



# Request for Proposals for Strong Beginnings Three-Year-Old Preschool Pilot Program

## 1. Statement of Purpose

The Governor's Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2026 funds the expansion of the Strong Beginnings pilot preschool program. Clinton County Regional Education Services Agency, Office of Innovative Projects (CCRESA-OIP), under the direction of the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP), administers the program and is preparing to implement expansion should the program be funded according to the Executive plan. Strong Beginnings is a state-funded program for three-year-old children with factors that may place them at risk for low educational attainment.

## 2. Background

In fiscal year 1986, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) received one million dollars to identify appropriate program models for operating preschool pilot projects for four-year-olds. Fifty-three projects were funded and served 694 four-year-olds. In fiscal year 1987, Section 36 of the State School Aid Act and the Department of Education Appropriations Act provided funds for targeted early childhood programs, now called the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP). Programs began operating in September 1988.

Since then, research on the efficacy of GSRP indicates that children provided with a high-quality preschool experience show significant positive developmental differences compared to children from the same backgrounds who did not attend a high-quality preschool program. As a result, the program has continuously expanded, serving over 43,000 children in fiscal year 2025. During the 2017-2018 school year, MDE-OGS used funds from the Race to the Top Early Childhood Challenge to develop a conceptual model for a state-funded three-year-old preschool.

Start-up funding through the PDG Birth through Five grant allowed for pilot implementation and evaluation of Strong Beginnings in 2021. As a result of the program's success, \$2.2 million in State School Aid funding was appropriated to continue the twelve-classroom pilot for the 2022-2023 school year. In fiscal year 2024, the pilot implementation of Strong Beginnings was expanded to \$18 million for fiscal years 2024-2026, expanding the program to 28 classrooms in 10 ISDs. **The Governor's proposed fiscal year 2026 budget expands this pilot implementation to \$61 million for fiscal years 2026-2029.** While the funding still requires legislative approval, this RFP seeks applicants for 11 additional classrooms for FY 26.

Preliminary selections of new ISDs for the fall of 2025 will be made in **June 2025**. When the funds are fully authorized, final notification for each year will be made. Classrooms involved in the pilot during school years 2021-2025 will continue to be funded yearly if funds are fully authorized. RFPs for additional years will occur later in the funding cycle.

*It is the policy of the Clinton County Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) that no discriminatory practices based on gender, race, religion, color, age, national origin, disability, height, weight, marital status, sexual orientation, political affiliations and beliefs, or any other status covered by federal, state or local law be allowed in providing instructional opportunities, programs, services, job placement assistance, employment or in policies governing student conduct and attendance. Any person suspecting a discriminatory practice should contact the Director of Special Education, 1013 South US-27, St. Johns, MI 48879, or call 989-224-6831.*

### 3. Scope of Work

Strong Beginnings is based on Michigan’s GSRP program. However, it has been modified to ensure it is appropriate for three-year-olds, including the addition of a Child/Family Supports program.

#### Timeline

Activity	Target Date
Release RFP	April 9
Informational webinar	April 11, 1:00 PM
Questions due from ISDs	April 15, 4:00 PM
FAQ Posted	April 18
Intent to apply due	April 21, 12:00 PM
RFPs due	April 28, 4:00 PM
RFP review, recommendations submitted	May 2 - June 1
Notify applicants, pending budget approval	June 3

#### Applicant Eligibility

1. Applications will only be accepted from Intermediate School Districts (ISDs).
2. ISDs currently receiving Strong Beginnings funding are ineligible to apply for FY 26, but may be eligible to apply in subsequent years.
3. Local Education Agencies (LEAs), Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Head Start programs, and Public School Academies (PSAs or “Charter Schools”) are **encouraged** to apply for classrooms through their ISD.
4. Applicants must commit to operating classrooms in the year they receive the award and each subsequent year that funding is appropriated through Fiscal Year 2029.
5. Applicants must successfully meet all grant requirements to receive ongoing funds.
6. Subcontractor awards are non-transferable without the approval of CCRESA.

