



SC EDUCATION OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Reporting facts. Measuring change. Promoting progress.

Waiting for 4K:

**An Exploration of Preschool
Waitlist Policies Across Early
Childhood Sectors**

Introduction

As part of the Preschool Development Grant (PDG), staff for the Education Oversight Committee (EOC) undertook a grant funded activity to study the waitlist processes across all early childhood sectors for 4-year-old kindergarten, also known as 4K. In identifying different processes, and how early childhood sectors work together to enroll all eligible children in a 4K opportunity, systemic gaps and infrastructure needs were identified. This information is intended to empower early childhood leaders and policy makers to act in ways so that all eligible children begin 4K at the beginning of the school year, thereby increasing access to 4K programming. In addition to satisfying part of the PDG activities, this report also completes a recommendation of the annual report of State-Funded Full-Day 4K to review waitlists to gain an understanding of how many children are on them and why.

Why Study Waitlists?

Most recently available data show that over 400 children in South Carolina spent time on a waitlist to access free, state-funded 4K. At the same time, there were over 2,300 available seats across the state. The process of collecting point-in-time data of eligible children waiting to access 4K is not efficient in matching children with available seats. It has previously been reported that pupils in poverty who access CERDEP-funded early childhood education are more likely to demonstrate readiness than their similarly-eligible counterparts. As a result, understanding how waitlists function across early childhood sectors to provide free 4K to eligible families is imperative in preparing our youngest learners for kindergarten. Understanding waitlists and the most efficient enrollment processes to match children with a 4K seat they are eligible for protects the investment South Carolina has made in early childhood education.

Early Childhood Context and Sectors

There are multiple sectors of 4-year-old programming studied for this report: Head Start, Child Early Reading and Development Education Program (CERDEP) classes to include CERDEP 4K in public schools and First Steps 4K in private settings; private preschool 4K to include those licensed or registered through DSS; and those licensed through private school accrediting organizations; and school district-run 4K programs including Title 1 and Education Improvement Act (EIA) funded 4K. Appendix A illustrates the funding streams in early childhood 4-year-old options, and oversight for state or federally-funded programming.

Terms

CERDEP is the inclusive term for full-day programs for four-year-olds administered by the SC Department of Education (SCDE) and the Office of First Steps (SCFS) funded by the state of South Carolina. It includes public schools, non-profit independent schools and child care centers who adhere to program and quality requirements for CERDEP funding and serve eligible four-year-olds. Children who qualify for CERDEP are those who meet a poverty threshold of 185%.¹

CERDEP 4K is the term for CERDEP in public schools that are state-funded and run by the local school district with the school district and SCDE as the reporting and oversight agency. To be eligible students must be at 185% of the federal poverty rate or are Medicaid eligible. CERDEP classrooms in districts must: provide a comprehensive approach to reading that follows the State Reading Proficiency Plan and the district's comprehensive annual reading proficiency plan and provide the developmental and learning support that children must have to be ready for school.

First Steps 4K is the term for the state-funded CERDEP programs run in non-public school settings with SCFS as the oversight and reporting agency. To be eligible students must be at 185% of the federal poverty rate or Medicaid eligible. The overarching goal of First Steps 4K is to provide children and their families with the developmental and learning support necessary for school success. As a result, First Steps 4K also prioritizes activities designed to support lifting families from poverty. First Steps 4K also works to ensure children enter Kindergarten ready to access the learning standards with necessary skills and background knowledge to be successful.

¹ Per Section 59-156-130 (C) (2) if by October first of the school year at least 75% of the total number of children eligible for CERDEP in a district or county are projected to be enrolled in that program, Head Start, or ABC Child Care program as determined by SCDE and SCFS, CERDEP providers may then enroll pay-lunch children who score at or below the 25th national percentile on two of the three DIAL-3 subscales and may receive reimbursement for these children if funds are available.

Head Start 4-year-old programming is awarded from the federal government directly to local grantees to serve children at 100% of the federal poverty rate. The goal of this program is to pull families from poverty using multi-generational approaches including child care and preschool classes for 4-year-old children to prepare them for kindergarten. Programming includes efforts to meet the needs of the Head Start community and prepare children for kindergarten success.

Private Preschool is the term for preschool classrooms that do not participate in First Steps 4K programming. They may be licensed or registered through the Department of Social Services (DSS) or through another agency for private or religious school accreditation. The goals of these programs vary widely, and most are funded through parent tuition or DSS child care scholarship.

Education Improvement Act (EIA) EIA funds can be used for preschool programming in districts that elect not to participate in CERDEP. These classes can be half-day and students who are 4 on or before September 1 of that year, show a delay in developmental readiness and/or meet other risk factors as determined by the school district. Beaufort, Greenville, Horry, York 2 and SC Public Charter District offer EIA funded preschool, while all others offer CERDEP 4K programming.

Title 1 funded PreK: Title 1 funds can be used for preschool programming in a school district or school that qualifies for Title 1 funding in whole or in part, based on the needs of eligible students. A Title 1 preschool program should comply with the Head Start performance standards, and the SCDE is responsible for oversight of the program, although the preschool classroom can be operated by school, district, or to supplement other preschool programs. ([U.S. Department of Education non regulatory guidance, Serving Preschool Children Through Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as Amended. February 2024](#)).

