom, concept development occurs when teachers intentionally move beyond asking children to recall information and instead encourage them to think deeply, explore ideas, and develop a greater understanding of concepts.

What Concept Development looks like in a First Steps 4K Classroom

- **Learning Through Investigation:** Children should be encouraged to explore, question, experiment, and discover through hands-on experiences and purposeful play.

- **Problem Solving:** Provide opportunities for children to think through challenges, develop solutions, test ideas, and evaluate outcomes.
- **Making Connections:** As the lead teacher, your role is to help children connect new learning to prior experiences, family experiences, classroom studies, books, and real-world situations.
- **Predicting and Reasoning:** Children are encouraged to make predictions, explain their thinking, justify their ideas, and reflect on outcomes. Questions that begin with “How do you know...” and “Why do you think that...” can prompt predicting and reasoning.
- **Open-Ended Questions:** You should use questions that encourage thinking and discussion rather than questions with only one correct answer. Open-ended questions begin with “what”, “how”, and “why.” These types of questions are preferred over using closed-ended questions (e.g., questions that begin with “is” and “do” words).
- **Creative Thinking:** Children are encouraged to use imagination, generate ideas, create representations, and explore multiple solutions.
- **Project-Based and Inquiry Learning:** Children's interests and questions are used to extend investigations and deepen understanding.
- **Learning Across Domains:** Intentionally connect literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, social-emotional development, and the arts throughout the day.

4K Responsibilities Related to Concept Development

INQUIRY AND INVESTIGATION: Inquiry and investigation should be the heart of a child-led, teacher-supported 4K classroom. An inquiry and investigation approach transforms daily lessons into exciting journeys of discovery. For teachers, this means moving beyond simply giving children answers and instead empowering them to ask their own big questions about how the world works. By nurturing natural, scientific thinking, you can help your students develop critical problem-solving skills and a lifelong love for learning, turning 4K classrooms into a vibrant laboratory of curiosity where every child is a capable researcher.

- **Science Investigations:** Children engage in hands-on experiences that encourage observing, questioning, predicting, experimenting, and discovering how the world works. You can encourage this by asking children about their thinking, using “how” and “why” questions regularly.
- **Discovery Learning:** Teachers create opportunities for children to explore materials, test ideas, and construct understanding through active participation and investigation.
- **Open-Ended Learning Experiences:** Children should be provided with materials and experiences that allow for multiple solutions, encourage creativity, and promote independent thinking. By indicating there is more than one right answer to questions, you can encourage these open-ended learning experiences.
- **Problem-Solving Opportunities:** Intentionally provide opportunities for children to identify challenges, develop solutions, test ideas, and reflect on outcomes. Opportunities for problem-solving often happen daily through your students’ play.

INTENTIONAL PLANNING: Intentional planning ensures every single interaction, activity, routine, and project in a child’s day has a clear developmental purpose. This means moving

away from simply picking cute crafts or filling time, and instead looking closely at children's assessment data, individual goals, and current student interests. Using this information, you can decide what concepts to introduce, select targeted vocabulary words, prepare specific open-ended questions, and structure transitions to support self-regulation. This purposeful planning takes the guesswork out of your day, allowing you to walk into a classroom fully prepared to implement learning effectively and maximize every teaching moment.

- **Lesson Plan Alignment:** Teachers plan meaningful learning experiences that support curriculum objectives, developmental progressions, and the South Carolina Early Learning Standards.
- **Real-World Connections:** Teachers help children connect learning to their own experiences, families, communities, and everyday life to deepen understanding and relevance. The dramatic play area can be an especially useful area for real-world connections, such as connecting learning topics to play focused on the local grocery store.
- **Opportunities for Reflection:** Children should be encouraged to discuss, revisit, and think about their learning experiences. You can help them develop understanding and make meaningful connections by offering opportunities for reflection.

CROSS-CURRICULAR LEARNING: 4K classrooms use intentional integration of multiple subject areas into a single cohesive learning experience. This incorporates concepts in math, literacy, science, and social-emotional skills across learning opportunities. To create cross-curricular learning opportunities, you should move away from teaching skills in isolated blocks and instead encourage children to learn through subjects that are woven together. By purposefully planning experiences where subject area boundaries are dissolved, you can make learning meaningful and help children see the natural connections across disciplines.

- **Literacy Integration:** Lead teachers should strive to embed language, vocabulary, conversation, reading, and writing opportunities into daily routines, play experiences, and content-area learning. Writing and reading opportunities should be included at all centers with alphabet charts displayed throughout the classroom and easily accessible to students. Instruction on letters and sounds should follow children's interest and lead.
- **Mathematics Exploration:** Children engage in meaningful mathematical experiences that promote counting, sorting, measuring, comparing, patterning, and problem-solving. There are multiple opportunities throughout centers and throughout each day to encourage the exploration of numbers and number concepts.
- **Science and Social Studies Investigations:** Children should have opportunities to explore concepts related to the natural world, communities, relationships, and cultures through inquiry, discussion, and hands-on experiences daily.
- **Creative Arts Experiences:** Children should be prompted to use art, music, movement, dramatic play, and creative expression to communicate ideas, explore concepts, and deepen learning daily.
- **Outdoor Learning Environment:** Utilize the outdoor learning environment and outdoor time to promote exploration, observation, and discovery of other learning subjects.

ASSESSMENT-INFORMED INSTRUCTION: Assessment-informed instruction provides a continuous loop of observing children in action, capturing and documenting their growth, and using assessment insights to shape what is taught next. This approach can help you move away from stressful, one-size-fits-all testing and instead emphasizes using everyday moments to better understand each child’s unique developmental journey. Assessment-based insights can pinpoint exactly who needs an extra challenge, who needs a different approach to learning the topics, and how to adjust any small-group lessons from week to week. You can learn more in the *Assessing Children’s Learning* section of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book, starting on page 179.

