CURRICULUM

Introduction

Curriculum encompasses the full range of the child's experience at school. The term curriculum model refers to an educational system that combines theory with practice. A curriculum model has a theory and knowledge base that reflects a philosophical orientation and is supported by child development research and educational evaluation. Curriculum models are essential in determining program content, training, and supervising staff to implement high-quality programs. Curriculum models include the skills, knowledge and concepts to be supported, and the plans for learning experiences through which progress occurs. The practical application of a curriculum model includes guidelines on how to:

- Set up the physical environment;
- Make decisions about learning objectives as well as specific methods to accomplish objectives that support specific child interests and/or emergent curriculum;
- Structure activities that are responsive to a variety of ability levels and populations, such as dual language learners and children with Individualized Education Plans;
- Interact with children and their families; and
- Support staff members in their initial training and ongoing implementation of the program.

Strong Beginnings program providers will implement a comprehensive, child-focused, constructivist curriculum model for all enrolled children, as is widely espoused for preschool and supported by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. In a constructivist curriculum model, there is an appropriate balance of child-initiated activities and adult-guided active learning. Throughout each classroom session, teaching teams (Lead and Associate Teachers) intentionally interact with children to build on their understandings and enhance learning. Play and peer-to-peer interaction are vital to provide children with opportunities to engage in abstract thinking, develop self-regulation skills, problem-solving and oral language skills. Strong Beginnings program providers will reflect the value of play in a written philosophy statement, the comprehensive curriculum, and teacher-parent communication. Teaching teams must have training in the curriculum from a certified trainer of the curriculum to implement an appropriate curriculum.

Regardless of which approvable curriculum is chosen, the Strong Beginnings indoor physical space is organized into clearly defined interest areas that can be recognized by the children and have enough space for several children to play at once. Strong Beginnings classrooms do not have a large portion of the room reserved for whole group instruction and/or a cluster of tables for group activities such as journaling, penmanship, worksheets. Classroom interest areas and materials are labeled and arranged to support the 'find-use-return' cycle. Teachers

and children use labels of many types (tracings, photographs, actual objects, words). Materials in all areas are plentiful and carefully selected, predominately open-ended and include many real/sensory items versus toy/plastic models. Additionally, materials which reflect the lives of enrolled families and the community are integrated into classroom activities. A variety of individual and project work of the children in the classroom is displayed at the child's level; only essential adult-made/commercial displays are present.

Together, learner-centered and learner-driven play = playful learning. Adult-initiated Strong Beginnings classroom activities include large, small group and transition times. During these portions of the daily routine, adults select concepts, activities and materials based on children's strengths and interests. Adults plan possible scaffolding strategies for children at emergent, middle and later developmental stages. Adults comment on what children are doing/saying, imitate and add to children's actions, use materials with children and support children as leaders. Children are engaged as active, participatory learners during adult-initiated activities. Children contribute their own ideas and are involved at their own developmental levels. Children have the highest level of control during uninterrupted child-initiated play, where children make many choices about where and how to use materials and carry out their activities. In this portion of the day, adults are partners in children's play; they observe and listen before entering play, assume roles as suggested by children, follow children's cues about content and direction, imitate children, encourage children to talk about what they are doing, use children's words and comment specifically on children's activities.

CCRESA does not identify one 'best' curriculum model, but rather supports preschool curriculum models that meet specific criteria. Approved curriculum models must align with the [Michigan Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Birth to Kindergarten](#), ensuring horizontal alignment among early learning expectations and preschool program standards, practice and assessment, as well as ensuring vertical alignment within Michigan's early childhood and education system and with kindergarten through twelfth grade standards.

It is important to keep in mind that the purpose of Strong Beginnings is not to assist children in acquiring half of the GSRP curriculum. There should not, for example, be an expectation that children will learn half the alphabet in Strong Beginnings and the other half in GSRP. The Strong Beginnings curriculum will introduce a wide variety of developmentally appropriate concepts and knowledge but will focus on oral language development, social emotional development and the development of self-help and executive functions.

Because of the age and developmental level of children entering Strong Beginnings, it is suggested that programs examine and utilize appropriate practices and materials that have been developed for toddlers as well as for preschoolers within the approved curriculum.

Selecting Curriculum

It is important when selecting a curriculum model from those approvable for use in Strong Beginnings, not only to refer to the program's student population and philosophy, but to ensure alignment with the early learning expectations and program standards of the ECSQ Birth to Kindergarten. The following questions can serve as a tool for guiding curriculum selection:

- Is the curriculum model research-based and research-validated? Are elements of the curriculum clearly based on research about the development of young children? Has research demonstrated the effectiveness of the curriculum model in improving comprehensive outcomes or results for children?
- What domains are included? Are there learning experiences and activities in all areas of development outlined in the ECSQ Birth to Kindergarten? Does the methodology promote important development in "approaches to learning" such as initiative, persistence, and imagination?
- Does the curriculum include guidelines on setting up the indoor and outdoor learning environments? Are materials available throughout the learning environment to support systematic child observation to assess what children know and can do?
- Is the curriculum child-focused, supporting emergent and meaningful curriculum for currently enrolled children? Does the curriculum promote active, participatory learning through all portions of the daily schedule?
- Are the materials for children's use appropriate? Does the curriculum model include or promote many 'real' items in place of 'toy replicas?' Are the materials appropriate for the age and level of development of three-year-old children, including children with special needs and those who may be more advanced in certain areas? Are the materials free of cultural bias? Do the materials reflect the interests and home cultures of enrolled children and the local community? Do the materials represent a balance of the need for teacher planning and child initiation of learning activities?
- Is there a balance of teacher-planned and child-initiated activities? Does the daily routine support a balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities? Does the curriculum model encourage teachers to plan topics of investigation based on the interests of the children?
- Is there evidence that authentic assessment (see Child Assessment section) for instructional purposes is integral to implementation of the curriculum model? Is there evidence that family engagement is valued and that interaction with families is focused on partnership in their child's development?
- Are the resources for teaching staff sufficient and appropriate? Are they available for toddlers as well as preschoolers? Is there adequate explanatory material on how to make decisions about learning objectives as well as specific methods to accomplish objectives? Is there adequate explanatory

material to structure activities that are responsive to a variety of ability levels and populations, such as dual language learners and children with Individualized Education Plans?