Important Note

In state-funded programs, 4-year-old programming is referred to as 4K. In the Head Start federally funded program, a classroom for 4-year-olds with requirements relating to curriculum, quality, and teacher qualifications based on the federal requirements of quality is called a 4-year-old class. In private early childhood education programs that do not receive funding through the Read to Succeed Act, programming for 4-year-olds is called a 4-year-old class or 4K. Only First Steps 4K and CERDEP 4K have state requirements for quality, length of school day, etc. This means that although 4K might be used to refer to a variety of options for a child, the classroom experiences and requirements vary greatly. This nuance in language means different things to early childhood educators, but not necessarily to families or other stakeholders like legislators or K-12 leaders. For the purposes of this report, 4K will be used to describe 4-year-old-programming for all except Head Start that will be referred to as a 4-year-old class.

Study Design

This study seeks to answer three primary questions about access to 4K:

1. How are waitlists functioning?
2. How many children are on waitlists instead of accessing 4K?
3. Are there points of opportunity to improve enrollment efficiency from a waitlist in open 4K spots? If so, what are they and where should they be piloted?

Review of Policy: To answer these questions, a review of policy regarding enrollment focused on waitlists was completed for each early childhood sector in South Carolina. These policies are analyzed in the next section and policies can be found in Appendix B. Additionally, a review of the supports available to families to access 4K was completed; this included a review of websites and portals that families can access for free. A description of these supports for families can be found later in this report.

Survey Administration: A survey to early childhood sectors was developed with state leaders in each sector and administered to CERDEP 4K, Head Start, EIA, and Title I local leadership. Because First Steps 4K utilizes a centralized enrollment structure that leaves no child on a waitlist, First Steps 4K providers did not complete a survey. Survey items for each sector can be found in Appendix C.

Phone Interviews: To determine if policy and practice were aligned and to understand the priorities of individual providers, questions were developed by researchers and asked of providers via phone calls. Specifically, the phone survey was designed to learn what program leadership does to facilitate enrolling children in a 4K program when a child is on a waitlist and what information families receive about open 4K spots in other early childhood sectors.

Review of Waitlist Numbers Over Time and Phone Interviews: Where waitlist numbers have decreased consistently, researchers set calls to understand how these improvements were being achieved. While practices may not be applicable across all districts, they offer insight into how waitlists may function more efficiently.



All policy related to waitlists for 4-year-old preschool programming in South Carolina was identified and summarized in this paper with references provided for each early childhood sector. Information was also collected about qualities of programs that have the highest numbers of students on a waitlist, which is helpful context that could be used to build additional infrastructure in early childhood systems. From this information about policy and practices, researchers could identify potential practices across early childhood sectors that would more efficiently enroll children in high quality 4K programming of their parents' choice. When possible, additional phone interviews were completed to supplement information and clarify questions.

Results by Early Childhood Sector:

CERDEP

CERDEP funded 4K waitlist policies are governed by Act 284, and Proviso 1.47 for both CERDEP 4K and First Steps 4K.

Section 59-156-140 Related to Waitlist and Accessing 4K:

(A) Public school providers participating in the South Carolina Child Early Reading Development and Education Program must submit an application to the Department of Education. Private providers participating in the South Carolina Child Early Reading Development and Education Program must submit an application to the Office of First Steps. The application must be submitted on the forms prescribed, contain assurances that the provider meets all program criteria set forth in this section and will comply with all reporting and assessment requirements.

(B) Providers shall:

- (1) comply with all federal and state laws and constitutional provisions prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability, race, creed, color, gender, national origin, religion, ancestry, or need for special education services;
- (2) comply with all state and local health and safety laws and codes
- (3) comply with all state laws that apply regarding criminal background checks for employees and exclude from employment any individual not permitted by state law to work with children;
- (4) be accountable for meeting the educational needs of the child and report at least quarterly to the parent or guardian on his progress;
- (5) comply with all program, reporting, and assessment criteria required of providers;
- (6) maintain individual student records for each child enrolled in the program, including, but not limited to, assessment data, health data, records of teacher observations, and records of parent or guardian and teacher conferences;
- (7) designate whether extended day services will be offered to the parents and guardians of children participating in the program;
- (8) be approved, registered, or licensed by the Department of Social Services; and
- (9) comply with all state and federal laws and requirements specific to program providers.

(C) Providers may limit student enrollment based upon space available, but, if enrollment exceeds available space, providers shall enroll children with first priority given to children with the lowest scores on an approved prekindergarten readiness assessment. Private providers must not be required to expand their programs to accommodate all children desiring enrollment, but are encouraged to keep a waiting list for students they are unable to serve because of space limitations.

Proviso 1.47¹ Related to Waitlists and Accessing 4K:

(J) On or before November 15, the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps shall share data that identifies the total number of children enrolled in CERDEP in both public and private providers. If available appropriations exceed the instructional costs of serving children enrolled in the program and if a waiting list of eligible children can be documented by the Department of Education and by the Office of First Steps, then the Executive Budget Office may authorize the transfer of funds between the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps.