- **Observation-Based Planning:** Use ongoing observations to understand children's interests, strengths, and needs. These should guide your instructional decisions.
- **Individual Learning Opportunities:** Learning experiences are adapted to provide appropriate support, challenges, and engagement based on each child's developmental progress. Children should be met where they are in their learning and development process. As the lead teacher, you should celebrate each child’s uniqueness and what they bring to the classroom community.
- **Responsive Instructional Adjustments:** Adjust instruction, materials, pacing, and learning experiences. These adjustments should be based on each child's responses, engagement, and understanding of the material being introduced and taught in the classroom.

SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION: Small group instruction can be a powerful opportunity to deliver individualized, intentional teaching within a focused setting. Whether you are introducing a complex counting game, experimenting with magnets, or practicing fine-motor cutting skills, this can be more easily accomplished in a small group format, allowing you to hear every child’s voice, carefully observe their thinking, and ask open-ended questions to prompt scaffolding. You can learn more about supporting learning through small groups in the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book, starting on page 167.

- **Critical Thinking Activities:** Small group experiences encourage children to analyze information, make predictions, solve problems, and apply learning in meaningful ways.
- **Higher-Order Questioning:** Use open-ended questions that encourage children to explain their thinking, justify ideas, and engage in deeper conversations.
- **Exploration of Concepts:** Children should be able to investigate and discuss concepts through hands-on experiences, meaningful conversations, and guided discovery.

Quality of Feedback (CLASS® Dimension)

The CLASS® Quality of Feedback dimension reflects how teachers respond to children's ideas, efforts, questions, and learning experiences in ways that extend understanding and encourage deeper thinking. Effective feedback helps children learn from experiences, build confidence, and develop problem-solving skills. You can learn more about the Quality of Feedback dimension, and why it is important for children, in your *CLASS® Dimensions Guide* from pages 33 through 35.

In a First Steps 4K classroom, high-quality feedback is not simply praising or correcting students. You should use conversations and interactions to scaffold learning, encourage persistence, and help children think more deeply about concepts and experiences.

What Quality of Feedback looks like in a First Steps 4K Classroom

- **Scaffolding Learning:** Provide support that helps children move to the next level of understanding while gradually encouraging independence. Ask follow-up questions and encourage children to explain, elaborate, and reflect on their ideas.
- **Encouraging Persistence:** As the lead teacher, you should recognize effort, problem-solving, and growth while supporting children through challenges. Additionally, feedback should focus on children's actions, strategies, and thinking rather than general praise alone.
- **Back-and-Forth Conversations:** Teachers should engage in ongoing exchanges that extend learning rather than ending conversations with simple responses. You can provide prompts and cues using hints, reminders, and guidance that help children discover answers and solve problems independently.
- **Using Mistakes as Learning Opportunities:** Children should be encouraged to view mistakes as part of learning and are supported in trying new strategies. You can support this by encouraging your students to think about what they learned, how they solved problems, and what they might do differently next time.

4K Responsibilities Related to Quality of Feedback

ASSESSMENT PRACTICES: Assessment practices that utilize documentation are the deliberate habit of capturing the raw, authentic moments of children's play and learning to make their development visible. Whether through quick anecdotal notes, photos of block structures, audio clips of children's storytelling, or work samples of early writing, these insights don't just fulfill administrative requirements but rather serve as a powerful tool for your understanding of each child's learning and development.

- **Teaching Strategies GOLD:** Use assessment information collected through Teaching Strategies GOLD documentation to understand children's current skills and identify appropriate next steps for learning.
- **Ongoing Observations:** You should observe children during daily activities to identify strengths, needs, and opportunities to extend learning through intentional interactions.
- **Progress Monitoring:** Regularly review children's progress to determine when additional support, practice, or enrichment is needed. Documentation provides evidence of children's growth and helps teachers plan feedback and learning experiences that build upon children's current understanding.

INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION: Commitment to meeting every child exactly where they are means recognizing that every learner in your classroom comes with a unique timeline, set of strengths, and style of learning. Individual instruction comes alive with specific teaching strategies, including small group time, guided practices, and intentional scaffolding. As children

gain confidence through this supported practice, you can empower them to take ownership of their learning. See page 172 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* for more information on Meeting the Needs of All Children.

- **Differentiated Small Groups:** Small group instruction is intentionally designed to meet children's individual learning needs and provide opportunities for targeted feedback and support.
- **Scaffolding Strategies:** Provide prompts, cues, modeling, and support that help children deepen understanding and successfully complete challenging tasks.
- **Guided Practice:** Children should receive opportunities to practice new skills with your support, using immediate feedback and clarification.
- **Targeted Support:** You should adjust your instruction and feedback based on children's developmental levels, strengths, and learning goals.

TEACHER-CHILD INTERACTIONS: Teacher-child interactions are the absolute foundation of a high-quality First Steps 4K classroom. These moments of connection serve as the primary vehicle through which emotional security, language development, and cognitive growth happen. You should strive to extend your students' thinking through open-ended questions and rich, descriptive vocabulary. Whether validating a child's frustration during a difficult transition or engaging in back-and-forth conversation during dramatic play, these meaningful connections provide a safe space for children to take risks and develop their understanding of complex topics.

- **Open-Ended Questions:** Ask questions that encourage children to explain their thinking, make predictions, and engage in deeper conversations about their learning. The use of "how" and "why" questions should happen daily.
- **Follow-Up Conversations:** You should try to extend children's responses through meaningful back-and-forth exchanges that encourage elaboration, reasoning, and reflection. Strive to have five back-and-forth conversations with children daily.
- **Feedback During Play:** Teachers should use play experiences as opportunities to provide feedback that encourages thinking, problem-solving, and application of new skills. Acknowledge effort and encourage children to continue working through challenges, helping them develop confidence and resilience.
- **Supporting Problem-Solving:** Guide children through the problem-solving process by asking questions, providing hints, and encouraging children to generate their own solutions.

Language Modeling (CLASS® Dimension)

Language Modeling reflects how teachers support and extend children's language development through meaningful conversations, rich vocabulary, questioning, and communication opportunities. Teachers intentionally create language-rich environments where children are encouraged to talk, listen, think, and communicate. You can learn more about Language Modeling in the CLASS® Dimension Guide on page 36.

In a First Steps 4K classroom, language development is embedded throughout the day. Teachers engage children in conversations during play, routines, meals, outdoor learning, small groups, and instructional activities. Every interaction becomes an opportunity to build oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, and communication skills.