#### Classroom Implementation Criteria for FY 2026

1. Classrooms funded beginning in 2025-26 will follow the Strong Beginnings Phase 1 pilot model. Additional program models or variations for 2026-2027 will be developed during FY 26, pending State Aid funding and requirements.
2. Only applications for classroom instruction will be considered (distance learning or hybrid approaches are not allowed).

3. All Fiscal Year 2026 classrooms must be currently licensed.
4. Programs will serve only three-year-old children. Multiage classrooms are not allowed for FY 26. Multiage and blended/braided classrooms may be considered in future years.
5. Pilot classrooms will use Strong Beginnings funds only. Braided or blended classrooms are not allowed.
6. Children with IEPs are eligible for special education services under the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education and are eligible for Strong Beginnings.
7. Children must come from families at or below 250% poverty and reside in the Strong Beginnings program's ISD area. The [Strong Beginnings Implementation Manual](#) provides a detailed description of eligibility and program requirements.
8. Four-day school day programs are required for all classrooms.
9. Pilot classrooms will have no more than 14 children and at least two staff members.
10. All classrooms will have two teaching staff with the required credentials, regardless of the number of children.
11. Programs will use only GSRP-approved screeners, curriculum, and assessments. They may not use Connect 4 Learning. Specials, supplemental curricula, and supplemental assessments will not be allowed.
12. All classrooms will utilize the CLASS 2nd Edition for program quality assessment.
13. All classrooms will work collaboratively with a Family Liaison, as described in the [Strong Beginnings Implementation Manual](#).

### Child/Family Supports Requirements

Families and children arrive at Strong Beginnings with different needs. These needs vary across the state, ISDs, subcontractors, and even classrooms. Because of this, there is a range of supports that ISDs should consider when providing Child/Family Supports in collaboration with subcontractors and other partners.

1. Each program must have a Family Liaison who is available to develop relationships with families, provide ongoing support, resources, and information, and assist families in improving their general well-being.
2. Family Liaisons provide support for the child attending Strong Beginnings. They are also expected to support families in meeting basic needs, assisting other children and family members, and dealing with issues, including health, employment, housing, and job training that are important to the family.
3. Services for children and families, such as Early Childhood Mental Health, Behavioral Consultation, or the inclusion of a third member of the teaching team on a full or part-time basis, may also be provided as part of the Child/Family Supports, but cannot take the place of a dedicated Family Liaison.

Each ISD, in conjunction with its subcontractors, must develop an annual plan for providing child and family support that strengthens the foundation for children and families as they begin their journey through the school system. This plan must include the following:

1. The support they will provide each classroom.
2. A vision for how the Family Liaison will be hired, coached, and supervised in fulfilling their role.

3. The responsibilities assigned to the Family Liaison, as well as the number of hours they will work, and their compensation.

More information on Child and Family Supports is available in the July 2024 revision of the [Child/Family Supports](#) section of the [Strong Beginnings Implementation Manual](#).

### Data Collection and Reporting

To scientifically examine the benefits of this new program for vulnerable children and families, data collection and reporting are required of each site for program monitoring, continuous quality improvement, and program evaluation. Examples of data collection and reports include:

1. Information such as COR or TSG child and summary records for children in Strong Beginnings
2. Child Screening Data
3. Program Quality Assessments
4. Family Contact Logs
5. Family Liaison Self-Assessment Rubric
6. Director's Survey
7. Child Demographics
8. Child Attendance
9. Family Surveys

Refer to [Appendix A](#) for a full description of data collection items and their associated reporting schedule.

### Evaluation

Pilot sites must agree to participate in a multi-year evaluation conducted by researchers at Michigan State University (MSU). The evaluation may include teacher and parent surveys for the Strong Beginnings program year.

MSU will compensate teachers and parents for their time completing assessments and surveys. Parents' participation in MSU activities is voluntary and will not impact children's eligibility or admission to the program.

See [Appendix A](#) for a list of assessments and schedules.

### Prioritization for 2026 Expansion

Understanding the strengths and challenges of the Strong Beginnings program when operating in all types of ISDs, all geographical regions, with all types of children, and all types of subcontractors is critical to the goal of developing a statewide scaling and implementation plan.

