

EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST

The Early Childhood Specialist (ECS)* is the educational leader and catalyst for continuous quality improvement for each Strong Beginnings classroom. Through observation and feedback, the ECS supports teaching teams and site administrators to provide high-quality preschool with fidelity to the Strong Beginnings model. The ECS confidently advocates for children, families and teachers to ensure appropriate decisions are made about the program. The ECS position is prominently featured in the ISD Program Evaluation policy.

Intermediate School Districts (ISDs) may employ/contract with qualified ECS to carry out the requirements specific to Strong Beginnings or may allow some or all program providers to contract with a qualified ECS to carry out the requirements specific to the program. One person may not be employed to fill both a Lead Teacher position and an ECS position. The local program administrator may be the ECS, if qualified.

To be hired or contracted as an ECS, a candidate must have:

- A graduate degree in early childhood education or child development.
- Five or more years of relevant job experience in early childhood education (such as working with young children in a group setting, program planning and implementation, program evaluation, staff supervision/development and program management).
- Experience and/or education relating to infants and toddlers and three-year-old children is preferred.

An ECS may support only Strong Beginnings or a combination of Strong Beginnings and GSRP classrooms. Thoughtful consideration should be given to the match between ECS experience and age of children in the classroom when assignments are determined.

Before or immediately after being engaged, the ECS must acquire:

- Knowledge of the Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Pre-Kindergarten (ECSQ-PK). Knowledge of the Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Infant and Toddler Programs (ECSQ-IT)
- Knowledge of Strong Beginnings requirements as outlined in the Strong Beginnings Pilot Implementation Manual.
- Knowledge of State of Michigan Licensing Rules for Child Care Centers.
- Formal training in the selected approved developmental screener, comprehensive curriculum, authentic child assessment, and program evaluation tool of the classrooms supported. Formal training is defined as comprehensive training in full implementation of a tool, completed by a certified trainer of the tool, such as those who have attended training of trainers.

- Knowledge of the *Essential Instructional Practices in Emergent Literacy: Birth to Age 3* and the *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy, Prekindergarten*,
- Knowledge of alignment documents between curricula and the ECSQ-PK.
- Status as a Reliable Assessor/Certified Observer in the applicable program evaluation tool(s)

Classroom Coach

ECS successfully completing Classroom Coach training are required to complete reliability testing for two consecutive years and then the reliability test is required every two years (testing required year 1, 2, 4, 6, etc.). Should an ECS have a gap in Reliable Assessor status for any reason, the ECS is required to take the reliability test for two consecutive years before going back to a two-year cycle of testing.

Each ECS must be able to perform the following functions for each assigned classroom:

- Develop a collaborative relationship with the teaching team to build trust and set the stage for strength-based coaching.
- Before the children’s program begins, work with teaching teams to ensure that planned daily routines and classroom arrangements meet Strong Beginnings requirements and reflect the comprehensive curriculum model.
- Meet with the Strong Beginnings teaching team and child/family support personnel before the children’s program begins to ensure that each is aware of the role/responsibilities of the other, to *facilitate completion of necessary forms* and to develop a plan for regular communication between the teaching team, child/family support personnel and ECS as appropriate.
- Meet at least two additional times yearly with the Strong Beginnings teaching team and child/family support personnel facilitate the sharing of information that will improve child and family outcomes and solving of problems around each persons’ roles and responsibilities.
- Implement an induction plan for new teaching staff to provide information about Strong Beginnings and the role of the ECS in supporting continuous improvement. It is especially important for new teaching staff to receive multiple visits and feedback early in the school year.
- Visit each classroom when children are present a minimum of three times each school year, ensuring all parts of the day are observed over time, outside of the classroom evaluation observation. ‘Walkthroughs’ that last only a few minutes are not sufficient to meet this requirement.
- Provide monthly coaching to teaching teams, based on the professional growth plan, which may include offering support by observing to provide feedback on techniques or interactions, modeling strategies with children, attending home visits/conferences, offering classroom or professional learning resources, meeting with teaching teams to discuss feedback,

strengths and needs, plans, etc. Meetings may be in person or through electronic means.