What Language Modeling looks like in a First Steps 4K Classroom

- **Frequent Conversations:** Engage children in meaningful back-and-forth conversations throughout the day rather than doing most of the talking themselves. One way to encourage conversations is to ask questions that encourage children to explain their thinking, share ideas, describe experiences, and engage in discussion.
- **Advanced Vocabulary:** Introduce and explain new vocabulary words during conversations, read aloud times, investigations, and play experiences. As the lead teacher, you can build upon children's responses and vocabulary by repeating, extending, and enriching their language. You can also use books, songs, fingerplays, nursery rhymes, storytelling, and writing experiences to strengthen language and literacy development.
- **Self and Parallel Talk:** Teachers should model language by describing their own actions and narrating children's actions and experiences. An example of this is narrating, "I am walking over to the block area to ask Jay what he is building."
- **Encouraging Peer Conversations:** A high-quality classroom creates opportunities for children to talk with one another, share ideas, collaborate, and solve problems together. Conversations occur during arrival, meals, learning centers, outdoor learning, transitions, read alouds, small groups, and classroom routines.
- **Active Listening:** Demonstrate genuine interest in children's ideas by listening carefully, responding thoughtfully, and encouraging further conversation.

4K Responsibilities Related to Language Modeling

LITERACY EXPERIENCES: Literacy experiences in a 4K classroom are deeply integrated, immersive, and joyful. These moments transform how young children communicate, express themselves, and make sense of the world. You should deliberately create a print-rich environment where books, print, and storytelling tools exist in every interest area. Through high-quality interactive read aloud times, phonological awareness games, shared writing, and daily back-and-forth conversations, you can nurture a deep love for language.

- **Daily Read Aloud Times:** Engage children in daily interactive read aloud experiences that build vocabulary, comprehension, listening skills, and meaningful conversations about text. One read aloud is auto-generated in the plans and gives you discussion prompts. The second read aloud must be added to plans daily and include the title, comprehension focus, vocabulary, concepts of print, and questions.
- **Interactive Storytelling:** Children benefit from stories, props, visuals, and dramatic expression. These strategies actively engage children in language-rich experiences that encourage participation and communication.

- **Concept of Print Activities:** Develop an understanding of how print works through intentional instruction that highlights book handling, directionality, letters, words, and the purposes of print.
- **Story Discussions, Retelling, and Acting Out:** Teachers and children should read together. This encourages discussion, prediction, participation, and exploration of language and print. Children strengthen language and comprehension skills by discussing stories, retelling events, acting out characters, and sharing ideas about text. These opportunities are provided during large group times and available during interest areas.
- **Vocabulary Instruction:** Intentionally introduce, model, explain, and revisit rich vocabulary throughout daily routines, conversations, books, and learning experiences. Revisit words frequently and give children the opportunity to use them as well.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT: Language and literacy development in the earliest years of life serves as the ultimate gateway for all future learning, social connection, and emotional well-being. During this window of rapid brain development, every rich conversation, interactive storybook reading, and playful rhyming game builds the brain connections that support complex thinking and communication. When you prioritize language acquisition at a young age, you aren't just teaching children how to express their immediate wants and needs, you are equipping them with the vital tools to understand their feelings, navigate social interactions, resolve conflicts, and make sense of the world around them. You should try to immerse your students in language-rich, responsive environments as early on in the school year as possible. See page 104 of the *Creative Curriculum: The Foundation* book to read more about how the curriculum teaches literacy.

- **Phonological Awareness Activities:** Children participate in playful language experiences that develop awareness of sounds in spoken language through songs, rhymes, fingerplays, and word play. These activities can be done during transitions, learning through play, mealtimes, and small and large group times. Examples include clapping syllables and counting words. There will be learning opportunities in the Learning Management System (LMS) for you to learn more about phonological awareness.
- **Alphabet Knowledge Experiences:** Provide opportunities for children to recognize, explore, and interact with letters through meaningful and engaging experiences. Each day, have a "spotlight" letter that the class spends time on. Use children's names and interests to teach letters.
- **Shared Writing Experiences:** Model writing while encouraging children to contribute ideas, language, and messages, helping them understand the connection between spoken and written language. There will be opportunities to learn more about these experiences on the Learning Management System.
- **Oral Language Opportunities and Interactive Conversations:** Engage children in frequent back-and-forth conversations that encourage listening, speaking, questioning, explaining, and sharing ideas throughout the day.

PRINT-RICH ENVIRONMENT: A print rich environment is a deliberate space where written language is easily accessible for children, making it impossible to miss and exciting to explore. It

is about creating a living classroom where print has a functional purpose that directly connects to students' lives. Ensure letters and words are everywhere that children play.

- **Labels:** Labels, both pictures and words, throughout the classroom help children connect spoken language to print while supporting independence, vocabulary development, and environmental awareness.
- **Environmental Print:** Children interact with meaningful print found throughout the classroom, helping them understand the many purposes of reading and writing in everyday life.
- **Accessible Books:** A variety of developmentally appropriate books should be readily available throughout the classroom to encourage exploration, enjoyment of reading, and language development.
- **Writing Materials:** Children should have access to writing tools and materials in multiple learning areas, encouraging them to communicate ideas and experiment with written language throughout the day.

FAMILY LITERACY PARTNERSHIPS: Family literacy partnerships recognize that a child's first and most important teachers are their family members. This makes the bridge between home and school essential for early language development. As the lead teacher, you should invite families into a collaborative, supportive relationship that celebrates and builds on unique home literacy practices.

- **ReadyRosie Activities:** ReadyRosie provides families with strategies and resources that promote language, literacy, and meaningful interactions at home. Playlists should be sent weekly once families sign up. You can have these playlists be generic or customized.
- **Family Literacy Events:** Programs must provide at least two opportunities for families to participate in literacy-focused experiences that strengthen home-school partnerships and support children's learning.
- **Home-Based Literacy Connections:** Share ideas, resources, and activities that encourage families to support language and literacy development beyond the classroom and at home.
- **Encouraging Reading and Conversation at Home:** Promote daily reading, storytelling, singing, and conversation as important ways families can strengthen children's language and literacy skills.