¹This proviso was amended in the 2025-26 Appropriations Act stating in section (D) "By September 1, the Department of Education and the Office of First Steps must collect the documented waiting lists, share the lists, and determine a process to notify parents of eligible students of available slots in all approved providers. The Department of Education is required to offer waivers allowing students with disabilities to be served in multi-categorical classroom settings based on similar cognition and abilities. Funding appropriated for CERDEP may be carried forward and expended for the same purpose.

(K) The Office of First Steps and the Department of Education shall collaborate with the South Carolina Head Start State Collaboration Office to inform parents of all publicly funded full-day 4K programs including Head Start by participating in PalmettoPreK and First5SC.

CERDEP 4K

Per the [2024-25 CERDEP Guidelines](#) published in July 2024 by the SC Department of Education (SCDE), a student waiting list is maintained on a SCDE-managed survey. In the event the number of eligible children exceeds the number of spaces available, children will be placed on a waiting list maintained at the school level. Children on the waiting list will be enrolled based on an eligible student's educational need (as determined by the DIAL-3 or DIAL-4 screening) at the time the vacancy occurs. Families with children on the waiting list will be notified of other CERDEP providers in the area. To facilitate this process, SCDE collects school and district level waitlist data and notifies the Office of First Steps (OFS) of the children in need of a 4K placement in July before the school year begins as a courtesy in efforts to locate a 4K placement for every eligible child before the school year begins, and again on September 1st in compliance with Proviso 1.47 of the 2024-25 Appropriation Act.

The waitlist may also be used for CERDEP eligible children who live in a district that does not participate in CERDEP. CERDEP districts will prioritize students who live in their district then serve those who live in non-CERDEP districts. There are three districts that elect not to participate in CERDEP (Beaufort, Greenville, Horry and the SC Public Charter District) currently. However beginning in the 2020-21 school year, CERDEP funding was expanded to all districts based at the school level based on the percentage of pupils in poverty. Districts participating in CERDEP that are seeking to expand and add additional classes are required to submit a letter of intent with their documented waiting list to illustrate that the additional class is needed to serve all eligible children.

The waitlist also serves as an indicator of need for districts and schools seeking available summer program expansion. Districts that want to increase the length of the program to offer extended day services (maximum 8.5 hours a day) or extend the school year to 220 days (extended year services), or fund summer program services (no more than 10 weeks in length and no more than 8.5 hours a day) are allocated funds on a per pupil basis first to districts that have a waiting list.



CERDEP 4K Survey Results

A survey was administered to all CERDEP districts to learn about the policy implementation at the district level, the number of children on a waitlist, and the number of open CERDEP 4K options. The survey items can be found in Appendix C and the 10-item survey was completed online using the Qualtrics platform and could be completed in under 15 minutes. There were 49 CERDEP districts that completed the survey, out of a possible 67, or a response rate of 73%, which is acceptable.

The results of this survey completed in August 2024 show point-in-time data before the start of the school year. From this survey completed by CERDEP 4K district leadership, there were 32 districts (65%) with at least one school that had a student on a waitlist. Of these 32 districts with students on a waitlist, the number of students on the waitlist at each school in the district ranges from one to 178. At the time of survey

completion (August 2024), districts offering CERDEP 4K reported 459 students on the waitlist. Data shared for the annual evaluation of state-funded full day 4K programming in December had 403 students across 18 districts. Data received by the SCFS by November 15th showed 82 students on a waitlist across 16 districts. Of these 82 students, only 22 children were financially eligible for First Steps 4K (documented family income 185% or less of the federal poverty level or Medicaid eligible). Fewer than that were unserved or remained interested in 4K by the time this data was shared so that First Steps enrollment specialists could support families in finding 4K. For this reason "real time" data communication, rather than point-in-time reports of waitlist numbers, will improve enrollment efficiency.

According to survey results, 17 districts did not have a waitlist, of those 11 (65%) had open seats, while 5 (29%) did not have a waitlist nor open seats, and one did not respond. There were 65 open spots in CERDEP 4K reported statewide in August of 2024.



A district can have both children on a waitlist for CERDEP 4K in one school, and open seats at a different school in the same district. For this reason, data on waitlists and open seats should be reported at the school level and spoken about as “District X has 3 schools with a CERDEP 4K waitlist and 7 schools with open seats.” This will clarify strategies needed to match eligible, unenrolled students with an open seat.

Overall, the proportion of children on waitlists in compared with open seats suggests that some districts would benefit from additional CERDEP 4K classes, First Steps 4K collaboration to serve additional children, or the addition of 4K programming funded by a different source made available in the districts.



CERDEP 4K leadership in the 32 districts with students on a waitlist in August 2024 were asked how they would facilitate finding a free, full day 4K space for the children on the waitlist. The districts reported they use a combination of four different strategies:

1. Notify a family if a space becomes available at that program
2. Notify a family about other free, full-day 4K options nearby
3. Call or email other free, full-day 4K options nearby and connect the family so they may choose other 4K options with open seats
4. Other strategies not described

Of these 32, 10 (31%) did not respond while 21 responded they would notify the family is a space became available at that program, which was the most used strategy. Only 4 of these 21 districts reported notifying families of an available space in that program as the only strategy utilized to find children a 4K spot. Seventeen reported they would notify parents of other free, full-day 4K options nearby and 4 reported they would contact other programs so 4K programs with open spots could contact families on the waitlist. Three districts reported using other strategies such as: refer the family to Hello Family, an online resource, share the names and contact information of the family with the district sponsored charter school for a 4K spot, or offer the family a CERDEP 4K spot without at waitlist at a school in another district.