- Support each teaching team to meet expectations around the learning environment, daily routine, adult-child interactions and partnership with parents as outlined in the Classroom Requirements, Curriculum and Parent Involvement sections of the Strong Beginnings Pilot Implementation Manual.
- Monitor formal training in the curriculum and ongoing child assessment tool and support their use with validity to the exclusion of supplemental curricula and assessments.
- Monitor quantity and quality of narrative anecdotal evidence entered into the child assessment tool by each teaching team. Support the continuous, purposeful analysis of child progress to inform parent partnerships and teaching through lesson planning for meaningful, intentional whole group instruction, as well as respond to small group and individual child needs.
- Review child outcome data.
- Participate in consistent documentation of work across the ISD, documenting each coaching session. For example, coaching models offer a system to help ECS to document approaches with unique teaching teams, coaching logs, observation summaries, coaching plans/goal setting, coaching reflections and follow-up with teaching teams.
- Be available for teaching teams between visits as needed.
- Follow up with the appropriate administrators, including the SB-ECC, if aware that licensing requirements are not met.
- Attend ISD ECS meetings and professional learning opportunities.
- Ensure that the selected program evaluation tool is administered between May 1 and May 30 with entry into the online system completed by June 15.
- Analyze program evaluation results, ECS observations, teaching staff interests, administrative input, and child outcome data with each teaching team to set goals for the classroom and identify areas for professional learning using a strength-based approach. An effective professional growth plan will:
 - Identify the goal;
 - Identify related program evaluation indicator(s) or child outcome objective(s);
 - Set strategies and activities to impact teacher knowledge, (e.g., watching a training video together, videotaping with teacher reflection, visit another classroom with teacher reflection, support from another member of the ECS team, making visual cues, over-the-shoulder coaching or a focus strategy;)
 - Supply needed materials;
 - Make changes in indoor/outdoor learning environment and daily routine;

- Include specific timelines and a person responsible for each activity; and
- Determine how progress will be measured (e.g., teacher completion of actionable strategy and reflection form, strengthened program evaluation scores and/or child outcome data.)
- Monitor progress toward meeting the goals throughout the year. Feedback follows the same process as above, documenting strengths and any areas still needing improvement; the continuous improvement plan should be updated and modified as appropriate.
- Lead/participate in local and Family Participation and Data Analysis groups.

ISD Strong Beginnings requirements that **may** be assigned to an ECS, depending on the unique configuration of each ISD:

- Acting as a leader in local or program provider-level data analysis team (See the *Program Evaluation* section of the Implementation Manual for more information on the data analysis team).
- Ensuring that program evaluation reports are shared with the SB-ECC, program provider administration and Strong Beginnings/GSRP Family Participation Group(s).
- Helping to design annual, data-driven professional development calendars for teaching teams.
- Facilitating meaningful professional learning and/or ensuring Strong Beginnings staff receive appropriate professional learning.
- Acting as a primary program contact with program providers administration.
- Providing input on classroom needs to ensure program funds are used appropriately, particularly using knowledge of classroom needs when recommending approval/rejection of capital outlay requests.
- Supporting alignment of Strong Beginnings with GSRP and protecting hallmarks of early childhood education such as learner-centered, active, participatory learning and authentic partnership with families in their child's development.
- Supporting teaching teams to understand and implement community, school, and classroom transition plans throughout the year. (See the *Transition* section of the Implementation Manual for more information.)
- Supporting programs to access resources, including Michigan Department of Education (MDE) sponsored professional learning, MiRegistry, Resource Centers and the Great Start to Quality Rating System.
- Assuring documentation of strong and positive parent engagement, such as completion of formal parent contacts where there is a reciprocal exchange of information about the curriculum and their child's development, with aligned strategies to promote and extend children's learning at school and at home, as well as partnership on referrals to meet child and/or family needs.