In fiscal year 2026, we are primarily seeking applications from programs that can meet one or more of the following criteria:

- The proposed classroom is in an area of the county that is a child care desert
- The proposed classroom is operated by Head Start (no blended or braided funding allowed)

- The proposed classroom is operated by a community-based organization

Programs that do not meet these criteria will be awarded funds only if there are insufficient high-quality proposals that meet these criteria or if unique needs for balancing characteristics are evident.

#### 4. Outcomes and Performance Standards

##### Desired Program Outcomes:

1. Implementation of Strong Beginnings classrooms
2. Implementation of Child and Family Supports
3. Implementation of a program meeting performance standards

Please refer to the [Strong Beginnings Implementation Manual](#) for a full description of performance standards.

##### Milestones, Deliverables, and Timeline

Program Milestones for SY 2025-2026 Cohort: *(All dates are tentative based on the School Aid Act)*

1. All contracts and subcontracts are signed by **7/31/2025**.
2. ISD Early Childhood Contact and Finance Representative attend the August 2025 trainings.
3. ISD Early Childhood Specialists, Family Liaisons, teaching staff, and site directors attend the August Back-to-School Kick-Off.
4. Programs start by **October 1, 2025**.
5. At least one Strong Beginnings ISD-level Project Team Member attends all Training and Technical Assistance meetings in SY 2025-2026.

##### Program Deliverables:

1. Submission of all budgets, reports, and data in accordance with project timelines
2. Submission of teaching staff, Family Liaison, and ECS resumes and credentials
3. Completion of a Child and Family Supports Plan

#### 5. Payments and Incentives

##### Program Payments

1. Strong Beginnings classroom will receive an allocation of \$13,500 per child in Fiscal Year 2026.
2. Programs will receive their full allocation regardless of enrollment. However, continued funding of the program may be jeopardized if the program is consistently under-enrolled.
3. Funds must cover both the program's classroom program and Child Family Supports components, and allowable administrative expenses.
4. Applicant ISDs (or a consortium of ISDs) may retain up to 4% of the total grant amount for administrative services the ISD provides. This amount comes out of the per-child allocation (not in addition to it).

##### Additional Payments

1. Transportation is encouraged and will be funded at a minimum of \$500 per child in addition to program payments.

2. One-time start-up funds of \$20,000 for each classroom are available (in addition to program funds) for purchasing **non-consumable** goods, equipment, materials, supplies, child restraint systems for vehicles, and making minor classroom renovations.

### Periods(s) of Closure

In the event of a shutdown due to health or other related reasons, classrooms will continue to receive their full per-child allocation. The Child and Family Supports are expected to continue virtually throughout the period(s) of closure to receive continued funding.

### Fund Balances

Due to this program's requirements and the evaluation's parameters, a **fund-balance carryover is not allowed.**

## 6. Contractual Terms and Conditions

### Assurance Regarding Compliance with Program Requirements

ISDs awarded contract funds under this RFP agree to comply with all applicable requirements of all state statutes, federal laws, executive orders, regulations, policies, and award conditions governing this program. Awardees understand and agree that if they materially fail to comply with the terms and conditions of the award, CCRESA may withhold funds otherwise due to this program until the recipient comes into compliance or the matter has been adjudicated and the amount disallowed has been recaptured (forfeited). CCRESA may withhold up to 100 percent of any payment based on a monitoring finding, audit finding, or pending final report.

### Certification Regarding Nondiscrimination Under Federal and State-Assisted Programs

In responding to this RFP, the applicant hereby agrees that it will comply with all federal and Michigan laws and regulations prohibit discrimination in employment, housing, education, and public accommodations based on religion, race, color, national origin, age, sex, height, weight, familial status, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in any program or activity for which it is responsible or for which it receives financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education, Michigan Department of Education, or Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential.