CLASS® Observations: Understanding the Process

CLASS® observations are designed to support continuous improvement by helping teachers reflect on classroom interactions and identify opportunities for growth. CLASS® is not an evaluation of the teacher, curriculum, classroom materials, or physical environment. Instead, CLASS® focuses on the daily interactions between teachers and children that support learning, development, and positive relationships.

The goal of CLASS® observations is to celebrate strengths, identify areas for growth, and provide teachers with individualized support through coaching.

Before

- Continue following your daily schedule and classroom routines and make sure it is uploaded in CaseWorthy.
- Let children know that a visitor may be joining the classroom to help them feel comfortable.
- Complete the form with your blackout dates indicating any prior commitments your class had that are not good dates for observations. Be sure this is sent to the Director of 4K Professional Development.
- No special preparation is needed. The observer is interested in seeing your typical classroom interactions.

During

- The observer will generally complete two, 15-20 minute cycles, taking a break from observing for about 10-15 minutes to score the first observation before beginning the second.
- The observer will take notes during the cycle and write down all (or most) interactions that are seen.
- Any adult in the room will count towards the observation so only you and your instructional assistant, if you have one, should be in the room for the observation.
- Be yourself! Don't change your routines or behavior during the observation. CLASS® observations reflect daily practices, so strive for excellence each day. Practice interactions every day and build them up over time.
- Deal with situations as you normally would. Respond authentically to children's needs, whether it's a minor incident or a more serious issue.

After

- You will not get immediate feedback. The observer will leave and enter scores into the data system. Your scores or feedback will not be shared with you until the observation window closes.
- Scores and feedback are used to drive your Quality Improvement Plan. These scores will not impact your job or your classroom's participation in 4K. Instead, CLASS® scores are tools for your 4K Coach to help to increase quality in all 4K classrooms.

How CLASS® Scores are Determined

CLASS® measures the quality of teacher-child interactions across domains, which are broken up into dimensions, which are broken up further into indicators, which are broken up even further to behavioral markers. Your QIP will be written at the indicator or behavioral marker level. You can read more about indicators and behavioral markers in your *CLASS® Dimensions Guide*.

Emotional Support

Positive Climate
Negative Climate
Teacher Sensitivity
Regard for Student Perspectives

Classroom Organization

Behavior Management
Productivity
Instructional Learning Formats

Instructional Support

Concept Development
Quality of Feedback
Language Modeling

Each CLASS® dimension receives a score from 1–7 based on the interactions observed.

Score Range	Level	What it Means
1-2	Needs Support	Interactions connected to the dimension are rarely observed or are not consistently demonstrated.
3-5	Intermediate	Interactions are sometimes demonstrated but may not yet be consistent across the classroom experience.
6-7	Advanced	Interactions are consistent, meaningful, and highly characteristic of the classroom experience.
A CLASS® score represents what was observed during the observation cycles. It is one piece of information used to guide professional growth and support.		

CLASS® Coaching: Turning Data into Growth

CLASS® observations are the beginning of the support process, not the end. First Steps 4K uses CLASS® data to identify strengths, set goals, and provide coaching support that helps teachers strengthen classroom interactions.

Coaching focuses on:

- Reflecting on classroom practices
- Setting meaningful improvement goals
- Practicing new strategies
- Receiving feedback and support
- Celebrating progress

This is a shift in our approach. In the past, coaches have been one-stop-shop, responsible for compliance and technical assistance. Moving forward, compliance will be monitored by Success Monitors. Our goal is to make coaching very focused on your professional development and driven by CLASS® scores to identify areas for growth. Once a goal is achieved, teachers and coaches identify the next area for growth.

You will receive regular coaching visits. You may also receive visits from a contract CLASS® coach as needed when one is available. The Coaching Cycle is as follows:

Observe → Reflect → Set a Goal → Practice → Receive Feedback → Reflect Again

Quality Improvement Plans (QIPs)

Your Quality Improvement Plan will be based on your Fall CLASS® observation. Your QIP will include:

- A specific CLASS® goal
- Action steps for improvement
- Coaching support
- Professional development opportunities
- Reflection and progress monitoring

Professional Learning and Training Events

Additionally, professional learning builds teachers' knowledge of effective instructional interactions, feedback strategies, and child development. Professional learning opportunities are provided throughout the year and are often mandatory for teachers and assistants to participate in. The training calendar outlines the mandatory and voluntary professional development opportunities available to the 4K Administrator and instructional staff for the upcoming school year.

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 Administrators and instructional staff are required to participate in all mandatory professional development over the course of the school year.

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

Program Requirements

Earlier this year, the 4K Operations Guidelines were shared with your 4K Administrator. This document outlines all the policies and program requirements expected from Providers who are participating in the First Steps 4K Program. If you have not had a chance to review the Operations Guidelines document, you should set aside time with your 4K Administrator to discuss the policies and procedures.

Additionally, in the following sections, we outline some of the policies and program requirements that are most likely to impact your role and your classroom. Many of these policies were also references under the previous CLASS® dimension sections but may be repeated in this section to highlight the operational requirements consistent with a high-quality First Steps 4K classroom.

Attendance

Attendance matters. Children benefit from consistent learning experiences, routines, and relationships built in the 4K classroom each day. Children may have no more than ten (10) unexcused absences during the school year. Exceeding this limit may result in the loss of the child's academic scholarship.

Excused Absences

Medical absences are considered excused. Children who are sick should remain at home. Families should be encouraged to provide documentation, such as a doctor's note, when a child is absent due to illness. If a family provides documentation for an excused absence, the documentation should be uploaded to the data system as a Case Note for the child.

If a child reaches 10 absences, the family may appeal the loss of their academic scholarship by reaching out to 4KOperations@scfirststeps.org to learn more about the appeal process.

Need Help?

Access the First Steps data system through the portal link provided during onboarding. Training resources for attendance entry are available in the 4K Learning Management System (LMS). For assistance accessing the LMS, contact the Director of Professional Development.

Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting and Investigations

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

- Any intentional 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. You may report anonymously. [Click here to report abuse/neglect online.](#)

Disciplinary Policy Statement

4K Teachers and assistants will receive a copy of the disciplinary policy statement.

- Lead teachers and instructional assistants must sign and date the disciplinary policy statement in recognition of receipt and understanding of the policy. Please provide the signed and dated policy to your 4K Administrator, who will upload a copy into the data system.
- Parent(s)/guardian(s) must also sign and date the disciplinary policy statement in recognition of receipt and understanding of the policy. Please add the signed and data policy as a Case Note to each student's profile in the data system.

If an incident involving corporal punishment occurs, it must be reported immediately to your 4K administrator in accordance with DSS reporting procedures.

Curriculum

Curriculum should be followed with fidelity. There is a recommended sequence of studies to be followed. The recommended sequence of studies to follow is:

- The First Six Weeks (30 days including the mini-study included) Begins on Day 2-August 6-September 18)
- Balls (20 days) (September 21-October 20)
- Trees (20 days) (October 21-November 17)
- What Jobs Can We do at Home or at School? (mini-study) (4 days) (November 17-November 20)
- November 18-December 4-2 mini-studies

- Clothes (20 days) (December 7-January 19)
- Buildings (20 days)
- Exercise (20 days)
- Reduce, Reuse, Recycle (20 days)
- Getting Ready for Kindergarten (20 days)
- How Does Rain Change the Environment (mini-study) (4 days)
- Water (20 days) (summer term)
- Wheels (20 days) (summer term)

Each month, 1-2 weeks prior to a new study starting, there is a planning meeting held for the next study. Teachers in their first year should plan to attend planning meetings and if they are unable, they should plan to watch the recordings. First Steps 4K uses the Creative Curriculum Guided Edition. The recording and resources for the study are sent out in a monthly newsletter.

Daily Schedule Requirements

A consistent, predictable daily schedule helps children feel secure, understand expectations, and participate successfully in classroom routines. First Steps 4K classrooms should provide a balanced schedule that includes:

- Arrival and routines
- Large-group experiences
- Small-group instruction
- Learning centers/interest areas
- Outdoor/gross motor opportunities
- Read aloud experiences
- Meals and personal care routines
- Rest/quiet time (when applicable)
- Transitions
- Planning time

The daily schedule should provide opportunities for:

- Child choice and exploration
- Teacher-guided instruction
- Individualized learning
- Social interaction
- Movement and play

A daily schedule must be posted outside the classroom and submitted to the First Steps data system prior to the first day of instruction.

Changes to Daily Schedule

If changes are needed during the school year, the 4K Administrator must submit a Daily Schedule Change Request Form. If approved, update the schedule changes:

- In the classroom
- Outside the classroom for families and visitors

Components of the 4K Day

Below is a breakdown of each component of the 4K day.

Arrival and Breakfast

Purpose: Build relationships, support independence, and create a welcoming start to the day. Every child should be offered breakfast, including children who arrive late.

Teachers and instructional assistants should:

- Welcome each child and family
- Support children in storing belongings and signing in
- Supervise self-service breakfast
- Engage children in conversations during breakfast.

Signing-in should be a daily part of the arrival process. Sign-in sheets can be created using the Letter Links system. Letter Links allows the teacher to pick a picture that matches the first letter initial in a child's name.

Group Meeting and Brain Smart Start

Purpose: Build classroom community, create a sense of belonging, and prepare children for learning.

Teachers should follow the Large Group Plan (included in lesson plan), including:

- Question of the Day
- Modeled/shared writing
- Brain Smart Start

Brain Smart Start is a large group activity to help maximize the positive potential of each day. It consists of four activities:

- Activity to Unite: Getting everyone on the same page. Come together as one, focusing on the same task. Examples include singing the same song and classroom affirmations.
- Activity to Calm: Practicing ways to calm oneself. Examples include breathing techniques and stretching.
- Activity to Connect: Connect children to the teacher and each other. A connection must involve at least two people and exhibit the four components of an I Love You Ritual.
- Activity to Commit: Prime brains for success. Examples include, "I am going to use my walking feet today" or "I am going to use gentle touches today with my hands."

Interest Areas/Learning Centers

Purpose: Provide opportunities for children to explore, make choices, practice skills, and engage in meaningful interactions.

During learning centers, teachers should:

- Use lesson plans to intentionally support learning
- Observe children and extend conversations and play
- Provide opportunities for documentation and individualized support
- Include writing opportunities when appropriate.

Interest Areas	Children Might...	Teacher Role	Materials that may be Included
Blocks	Build, design, solve problems	Introduce math vocabulary, ask open-ended questions	Full set of unit blocks, at least one other type of blocks, cars, signs, etc.
Dramatic Play	Pretend, communicate, collaborate	Extend language, encourage problem solving	Kitchen set, multicultural dolls, home props, costumes
Library	Read, retell, act out stories, explore books, listen to stories	Model comprehension and vocabulary, practice using story language	Books, puppets, listening station, class made books
Art	Create and express ideas freely, paint on easel, make things	Focus on process over product	Easel, paint, paint brushes, variety of drawing materials, glue, stamps, three-dimensional materials
Writing	Draw, write, make signs or letters	Encourage authentic writing	Pencils, markers, crayons, small chalk, magnetic letters, alphabet chart
Discovery	Observe, investigate	Ask prediction and inquiry questions	
Fine Motor/ Math/Manipulatives	Sort, count, compare	Introduce mathematical thinking	Puzzles, manipulatives, lacing cards, snap blocks, small building toys, Lincoln logs, Magna tiles, patterns, measuring, data and graphing opportunities

Water/Sand Table	Measure, pour, create	Ask compare and contrast and inquiry questions	Sand, water, materials to pour
Music and Movement	Play songs, sing, make patterns	Encourage creativity, follow rhythm	Instruments, pretend microphones
Science/Discovery	Explore, make predictions, hypothesize	Ask questions, encourage discovery	Magnifying glass, variety of tools, things to explore

Children should have at least two uninterrupted blocks of learning center time daily (60-90 minutes each when possible).