Some ECSs will be assisting classrooms that also have an Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant, Behavioral Consultant or School Social Worker providing support for children with challenging behaviors through Child/Family Support or other classroom funding. In these instances, it is imperative that all individuals providing direction and support are focused on goals based on reasonable expectations of three-year-old children. Using the Pyramid Model as a basis for coaching, the ECS must assess as early in the year as possible whether the teaching team is using core, developmentally appropriate techniques such as short and engaging whole group times and appropriate numbers of and planned for transitions. Any deviations from core, appropriate behaviors must be the focus of immediate intervention. The resulting strong core classroom will minimize the number of children exhibiting challenging behaviors. It is only when this core is in place that an Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant, Behavioral Consultant or School Social Worker can truly determine which children are struggling and develop collaborative plans to assist them in successfully handling the expectations of the classroom. No behavioral specialist should ever be attempting to have children meet inappropriate classroom expectations. The ECS and specialist need to work together to ensure that classrooms are ready for a wide range of very young children and that expectations they are trying to meet are appropriate.

The ECS may also be working in classrooms with a third teaching team member as a result of Child/Family Support or general classroom funding. Again, it is critical that the additional team member not be used to reinforce children's participation in inappropriate activities but to make the provision of a range of developmentally appropriate programming available to all the children in the classroom. Thoughtful consideration should be given to the strategy of utilizing the most educated, experienced staff with the most difficult children as you work with the teaching team to plan their roles and responsibilities

Additionally, the ISD must ensure that each ECS has support to engage in appropriate professional learning opportunities to remain up-to-date with: early childhood education theories and practices; supported developmental screening, ongoing assessment tools, comprehensive curricula; and, coaching and mentoring processes. The ECS attends meaningful, high quality professional development events, such as national early childhood conferences or training, MDE sponsored professional learning, the Michigan AEYC Professional Learning Institute and/or the HighScope International Conference and Research Symposium. In addition, the ISD must provide opportunities for ECS to reflect on the ECS role and responsibilities with peers more than once per year utilizing listservs, webinars, local or regional meetings, etc. Planning for professional development should reflect the differing needs of those ECS supporting Strong Beginnings and GSRP and should include a strong focus on the differences in development and planning for three- and four-year-old children.

Program-Wide Continuous Improvement

Strong Beginnings requires that the ECS along with the SB-ECC and appropriate advisory committee(s) considers each classroom and the program as a whole to provide answers to a few key questions:

- What is working and what needs to be improved?
- What support do staff need to be fully prepared to carry out the program with fidelity?
- What guidelines have staff received about collecting, analyzing and using high quality data?
- What experiences need to be added or strengthened in the classroom for the children?
- How is the program demonstrating children’s growth?
- How are parents engaged as active decision makers for the program and involved in an exchange of information around goal setting and progress for their children?

The ECS sets the stage for answering these questions by supporting each teaching team in high fidelity use of an approved comprehensive curriculum and ongoing child assessment tool, and through the administration of an approved program evaluation tool. The ECS also considers how program expectations are met as outlined throughout the Implementation Manual.

The ECS facilitates a relevant and useful professional learning plan each year, taking into account patterns in child data, individual needs of the staff, as well as the overall support needed to address aggregated data. Professional learning is connected to the ECSQ-PK, ECSQ-IT and the curriculum. If teaching staff has no prior experience with three-year-old children, a focus of professional development must be on development and appropriate planning for three-year-old children as opposed to those who are four. The professional development calendar should address program orientation, how new staff members are mentored, developmental screener/curriculum/child assessment training, in-service training, monthly training topics, and contract professional learning days. Though the professional learning plan may be created by the ECS, it should be shared annually with the local family participation group (s) for input to support their engagement with the process.

Early in the school year, the designated program evaluation tool for each classroom is administered for new teachers and those continuing teaching teams working with children of a different age to aid in understanding of the tool and process and to identify the teaching team’s strengths and areas for improvement. When the structure of a teaching team changes during the program year, the ECS in partnership with the SB-ECC and program administrator will complete a new a baseline program evaluation.

Information relating to both the status of program quality and level of success in meeting the current year’s goals and the goals set for the following year is shared

with local family participation groups, parents, staff, administration, and the school board. Finally, the SB-ECC leads activities to aggregate all program providers data collected by the ECS, and together they evaluate and broadly share program success.

*Use of the term ECS throughout this document refers to a singular ECS or to the multiple members of an ECS team.