- Do the authors or publishers of the curriculum model offer professional learning opportunities to support staff members in their initial training and ongoing, full implementation of the model? Is the training of trainers certified in the curriculum intensive and rigorous? Are there sufficient trainers available to offer professional learning opportunities with sufficient frequency and at reasonable cost?
- Horizontal Alignment: Has the publisher provided horizontal alignment with the early learning expectations and program standards of Michigan's ECSQ Birth to Kindergarten? Are the contents of ECSQ Birth to Kindergarten, curriculum model, and child assessments aligned?

Alignment

Early care and education alignment focus on the content and format of children's experiences across settings, through age eight. Educators are concerned with both horizontal and vertical alignment.

Horizontal alignment refers to the agreement among standards, curriculum and assessment within a given age or grade level. This alignment defines expectations for children, families, and teachers and ensures that child assessment reflects state-level early learning expectations. Horizontal alignment of program standards and program assessment allows program administrators to measure the quality of the program based on the standards and research-validated curriculum. For Strong Beginnings, the research-validated curriculum model, developmental screening, and authentic/comprehensive child assessment align with the ECSQ Birth to Kindergarten.

Vertical alignment refers to the agreement of the standards, curriculum, and assessments between age or grade levels. This ensures consistent expectations and quality from year-to-year for children, families, teachers, and administrators. MDE vertically aligned the *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Birth to Kindergarten*, and the kindergarten curriculum standards. Additionally, some research-validated early childhood curriculum and child assessments have both infant-toddler and prekindergarten versions.

Commonly Used Curriculum Models Validated by Research

Strong Beginnings contractors are required to use a research-validated curriculum model that aligns with the ECSQ Birth to Kindergarten. The following curricula are currently allowed in Strong Beginnings classrooms. In order to provide continuity for children and families, Strong Beginnings contractors should ensure that those classrooms for three- and four-year-old children typically providing a two-year sequence for the same students use the same curriculum. Since Connect4Learning was designed only for four-year-old children it is not approved for Strong Beginnings classrooms. Strong Beginnings classrooms may use any of the approved

Strong Beginnings curricula if the GSRP classrooms children are likely to transition into have adopted Connect4Learning. Descriptions below are adapted from linked websites.

Reggio Emilia:

Distinctive traits of the Reggio Emilia approach include collegial and relational-based provocative experiences, the importance of environments and spaces, intense co-participation of families, affirmation of competencies in children and adults, educational documentation, listening and intentional, flexible planning for children. Guiding principles include:

- A strong and optimistic image of the child who is born with many resources and extraordinary potentials.
- Participation values and fosters dialogue and the sense of belonging to a community.
- The flow of quality information via documentation introduces parents to a quality of knowing that tangibly changes expectations.
- Research represents one of the essential dimensions of life of children and adults, a knowledge-building tension that must be recognized and valued.

Project Approach:

The Project Approach refers to a set of teaching strategies that enable teachers to guide students through in-depth studies of real-world topics. Projects have a complex but flexible framework within which teaching and learning are seen as interactive processes. When teachers implement the Approach successfully, students feel highly motivated and actively involved in their own learning, leading them to produce high-quality work and to grow as individuals and collaborators. A study may be carried out with an entire class or with small groups of students. Projects typically do not constitute the whole educational program; teachers use them alongside systematic instruction and as a means of achieving curricular goals.

Montessori:

The Montessori curriculum focuses on five areas: practical life, sensory awareness education, language arts, mathematics and geometry, and cultural subjects. Components necessary for a program to be considered authentically Montessori include multi age groupings that foster peer learning, uninterrupted blocks of work time, and guided choice of work activity. In addition, a full complement of specially designed Montessori learning materials are meticulously arranged in an aesthetically pleasing environment. The classroom is prepared by the teacher to encourage independence, freedom within limits, and a sense of order. Since the Strong Beginnings pilot does not allow multi-age groupings, Montessori is a more difficult curriculum to authentically implement.

HighScope:

The HighScope Preschool Curriculum is based on the principles of active learning and support of a child's positive interactions with adults and peers. The curriculum

is a comprehensive model that addresses all areas of development through eight content areas and 58 key developmental indicators (KDIs). Each KDI is connected to and reinforced by scaffolding strategies to support and gently extend children's learning. While learning in content areas prepares children for later schooling, HighScope features methods that promote independence, curiosity, decision making, cooperation, persistence, creativity, and problem solving in young children. The website offers alignment between the curriculum and Michigan's ECSQ Birth to Kindergarten.

Creative Curriculum:

Creative Curriculum helps teachers create a high-quality learning environment and build a thorough understanding of best practices. Daily Resources help teachers plan and manage every moment of their day. Through studies, which are hands-on, project-based investigations, The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool helps teachers build children's confidence, creativity and critical thinking skills, and promote positive outcomes.

Supplementing a Comprehensive Curriculum

No supplemental curricula are allowed in Strong Beginnings classrooms. If data reveal that many children are presenting differently than expected in any developmental domain, the best course of action is always to ensure staff have focused professional development in the domain in question. The professional development must have strong connections to the comprehensive curriculum and the ongoing child assessment tool. The ECS supports staff as skills are strengthened, practiced, and subsequent data are collected on child development.