

TRANSITION

Transitions into preschool and from Strong Beginnings to GSRP are important milestones for children and their families. Like other major changes, these transitions can cause children and families to experience many strong emotions such as excitement, anxiety, fear, and/or hope. To lessen the stress for all of those concerned, including teachers, it is important to prepare children and families for the upcoming changes. Strong transition efforts targeting parent involvement can lead to positive teacher morale, parent support and satisfaction, a great reputation for the program in the community, and improved child outcomes.

Strong Beginnings programs create and implement plans that transition families both into and out of the program. The Strong Beginnings transition plan should be an extension of a unique, community-wide effort. An effective transition planning committee has representatives from all early childhood stakeholder groups including parents, the Intermediate School District (ISD) early childhood contact, Strong Beginnings and GSRP classrooms, Head Start, Center and Home-Based early care and education providers, *Early On*[®], special education, kindergarten teachers, elementary/public school academy administrators, the local Great Start Collaborative, and a representative from the local Great Start Regional Resource Center. The languages and cultures of the community should also be reflected in the team membership. Community transition plans should be evidence-based with a focus on responsive relationships, coordination, and continuity between environments. The transition period is viewed as a reciprocal process for all partners, rather than an event that happens to a child; acknowledging “ready” children, “ready” schools, and “ready” communities (Pianta, Rimm-Kauffman and Cox, 1999; Dockett and Perry, 2001).

Whether transitioning families into or out of Strong Beginnings, connections are purposefully created as resources for children: family-school connections, child-school connections, peer connections, and community connections. The appropriate committee within the ISD Strong Beginnings/GSRP Advisory Structure is responsible for overseeing and coordinating the development of a plan for transitions into and out of Strong Beginnings. This may be the School Readiness Advisory Committee, or another committee determined by the ISD. Ideally, an ISD Strong Beginnings team member is identified to serve as the facilitator for transition plan work. The individual assures that transitions are a regular agenda item, including dialogue and collaboration to generate ideas for carrying out transition activities, creating and monitoring a timeline for transition activities, and evaluating and revising the transition plan as needed. The plan features activities that support children and their families as they move into Strong Beginnings and from Strong Beginnings to GSRP. The plan should differentiate between “orientation to school” and “transition to school,” and respect the different perspectives and expectations of families and children.

Transition into Strong Beginnings

Children enter Strong Beginnings having experienced varying services and environments: home, *Early On*, or possibly another early education childcare setting. The SB-ECC should ensure programs that frequently transition children into Strong Beginnings, such as *Early On* and Home Visiting, have current information on eligibility and enrollment procedures as well as an understanding of the Strong Beginnings program so they can assist families who might benefit from entering the program with enrollment and transition. Key to transition is establishing frequent, open, and honest communication between program staff and family members. Successful strategies for establishing positive communication begin with staff eliciting, valuing, and using information from parents about the enrolled child.

Families with children entering Strong Beginnings are more likely to have concerns over leaving their children in a classroom setting than those who have children entering GSRP. Not only are the children younger and less independent, but they are less likely to have attended a school-based program before beginning Strong Beginnings. Parents will need continuing reassurance and opportunities to gain confidence that their child is adjusting successfully to their new program.

Correspondingly, children in Strong Beginnings may have a longer or more difficult period of adjustment than older children. Staff should plan ahead, in order to have structures in place that allow them to meet the needs of children in the program. Starting the day with free choice time, for example, allows the staff to be more available to children and families who need some extra attention and reassurance during drop off. Family Liaisons/School Social Workers, if available, in Strong Beginnings programs may provide support to individual children and families who need additional assistance with the transition to a classroom-based program.

Parents, like children, come to Strong Beginnings with different circumstances and experiences. Programs should develop strategies to communicate with all parents. Some parents may work two jobs or a night shift, cannot read or speak English, share custody of a child, and/or have had poor school experiences themselves. Meaningful information and opportunities should be provided to parents based on their expressed interests and needs. Refer to the Parent Involvement section for more information.

Before school begins, an initial home visit and an orientation opportunity for the child and parent help staff and families begin to get to know each other and build trust. This continues throughout the year as formal and informal occasions are utilized to strengthen responsive relationships between all involved. This includes drop off/pick up times, email, notes or phone calls, family events, home visits, and parent/teacher conferences.

Written information should be positive and useful. The parent handbook must include a program overview, school calendar, contact information; and policies regarding attendance, weather, illness, medication, conflict-resolution,

emergencies, confidentiality, and grievances. It must also be written in a manner that is understood by parents.

A high-quality Strong Beginnings program employs many strategies to engage parents as decision-makers in all facets of the program. Staff members begin this during the very first contact by asking parents what information they would like to know about the program. A one-page explanation of the role of the local Strong Beginnings/GSRP family participation group, how often they meet, the support available to parents who serve, and the work typically done, might help parents to feel comfortable who would otherwise think special skills are required for participation. For confident and active participation, family participation group work should begin with an orientation on topics such as membership, organizational structure and responsibility.

Transition from Strong Beginnings to GSRP

Many children who attend Strong Beginnings will remain at the same site for GSRP. A thoughtful transition between these levels should be planned in the spring and continued through the beginning weeks of school in the fall. In the spring, options such as children visiting GSRP classrooms or GSRP teaching staff visiting the Strong Beginnings classroom may be helpful. If possible, plan a few summer events at neighborhood parks, libraries or other gathering places so children and families can stay connected to their peers as well as previous and new teaching staff. Even sending texts to families, every few weeks, possibly with pictures taken during the school year, can provide an opportunity for them to revisit positive school experiences and talk about what might happen next year. In the fall, allowing the parents and children to have an opportunity to briefly reconnect with their past teachers might aid a smooth transition. Each site that houses both Strong Beginnings and multiple GSRP classrooms should carefully consider whether children from Strong Beginnings should remain together in a GSRP classroom or be split up between the available classrooms.

Some children will attend Strong Beginnings and GSRP in different locations. Families are allowed to select the program that they feel will best meet their child's needs, whether it is because their preferred site for GSRP didn't offer Strong Beginnings or other reasons. Regardless if parents choose the same or different sites for the two program years, any child who attended Strong Beginnings is admitted automatically to GSRP. Children who attended Strong Beginnings at one location may only be turned away from GSRP at a different location if all the GSRP space at the new location is filled by children who were in that site's Strong Beginnings classroom(s).

While all GSRP programs follow the same rules and guidance from MDE and the ISD, different sites might use different curricula and child assessments or have different policies and procedures regarding matters such as attendance. It is important that sites enrolling children who attended Strong Beginnings in another

location discuss specifics of the new program with the family rather than assuming they are familiar with the operation of GSRP.

It will also be important to familiarize all parents with the differences between Strong Beginnings and GSRP so they are prepared for different child-staff ratios, class size, etc. as well as for the discontinuation of the Strong Beginnings family/child supports. If Family Liaisons or School Social Workers are part of these supports, they should plan for the termination of their services during the spring of Strong Beginnings and ensure that families are already connected or have all necessary information to connect with agencies and organizations that can provide needed ongoing support. Families should also be made aware and reminded during the GSRP year, that they can ask appropriate GSRP staff for referrals necessary to meet their continuing or new needs.