Chart 1: Number of Districts who Use this strategy to Find Child on Waitlist a 4K Spot:

	Contact Family if Spot Becomes Available in this Program	Notify Family of Other Free, Full-Day 4K Options Nearby	Contact Other Programs so they May Contact Family with Free, Full-Day 4K Option	Other	None of These or No Response
Number of Districts Who Use this Option	21	17	4	3	11

*Districts could select more than 1 option.

CERDEP 4K respondents were also asked if there were any changes to the waitlist process that could be made to make the process better for families attempting to find 4K programming for their children. While most responses did not suggest a benefit to altering the waitlist process, several districts did report needs:

1. Planning for the number of eligible 4-year-olds can be challenging from year to year, leaving districts with open spots at one school but not another. Allowing students to attend schools within district without the waitlist is working well at enrolling children efficiently, however does bring challenges related to transportation. *“It is so hard to know year by year which school will have a waiting list and which will not.”*
2. Transportation across the district so that schools with open seats can serve children on waitlists *“We have available 4K openings in one of our schools but there is no bus transportation from the other 2 schools to get the students from those waitlists to the school that has available openings.”*
3. Information in the form of a comprehensive list of child care centers in each county (First Steps 4K, private, etc.) is desired to facilitate serving children on the waitlist was requested. This information is shared on the SC Child care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) website, and on the SC Child care Early Care and Education website which means that district leadership would benefit from information about these resources, in addition to the Free4KSC, Palmetto PreK and First 5 resources which offer similar information included in the annual CERDEP 4K guidelines. *“I’m not sure of the other places to refer them to so a list of local options would be helpful!”*
4. Increasing capacity to serve more children at the district by hiring additional CERDEP staff to connect families and enroll eligible children in each district would increase enrollment efficiency in some cases. Offering more CERDEP classes was suggested by some districts. Space for additional classes can be a challenge, so increased communication with local First Steps 4K and Head Start programs could match children with open spots and alleviate waitlists for some districts.

Eleven districts reported not having a waitlist and having open spots in their CERDEP 4K program. These districts reported strategies used to fill open seats, with the most districts electing to call the local First Steps 4K program to determine if there are students in a waitlist who might benefit from the CERDEP 4K spot.

Chart 2: Strategies Used to Fill Open CERDEP 4K seats

	Contact Local First Steps 4K Program	Contact Local Head Start Program	Contact Local Child care Center	Other	No Response
Number of Districts Who Use this Option	5	4	3	4	2

*Districts could select more than 1 option.

First Steps 4K:

First Steps 4K is governed by the same law that CERDEP 4K is and is operated by First Steps State Office (SCFS). There are over 300 First Steps 4K providers offering free, full-day 4K programming, and enrollment is processed at the state level. First Steps 4K employs 5 eligibility specialists at the state office who work regionally to determine eligibility of students during the enrollment process for a First Steps 4K program. These specialists can support a family if the First Steps 4K program they request is full in finding an alternative First Steps 4K program. SCFS does not report any children on a waitlist as a result of this process. The enrollment process for First Steps 4K and the collaboration between First Steps 4K providers and SCFS is illustrated in Figure 1 from SCFS.



Because this centralized system does not report a waitlist, surveys were not completed by this sector, and more research must be completed to determine if do not enroll in an open First Steps 4K spot, and their reasons for declining the open spot. Some districts function this way, and if a family does not enroll in an open spot that is not at their neighborhood school, they may not be reported on a waitlist. Collecting this information will focus program improvement efforts and access.

Children on CERDEP Waitlists in November:

Because the CERDEP legislation requires any students on a waitlist to be referred to SCFS, there is historic, albeit unreliable data, on how many students are on waitlists in November at CERDEP 4K across the state. Table 1 shows the number of students referred to First Steps 4K from CERDEP 4K districts over the past 4 years in compliance with budget proviso deadlines.

There are challenges at the district level completing the required communication to report waitlist information to the SCDE by the required deadline. Currently, the Student Information System cannot automatically populate student information on waitlists, and as a result the data must be entered by hand on a Formstack survey from SCDE at various points in time. If there is a change in the waitlist numbers, the Formstack survey must be updated. This process requires time from multiple individuals with full work days and may be completed at additional cost outside of the traditional work day. As previously described, the waitlist data fluctuates over time and is less useful when received by SCFS. Researching options for an automatic, “real time” sharing of waitlist numbers between CERDEP 4K, First Steps 4K and Head Start would ease this administrative burden that negatively impacts families.

Over the past 4 years, with current waitlist policies and practices are in place, there is an average of 219 eligible four-year-olds waiting for a spot in CERDEP 4K in November and there are typically over 800 open seats at the beginning of the summer in First Steps 4K programs. While parents choose the 4K program that best meets their child and family’s needs, this data tells us that all eligible children waiting could start the school year in a free, full-day 4K class that has demonstrated effectiveness preparing students for Kindergarten (2024 State-Funded Full-Day 4K Annual Report 2022-23 & 2023-24, SCEOC). It is the recommendation of researchers that 4K parent navigators be established in regions where children are on a CERDEP 4K waitlist, who can describe other free, full-day 4K options and support enrollment by the start of school so that there are no 4-year-olds waiting for 4K by the legislatively required referral at one point-in-time.