### Specific Program Assurances

1. Should an award be made, the following provisions are understood to be true:
2. This award is made possible through State School Aid Act dollars and is subject to legislative appropriation and enactment.
3. The award will be made as a contract between CCRESA and the ISD applicant.
4. The award is approved for the applicant and cannot be assigned to a third party without specific approval.
5. CCRESA is not liable for any costs incurred by the awardee before the issuance of the award.
6. Payments, records, and financial statements made to sites under the provisions of this program will be made accessible and are subject to audit by CCRESA.

7. Each ISD, in collaboration with its sites, shall comply with all reporting requirements and due dates.
8. Each ISD acknowledges that the program is part of a data collection and evaluation effort. Acceptance of these funds requires that the project fully cooperate with CCRESA, MDE, and MSU and that cooperation includes but is not limited to the following:
  - Making classrooms available for observation.
  - Allowing administrators and staff to take time to complete surveys and questionnaires (by phone, online, on paper, or in person).
  - Returning completed surveys and questionnaires promptly and regularly to the contractor or any of the state's other research partners.
  - Providing program information to CCRESA and MSU. This information may include, but is not limited to, program type, session types, session hours, program calendar of school breaks, field trips, staff development, site locations, number of classrooms per site, number of children served, and staffing assignments within classrooms.
  - Providing a Unique Identification Number (UIC) for each child enrolled in Strong Beginnings.
  - Entering data on children in accordance with the CEPI MSDS Early Childhood Collection dates.
  - Participating in project informational webinars, conference calls, and in-person meetings.
  - Distributing parent information letters/consent forms; and
  - Collecting and forwarding parent consent forms promptly and regularly.

ISDs are aware and understand that program requirements may be subject to change due to circumstances around health or other state- and federally emerging requirements.

### **Award Availability, Force Majeure, and Contract or Award Cancellation**

Awards made under this agreement are subject to funding allocation and availability under the State School Aid Act and Michigan Department of Education fiscal year appropriations for 2024, 2025, and 2026.

The performance of an award or agreement by either party shall be subject to force majeure, including but not limited to acts of God, fire, flood, natural disaster, war or threat of war, acts or threats of terrorism, civil disorder, unauthorized strikes, governmental regulation or advisory, recognized health threats as determined by the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control, or local government authority or health agencies, curtailment of facilities, or another similar occurrence beyond the control of the parties, where any of those factors, circumstances, situations, or conditions or similar ones prevent, dissuade, or unreasonably delay the terms of the award or ensuring agreement. The award or contractual agreement may be canceled by either party, without liability, damages, fees, or penalty, for any one or more of the above reasons, by written notice to the other party.

## 7. Letters of Intent, Application Materials, and Format of Response

### Timeline and Process

1. A [webinar](#) about this RFP will be held on **April 11 at 1:00 PM**.
2. Questions about this RFP should be submitted using [this link](#) and are due by **April 15, 2025, at 4:00 PM**. An FAQ will be posted by April 18.
3. The ISD must submit an intent to apply by completing this [online form](#) by **April 21, 2025, at 12:00 PM**. Only ISDs who submit an intent to apply can respond to the RFP.
4. Full RFP responses must be received at CCRESA by **4:00 PM on Monday, April 28, 2025**, and include the following:
  - a. **Online Application:** Submit this information directly through the [application in SurveyMonkey](#). If you want to preview the application before beginning, click [here](#) to view a PDF version.
  - b. **Letters of Support:** Submit your letters of support via Google Drive. Applicants will be sent a link to this drive after submitting their intent to apply.
  - c. **Completed Rubrics:** ISDs will conduct outreach to identify potential partners and select sites based on this [rubric](#). You will also submit these completed rubrics (one for **each site** that you submit for consideration) via the same Google Drive link.

## 8. Evaluation and Awards

This phase of the Strong Beginnings Pilot Project aims to assess the scalability of a three-year-old preschool program statewide. Because implementation must be studied across different settings, the final site selection will be based on a combination of factors, such as communities within established child care deserts, operated by Head Start, or community-based organizations.

Visits to sites under consideration for an award may be made in **May 2025**.

Intent to award will be made in **June 2025**.