Small Groups

Purpose: Provide individualized instruction and opportunities to practice developing skills. Small groups are teacher-directed learning times, not free-choice time.

Teachers should:

- Follow small-group lesson plans.
- Differentiate instruction based on children's needs.
- Provide targeted support and introduce/reinforce concepts.
- Conduct groups for approximately 10–20 minutes.

Math Talk, Phonological Awareness, and Spotlight Letter

Purpose: Build foundational skills for future school readiness and success.

Teachers should provide daily opportunities for:

- Mathematical thinking and problem solving
- Daily phonological awareness practice
- Alphabet knowledge development
 - Letter name ID
 - Letter sound ID
 - Motion and sound
 - Recognize a letter in text
 - Producing the letter form

For Spotlight Letter, the goal is to focus on a different letter each day instead of each week. By focusing on one letter a day, you will get through the alphabet around seven times. Ways to teach a letter include:

- Letter name identification: This is the letter _____. This is the uppercase letter _____ and this is the lowercase letter _____.
- Letter sound identification: The letter _____ represents the sound _____. When I say the _____ sound, I place my tongue and mouth like this. Demonstrate. Say the _____ sound with me.
- Recognizing the letter in text: Let's see if we can find the letter _____. There are many ways to have students practice recognizing the letter in text, such as sorting through magnetic letters, identifying the letter in class charts, finding the letter in a magazine or books.
- Producing the letter form: Let me show you how to write the letter _____. Provide the pathways and strokes for how to write the uppercase and lowercase form of the letters. Practice writing the letter together.

Read Aloud/2nd Read Aloud

Purpose: Build vocabulary, comprehension, classroom community, and foundational reading skills. Teachers and instructional assistants should actively engage children through discussion and interaction.

Classrooms should include at least two read aloud experiences daily. One is auto generated into the plans and the second must be added to the plans.

Read aloud plans should include:

- Comprehension focus
- Concept of print focus
- Questions
- Vocabulary

Outdoor Learning

Purpose: Support exploration, play, physical development, and learning in a different environment. If weather prevents outdoor play, provide an alternative gross motor opportunity.

During outdoor learning, teachers should:

- Supervise children actively
- Engage in play and conversations
- Support games, movement, and exploration
- Include intentional gross motor experiences in lesson plans.

Music and Movement

Purpose: Support movement, engagement, and brain readiness.

Music and movement may include:

- Songs
- Brain breaks
- Gross motor activities
- Unite, Calm, Connect, and Commit activities

Meals

Children should be provided with breakfast, lunch, and a snack daily. Use these times for conversations with children.

Personal Care Routines

PCR should be included into your day. Teach children how to wash their hands and take care of their personal needs.

Rest

Young children need rest. Allow for a daily 45-minute rest period. Rest should not exceed this.

Transitions

Purpose: Maximize learning time and reduce waiting.

Effective transitions include:

- Predictable routines
- Visual cues
- Songs and finger plays
- Mighty Minutes
- Small-group movement when possible

Large Group Round Up/Dismissal

Purpose: Reflect, reconnect, and prepare children for what comes next. During dismissal, teachers should welcome families and encourage children to share their experiences.

Teachers should:

- Reflect on the day's learning.
- Revisit classroom experiences.
- Discuss plans for the next day.
- Include shared writing when appropriate.

Daily Teacher Planning Time (1 hour daily)

Purpose: Ensure teachers have dedicated time to prepare, reflect, document, and strengthen instruction.

Teachers should use planning time to:

- Complete documentation
- Develop lesson plans
- Review child data
- Prepare materials
- Complete required professional learning
- Communicate with coaches/administrators
- Review attendance

Data System

You will register with the data system and be approved by the 4K state office. 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. Lead Teachers must use their own login to access the data system to ensure accurate auditing of data submission and access.

If you have questions about registering, accessing, or using the data system, reach out to 4koperations@scfirststeps.org with the subject line: Data System Support.

Development Screenings

Developmental screenings are an important part of the First Steps 4K enrollment process. Screening helps teachers and families better understand each child's developmental strengths and identify areas where additional support may be helpful.

First Steps 4K uses the ASQ®-3 (Ages & Stages Questionnaire, Third Edition) and ASQ®:SE-2 (Social-Emotional) or another approved developmental screening tool. Screening results should be maintained in the child's assessment folder and reported to SC First Steps 4K. First Steps 4K provides Lead Teachers with access to training and the resources needed to support completion of developmental screenings. As the Lead Teacher, you will:

- Receive access to ASQ Online through the First Steps state office.

- Create your classroom within the ASQ Online platform.
- Share the ASQ Online link with each child's family.
- Communicate with families the questionnaire should be completed within 72 hours.
- Review completed screenings and use available resources to support children's development.

A member of the SC First Steps state office will have access to your ASQ Online account as a Reviewer to provide support and ensure program requirements are met. Once families complete the questionnaire, teachers will have access to:

- Developmental reports
- Resources and activities to support children's growth
- Information that can guide classroom instruction and individualized support
- Students whose developmental screening scores fall at the 10th percentile or below must be referred to ChildFind in the child's school district in which they reside.

Developmental screening results are one source of information used to better understand and support each child. If you have questions about using ASQ Online or interpreting screening information, contact 4koperations@scfirststeps.org and your email will be directed to the correct person to offer support. Families are important partners in understanding children's development. Teachers should encourage families to complete screenings and use conversations about screening results as an opportunity to build relationships and support each child.

Instructional Assessment (GOLD®)

Teaching Strategies GOLD® is a performance-based assessment system that helps teachers understand children's development, monitor progress, and plan individualized instruction. GOLD® is based on ongoing observation, documentation, and reflection of children's skills and behaviors.

First Steps 4K will create your classroom in GOLD® and provide login information at the beginning of the school year. Assessment information should be used to:

- Identify children's strengths and areas for growth
- Plan intentional instruction
- Individualize learning experiences
- Communicate children's progress with families

Ongoing Documentation

Teachers collect evidence of children's learning through observations, photos, videos, and notes throughout the school year. Lead Teachers should:

- Collect documentation throughout the day during authentic classroom experiences.
- Document children's skills and behaviors during play, routines, small groups, and teacher-guided activities.