Figure 1: Enrollment Process for First Steps 4K:

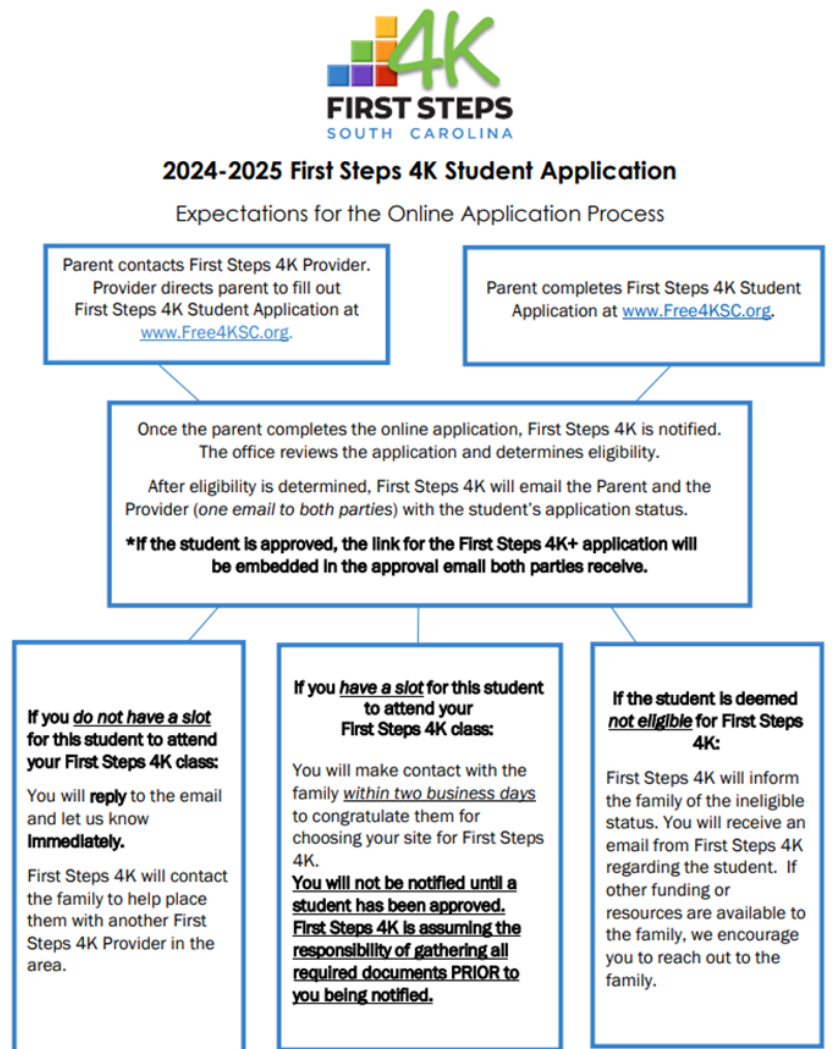


Table 1: CERDEP 4K Waitlist Referrals to First Steps 4K by District 2021-2024 School Years:

District Waitlist Counts/Referrals 2021-2024				
District	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22
Aiken	12	62	119	36
Anderson 2	8			
Anderson 3				17
Anderson 4		6		
Anderson 5	74		1	
Bamberg 3		5		
Barnwell 45	6			
Berkeley	34		75	52
Chester	10			
Chesterfield	22		28	11
Colleton			1	1
Darlington	10	52		
Dillon	6			
Edgefield				12
Florence 4				10
Greenwood 50		2		
Jasper	22	22		
Lancaster	12	16		
Laurens 56			5	
Lexington 1	105			
Lexington/Richland 5		3		
Marlboro			6	
McCormick				1
Newberry	30	6	40	19
Pickens	14			
Richland 2	7	8		
Saluda				6
Spartanburg 1		10		
Spartanburg 3				4
Spartanburg 5	11			
Williamsburg	12		20	
York 1			13	
York 3	5	10		
Total	402	203*	308	169

*1 student was referred by multiple districts, so is not reflected in the district count but is in the total

Head Start Policy:

Head Start Policy and Regulations hold the Head Start Performance Standards that offer program governance in Part 1301. Part 1302 Subpart A includes guidance related to waitlists. It is required that Head Start programs develop a waitlist at the beginning of each enrollment year. The waitlist must be maintained all year and rank children according to the program's selection criteria. Each program develops selection criteria using the community wide strategic planning and needs assessment found in Part 1302.11, referred to as the community assessment. The purpose of the community assessment is to support Head Start grantees in designing a program that meets community needs while building on strengths and resources. A community assessment is developed at least once every 5 years and is reviewed and updated annually.