- Use lesson plan resources such as Mighty Minutes and Intentional Teaching Experiences to support documentation.

Daily Documentation Expectations

Each classroom should collect documentation regularly. Documentation should come from Intentional Teaching Experiences and Mighty Minutes. Completed and leveled documentation will help to complete checkpoints.

GOLD® Checkpoints

First Steps 4K requires summary ratings at designated checkpoints throughout the year.

Programs complete:

- Fall checkpoint
- Winter checkpoint
- Spring checkpoint

Programs offering summer school will also complete a summer checkpoint. Checkpoint ratings should be based on documented observations of each child's skills and development. Teachers should complete checkpoints by the deadline provided by First Steps 4K. Checkpoint information helps teachers and families understand children's progress and guides instructional planning.

GOLD® objectives include developmental progressions that help teachers identify where children are in their learning journey. When selecting a level, teachers should consider whether a child:

- Consistently demonstrates the skill
- Demonstrates the skill independently
- Shows the skill across different settings and experiences

Progressions include color-coded indicators to help teachers understand developmental expectations.

Assessment Opportunity Cards (AOC)

Assessment Opportunity Cards (AOCs) provide structured opportunities to observe and document skills that support future school success. Teachers should:

- Complete assigned AOCs each month.
- Submit AOC information for each child through the data system portal by the required deadline.
- Add completed AOCs to documentation records as required.

The AOC monthly schedule and objectives covered are as follows:

Assessment	Month to Assess and Document	Checkpoint it will be included in	Objectives covered
ABC Recognition Game	August	1 st Checkpoint	16a, 16b
ABC Recognition Game	January	2 nd Checkpoint	16a, 16b
ABC Recognition Game	May	4 th Checkpoint	16a, 16b

SCEIS Vendor Registration

To receive stipends for professional development outside of traditional hours, you must register as a vendor in the South Carolina Enterprise Information System (SCEIS). Review the 4K Operations Guideline for a step-by-step walkthrough of SCEIS Vendor registration. The SC First Steps 4K team can also provide this guide upon request.

Teacher Supply Money

Eligible lead teachers, including lead teachers in approved publicly funded full-day 4K Programs, may receive 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. 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. The Cognito form and receipts for the \$400 reimbursement must be submitted no later than December 31, 2026.

Refundable Income Tax Credit 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.

Technology

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.
- The First Steps state office staff will contact your 4K Administrator prior to the start of the school year to coordinate the drop-off and pick-up of each classroom's iPad.

Screen Time Regulations

All video materials are to be previewed to ensure the video is appropriate for use in a preschool classroom and discuss what will be viewed. The use of active instructional technology, such as age-appropriate computers or tablet software, should be limited to no more than 30 minutes per week.

Toilet Training Tips

You may have children that are not potty trained. Here are some tips to help with potty training for 4-year-olds.

Supporting Children's Independence

Teachers should:

- Encourage children to use the restroom at regular, predictable times throughout the day.
- Promote independence by encouraging children to manage clothing, handwashing, and personal hygiene to the greatest extent possible.
- Offer verbal reminders and encouragement without pressure or punishment.
- Respect each child's privacy and dignity during toileting routines.
- Maintain supervision while allowing children opportunities to develop independence.

Creating Positive Toileting Experiences

Children learn best when adults respond calmly and consistently.

Teachers should:

- Use encouraging, matter-of-fact language.
- Celebrate effort and growing independence rather than expecting perfection.
- Avoid shaming, punishment, or negative reactions to accidents.
- Remember that toileting accidents are a normal part of development for some young children.

When Accidents Happen

If a toileting accident occurs:

- Respond calmly and discreetly.
- Help the child change into clean clothing while protecting their privacy.
- Follow your program's health and sanitation procedures.
- Clean and disinfect affected areas according to licensing and program requirements.
- Communicate with the family as appropriate.

Partnering with Families

Consistency between home and school helps children become successful.

Teachers should:

- Discuss routines and strategies with families
- Share successes as well as concerns
- Work together to develop consistent expectations and routines
- Respect that every child develops toileting skills at their own pace.

If ongoing toileting concerns interfere with a child's health, participation, or development, collaborate with the family, 4K Administrator, and appropriate support staff to determine next steps.

Tips for Success in the Classroom

- Establish predictable bathroom routines (for example, before outdoor play, after meals, and before rest time).
- Keep extra clothing easily accessible.
- Dress children in clothing they can manage independently whenever possible (elastic waistbands instead of difficult buttons or belts).
- Teach and model proper handwashing every time.
- Watch for signs that a child needs to use the restroom, such as squirming, crossing legs, or suddenly becoming quiet.
- Use visual reminders or picture cues for children who benefit from additional support.
- Praise independence and effort with specific feedback, such as, "You remembered to wash your hands all by yourself."

Resources

Use the links below to learn more about the following:

First Steps 4K references: <https://www.scfirststeps.org/first-steps-4k-resources/>

First Five SC: <https://first5sc.org/>

First Steps Local Partnerships: <https://www.scfirststeps.org/about-us/local-partnerships/>

SC CCR&R: <https://www.scccr.org/>

ABC Quality: <https://abcquality.org/providers/>

SC Endeavors: <https://scendeavors.org/>

Help Me Grow: <https://helpmegrowsc.org/>

Teaching Strategies: <https://teachingstrategies.com/>

ASQ Online: <https://agesandstages.com/asq-online/>

SC Child Care Inclusion Collaborative: <https://www.scinclusion.org/>

Family Connections: <https://www.familyconnectionsc.org/>

Ready for Kindergarten: <https://kindergartenreadysc.org/resources/>

Teachstone and CLASS: <https://teachstone.com/>

SC Child Care: <https://www.scchildcare.org/>

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program: <https://dph.sc.gov/health-wellness/family-planning/women-infants-and-children-wic-nutrition-program>

Healthy Learners: <https://healthylearners.com/>

Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities: <https://ddsn.sc.gov/>

SC Infant Mental Health Agency: <https://www.scimha.org/services/pear-program/>

SC Department of Education's Office of Special Education Services:
<https://oses.ed.sc.gov/early-childhood/child-find/>