Each Head Start Grantee is empowered to rank children on a waitlist based on the priorities of the community assessment and tailor services to best meet the unique needs of this population. In South Carolina, there are 19 Head Start grantees, that can have different priorities for enrollment of eligible 4-year-olds. While the community needs assessments nor the priority ranking criteria are posted on any state or federal websites, a survey was developed for each Head Start grantee in South Carolina and the information collected is illustrated in the matrix in Table 2. Eleven of the 19 grantees completed the survey, for an acceptable completion rate of 58%.

Head Start Survey Results:

Grantees that responded to this survey reported a broad array of priority areas from the community needs assessment that influence a child's ranking on the waitlist. This policy allows for flexibility to meet the needs of families in the community, but also that a child eligible for the suite of services provided to Head Start families in one service area may not rank high on the waiting list in another. One grantee reported that 4-year-old services are low on the community needs assessment due to the other early childhood sectors serving this age-group, but homelessness, foster care, and eligibility for low-income public assistance programs were the most common. Table 2 lists the characteristics reported and the number of grantees that prioritize this quality.

Table 2: Characteristics of Priorities Across Head Start Grantees:

Risk Factors	Number of Grantees:
Homelessness	3
Foster care	3
Children with a disability	3
Public assistance/low income	3
Highly mobile children/families	1
Teen mom	1
DSS involvement	1
Hispanic families	1
Family need for Early Head Start services or child care	1
Transportation	1

*Some grantees listed more than one priority.

Eight grantees reported having 4-year-olds on a waitlist ranging from 10 to 65 per grantee for a total of 176 children waiting for Head Start 4-year-old services. The most used strategy was to alert a family when a spot becomes available at that program, but only one grantee used this strategy alone. Three grantees will notify families of other free, full-day programming nearby and two grantees reporting using other strategies that were not described further. Two grantees reported that the number of children on the waitlist will reduce once staff is hired for the 4-year-old class, and one was in the process of hiring an applicant in August.

Three of the 11 grantees (27%) reported that there were no children on the 4-year-old waitlist, and 2 responded that there are 10 open seats in each program. These grantees reported they would attempt to fill the spots by contacting the local First Steps 4K to see if there are children on a waitlist who might be eligible for these spots. Another program will contact the local school district and private local child care centers to see if there are eligible children on a waitlist who could benefit from 4-year-old Head Start programming.

Grantees reported that several aspects of the current process for enrollment and waitlists for 4-year-old classes are working well in SC. Prioritizing families with the most need in the community ensures program access for children who will benefit most from the Head Start suite of services. Marketing to alert potentially eligible families to Head Start programming is reported to be valuable. Head Start grantees have family services staff who understand services beyond 4-year-old programming that families will benefit from and can enroll them.

Grantees also reported needs related to enrolling eligible 4-year-olds and ensuring no eligible child spends time on a waitlist. Perceived competition with local school districts and a lack of efficiency between district and Head Start grantees was a salient finding with almost 70% of Head Start respondents citing these opportunities for improvement. Blending program funds to meet the highest quality requirements along with improving communication and collaboration between district and Head Start 4-year-old programming would reduce children on waitlists for both sectors.

Table 3: Number of Head Start Grantees that Use this Strategy to Find a Child on Waitlist a 4K Spot:

	Contact Family if Spot Becomes Available in this Program	Notify Family of Other Free, Full-Day 4K Options Nearby	Other	None of These or No Response
Number of Grantees Using this Strategy	6	3	2	2

*More than one strategy can be selected.

“Most of our issues (are) because families delay coming to us based on waiting to hear from the LEAs and if their children were accepted into public school Pre-K.” - Head Start grantee

“An opportunity to blend classrooms as it relates to funding could be helpful in SC.” - Head Start grantee

Private Preschool 4K- Private preschool is comprised of small businesses that determine their own waitlist procedures and priorities. There are not requirements about waitlist procedures noted in ABC quality or other credentialing or licensing requirements. For this reason, a list of all licensed child care centers with 4-year-old programming was compiled by county. A stratified random sample of centers was selected, and the website was searched for a waitlist policy. After an online search for waitlist procedures a call was made to centers where 2 core questions were asked, and additional detail was collected when possible:

1. Are there open spots in your 4K class?
 - a. Will you do anything to fill these spots? If so what?
2. Is there a waitlist for your 4K class?
 - b. How are children moved off the waitlist for enrollment?

This data was collected and analyzed for themes across quality level and geography. The number of early childhood education centers was triangulated between [SC Child Care Registry](#), Child Care Resource and Referral, and [PalmettoPreK](#) and 1,233 centers comprised the master list. Ten percent of these centers were called across ABC quality level and county, so data was collected from 124 centers across the state. The early childhood landscape is increasingly complex, because a private child care center may participate in First Steps 4K for one class. The other 4K class in the same center can be private pay or utilize SC Child Care Scholarships to offset the cost of tuition. For this reason, it is possible to have a First Steps 4K center that also has a waitlist for 4-year-olds.

The most common results in the private sector were that families were enrolled on a first come first served basis. Some families who described themselves as being in “a very difficult spot” might be enrolled sooner or advance on the waitlist at the owners’ discretion.

Another finding in the private child care sector is that there was profile of centers that had the longest 4-year-old waitlists. Private, non-First Steps centers in rural counties that were C rated had the waitlists with the most children on it. One provider reported that “There isn’t any way a child added to the waitlist now would get in before kindergarten.”