ReadyRosie: <https://staging.readyrosie.com/>

South Carolina Association for the Education of Young Children (SCAEEYC):
<https://scaeyc.org/>

Appendix

DAILY SCHEDULE OPTIONS:

Option 1, 8:00-2:30 (6.5-hour day): 4K Daily Schedule

8:00-8:30 Arrival, Breakfast, Group Meeting

- Includes daily sign in using Letter Links, attendance, greeting, safe keeper, answer question of day, look at books, personal care routines, as needed
- Every child is offered breakfast, even if they arrive late
- Morning Meeting: Follow Large Group Plan in plans, including Question of the Day, Modeled/Shared Writing, Brain Smart Start

8:30-8:55 Small Group

8:55-10:15 Learning Centers

10:15-11:00 Outdoor Learning

- Weather Permitting. If unable to go outside due to weather, indoor active play is provided.
- Plan transition to come back in with a Mighty Minute-Math or Phonological Awareness

11:00-11:10 Phonological Awareness/Alphabet Spotlight/I Love You Ritual/Fingerplay

- Students engage in personal care routines during this time, as needed

11:10-11:20 Read Aloud

11:20-11:45 Lunch

- Include personal care routines before eating

11:45 -12:25 Rest and Wake-Up Procedures

12:25-12:35 Music and Movement & Brain Smart Start

12:34-12:45 Read Aloud

12:45-1:30 Outdoor Learning Time and Gross Motor Activity

- Weather Permitting. Planned physical activity from plans.

1:30-2:15 Learning Centers and Self-Serve Snack

2:15-2:30 Large Group Round-Up

2:30 Dismissal

Option 2, 8:00-2:30 (6.5-hour day): 4K Daily Schedule

8:00-8:30 Arrival, Breakfast, Group Meeting

- Includes daily sign in using Letter Links, attendance, greeting, safe keeper, answer question of day, look at books, personal care routines, as needed
- Every child is offered breakfast, even if they arrive late
- Morning Meeting: Follow Large Group Plan in plans, including Question of the Day, Modeled/Shared Writing, Brain Smart Start

8:30-9:50 Learning Centers

10:00-10:45 Outdoor Learning

- Weather Permitting. If unable to go outside due to weather, indoor active play is provided.
- Plan transition to come back in with a Mighty Minute-Math or Phonological Awareness

10:45-10:55 Phonological Awareness/Alphabet Spotlight I Love You Ritual/Fingerplay

- Students engage in personal care routines during this time, as needed

10:55-11:05 Read Aloud

11:05-11:30 Lunch

- Include personal care routines before eating

11:30-12:10 Rest and Wake-Up Procedures

12:15-12:40 Small Group

12:40-12:50 Music and Movement & Brain Smart Start

12:50-1:00 Read Aloud

1:00-1:35 Outdoor Learning Time and Gross Motor Activity

- Weather Permitting. Planned physical activity from plans.

1:35-2:15 Learning Centers and Self-Serve Snack

2:15-2:30 Large Group Round-Up

2:30 Dismissal

Option 3, 8:00-4:00 (8-hour day): 4K Daily Schedule

8:00-8:30 Arrival, Breakfast, Group Meeting

- Includes daily sign in using Letter Links, attendance, greeting, safe keeper, answer question of day, look at books, personal care routines, as needed
- Every child is offered breakfast, even if they arrive late
- Morning Meeting: Follow Large Group Plan in plans, including Question of the Day, Modeled/Shared Writing, Brain Smart Start

8:30-10:00 Learning Centers

10:00-10:15 Math Talk Phonological Awareness/Concepts of Print/Alphabet Knowledge

10:15-11:00 Outdoor Learning

- Weather Permitting. If unable to go outside due to weather, indoor active play is provided.
- Plan transition to come back in with a Mighty Minute-Math or Phonological Awareness

11:00-11:10 Read Aloud

11:10-11:40 Lunch

- Include personal care routines before eating

11:40-12:25 Rest and Wake-Up Procedures

12:25-12:45 Small Group

12:45-1:00 Music and Movement & Brain Smart Start

1:00-1:50 Outdoor Learning Time and Gross Motor Activity

- Weather Permitting. Planned physical activity from plans.

1:50-2:00 Phonological Awareness/Alphabet Spotlight I Love You Ritual/Fingerplay

- Students engage in personal care routines during this time, as needed

2:00-2:15 Read Aloud

2:15-3:20 Learning Centers and Self-Serve Snack

3:20-3:40 Small Group

3:40-4:00 Large Group Round-Up

4:00 Dismissal

Option 4, 8:00-4:00 (8-hour day): 4K Daily Schedule

8:00-8:30 Arrival, Breakfast, Group Meeting

- Includes daily sign in using Letter Links, attendance, greeting, safe keeper, answer question of day, look at books, personal care routines, as needed
- Every child is offered breakfast, even if they arrive late
- Morning Meeting: Follow Large Group Plan in plans, including Question of the Day, Modeled/Shared Writing, Brain Smart Start

8:30-8:45 Small Group

8:45-10:15 Learning Centers

10:15-10:30 Math Talk Phonological Awareness/Alphabet Knowledge

10:30-11:15 Outdoor Learning

- Weather Permitting. If unable to go outside due to weather, indoor active play is provided.
- Plan transition to come back in with a Mighty Minute-Math or Phonological Awareness

11:15-11:25 Read Aloud

11:25-11:55 Lunch

- Include personal care routines before eating

11:55-12:40 Rest and Wake-Up Procedures

12:40-1:00 Small Group

1:00-1:10 Music and Movement & Brain Smart Start

1:10-1:55 Outdoor Learning Time and Gross Motor Activity

- Weather Permitting. Planned physical activity from plans.

1:55-2:05 Phonological Awareness/Alphabet Spotlight I Love You Ritual/Fingerplay

- Students engage in personal care routines during this time, as needed

2:05-2:20 Read Aloud

2:20-3:20 Learning Centers and Self-Serve Snack

3:20-3:40 Small Group

3:40-4:00 Large Group Round-Up

4:00 Dismissal



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