These centers have lower tuitions and could receive DSS Child Care scholarships. By focusing First Steps provider recruitment on these rural, C rated centers providers could access professional development, coaching and ABC quality supports that could raise the quality level and consequently the per student reimbursement rate for students accessing the Child Care Scholarship. This focused recruitment of providers would also offer students in a high poverty area increased access to high quality 4K demonstrated to improve Kindergarten readiness. Similarly recruiting A and B rated centers to participate in First Steps 4K would offer increased free, full-day 4K spots and increase access to 4K.

Because rural centers with waitlists were most often C rated or unrated, not participating with First Steps 4K charging a lower tuition cost per week than higher rated centers, it is the recommendation of researchers that the reimbursement rate for First Steps 4K be at least the equivalent of what these centers could charge families (approximately \$100 per week). By ensuring financial equity between private pay, child care scholarship funding, and First Steps 4K reimbursement, these centers be intentionally recruited without financial inhibitors and through First Steps 4K participation focus on improving quality using the coaching and resources provided through participation. This would benefit families as they would receive free, full-day 4K for their children and any other available financial benefits like First Steps siblings scholarships. Centers would benefit from the First Steps enrollment and eligibility determination that occurs centrally, and from support and training offered through First Steps state office related to quality improvement. These actions result in further expansion of CERDEP programming and increasing parent choice across additional 4K programs.

Another relevant finding is that there are counties that have few or no licensed child care settings to serve children and families in any capacity. These counties include: Abbeville, Allendale, Calhoun, Clarendon, Edgefield, Fairfield and McCormick where there is not currently a First Steps 4K program. There is a growing number of registered family child care homes in these areas. Piloting a method by which to support registered family child care homes in 4K curricula and strategies designed to improve kindergarten readiness may support children on a waitlist in these areas. Additionally, First Steps would have a more powerful presence making recruitment of any new or planned child care settings as First Steps 4K providers an easier process.

Title 1 & EIA Funded 4K:

4K programs funded by Title I or EIA dollars are run at the school district level. Because no policies specific to waitlists or waitlist communication were found related to these two funding streams, districts who offer free, full-day 4K using these funds were contacted to learn about waitlist policies. All districts contacted described using one set of enrollment criteria to access 4K, and Title 1 and EIA funded 4K are administered at the district level. An email was sent to administrators in districts utilizing these funding streams for 4K asking:

1. Are there students on a Title 1 4K waitlist this school year (2024-25)? If so, how many?
2. How do the waitlists function? Are there criteria for enrolling students from a waitlist in a 4K class or is it first-come-first-serve off the waitlist?
3. Did you have open seats in the Title 1 4K class? Do you ever use Palmetto PreK or First5 portals to find students?

Some administrators braid or blend funds from Title 1 and CERDEP to cover a portion of the cost of a teacher assistant salary, which means that the CERDEP requirements for waitlists are followed. By braiding or blending different funding streams as is allowable, some aspects of the 4K class can be funded from CERDEP and others from Title 1, maintaining the highest level of quality required by the funding stream. Additionally, some administrators share data with Head Start about children on a waitlist in July. Students are enrolled off the waitlist based on the following criteria: 1. Income eligibility, 2. DIAL scores, then 3. First-come-first serve. Some districts using CERDEP and Title 1 funds for preschool use CERDEP dollars for 4K and Title 1 dollars for 3K. In districts where CERDEP is not offered, risk of entering Kindergarten without prerequisite skills is the priority ranking which might include poverty.

Two districts reported they are beginning to onboard with First 5. Palmetto PreK was not used by all districts to locate children; however, several districts reported that Palmetto PreK directed families to the district 4K programs.



Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R):



[South Carolina CCR&R \(sc-crr.org\)](http://sc-crr.org)

The Child Care Resource and Referral website houses information about child care, including 4-year-old programming, and paying for child care for families and also supports for providers. This website includes information about child care centers that are licensed, registered, or approved by DSS, group homes, family child care homes and exempt or non-regulated programs that do not operate during the same hours as the other types of child care. An example of this might be a week-long summer camp during the day or Moms' Morning Out program that operates for 2 hours one day per week. Results can be filtered by type of child care, licensing type, ABC quality level, and in some cases includes open seat data for a program.



[First 5](http://first5sc.org)

The First5 portal is a website initiated by the Preschool Development Grant that was awarded in 2019 and is a supplement to PalmettoPreK. This resource is for families of children birth through age five and collects some information about the family so that a list of programs and resources the family is eligible for is filtered by location. First5 includes programs in health and wellness as well as education. The family can begin enrollment in these programs through the website, and supplemental/separate applications may be required for some programs. There are opportunities to enroll in four district CERDEP 4K programs. However not all districts participate in First 5.



Free4Ksc.org

The Free4KSC.org website is the First Steps 4K website where families can find a First Steps 4K program and apply. There is also information about First Steps, news and resources. This website is available to the public and supports enrollment in First Steps 4K.



[Palmetto Pre-K](http://palmettopre-k.org)

The PalmettoPreK portal is a website initiated by the Preschool Development Grant that SC was awarded in 2019 designed for parents and families in SC looking for preschool programs. The goal is to provide a website that identifies and provides information about subsidized federal, state, and local programs and filters them by location and eligibility. All school districts that participate in CERDEP, all Head Start and First Steps 4K programs participate in the PalmettoPreK portal.



[SC Child Care Early Care and Education: www.scchildcare.org](http://www.scchildcare.org)

The Office of the Child Care Administrator at DSS manages a website with all licensed, registered, and exempt child care centers, and include quality rating. These results can be filtered by location, ABC quality rating, license type, program type when possible and include complaints or compliance information.

These portals offer similar information, and although there are slight differences between them, on each of them you can find 4K opportunities and information about the program and on 2 of these sites you can begin the application process. These supports are already available to parents and providers at no cost, yet several CERDEP 4K districts asked for information about nearby 4K programs so that parents on waitlists could be directed to open spots. This information should be shared with all 4K providers in the annual guidance documents from the licensing agencies and marketed more efficiently to families. While somewhat duplicative, information is available, yet because there are eligible children still waiting to access 4K it is clear that a different strategy is needed to support families who are not assisted by these websites alone.



Challenges in the Current Enrollment Systems & Opportunities for Improvement:

As described throughout this study, there are a number of challenges in the current system to enroll eligible children in free, full-day 4K. To ensure that the state's investment in early childhood education and kindergarten readiness is fully realized, the following systemic challenges must be mitigated:

1. Improve data quality.

a. Point-in-time data leads to wasted time for administrators and families, and lost learning for children. Additionally, this data is not reliable given the fluidity of waitlist numbers and communication processes. Instead of entering all children on a waitlist during one point-in-time to complete a legislative requirement, a system should be piloted that will immediately connect families to individuals at other programs for matching an eligible child with a 4K spot that meets their needs.

b. Information about why a parent might decline a different open 4K spot are not collected. This information can drive programmatic decisions that will build infrastructure of highly desirable early childhood educational environments.

c. Not all schools within the district have the same number of CERDEP classes or children eligible for programming. By describing the number of schools that have children on a waitlist, or that have open seats in a school district more actionable data will be communicated. Describe the number of children on a waitlist at the school level instead of only at the district level.

d. Some districts offer a child zoned for a neighborhood school a CERDEP 4K spot in a school that has space for the student but is farther away. When districts can offer transportation parents may select this option, but if they don't the child has declined the space available and not uniformly kept on a waitlist. This is compliant and is the same centralized enrollment system utilized SCFS, but at the district level. While legal, this practice obscures the number of eligible children who seek out but do not access state-funded 4K, a problem that could be alleviated if consistency across how children on a waitlist are categorized and reported became a requirement.

2. There are a minimum of four websites/online portals that families can use to access information about 4K. While these websites can support learning about programs and generate leads for Head Start, First Steps, and district personnel to contact families, they can be overwhelming or confusing for families and offer less support than speaking with a person. To understand a variety of 4K options and what is offered would require several calls from a guardian attempting to enroll their child in 4K. While these websites and portals offer a great deal of information and meet a variety of legislative requirements, they have not eliminated the need for alternative supports for families on waitlists.

3. Being on a waitlist is typically a passive process unless parents are actively searching for an alternative program. Parents typically do not have the same knowledge of early childhood systems and opportunities to navigate the complexities of 4K opportunities swiftly. It would better serve families if systems were changed so that a waitlist was a catalyst for a supported matching process to begin, and data collected through enrollment in a 4K program.





Recommended Pilot Options:

Pilot a 4K navigator position to support families on a waitlist in finding a free, full-day, state-funded 4K option that best meets their needs. 4K navigators should be employees of organizations that do not administer 4K and should not be funded by a specific preschool program, but have knowledge of the differences between all preschool programs. These stipulations are to ensure a neutral and objective support for families selecting 4K that best meets their needs. It is recommended for the pilot that the 4K navigator is funded either through EIA dollars, grant funding, or other source and coordinate with existing First Steps 4K and Head Start enrollment specialists. These 4K navigators will support matching a child through enrollment in 4K and also collect data on why a family made a specific choice. Because there are multiple 4K options, collecting data on what is most desired by families can support programmatic decisions and influence quality. Similarly, if a family declines open 4K spots, this decision and reasons why will be documented. Invitations to pilot this new process should be extended to districts and local partners by state level leadership determined by most recent waitlist data. While the district may not elect to participate in the pilot, a benefit would be that they would be they are excused from completing the district waitlist Formstack survey. Instead, the navigation process would provide data for that year to SCDE in accordance with the calendar put forth in proviso by September 1st. Additionally the district would also be able to utilize any existing enrollment or placement strategies, and parents would be supported in finding a 4K option in real time. In participating pilot districts when a child attempts to enroll in CERDEP, they can complete the process as they traditionally do, with one exception. If the family does not have or declines a 4K placement in the district, their contact information is immediately notify the 4K navigator. The 4K navigator will contact the family within two business days to explain 4K options and connect the family with the First Steps enrollment specialists.

4K Navigator Benefits	4K Navigator Challenges
Through there are websites and individuals at individual programs, a 4K navigator piloted in 1-2 school districts will offer support to families immediately rather than waiting for a calendar date.	Will require a slight change in practice at the school building level when a CERDEP 4K program is at capacity.
Data will be collected about why certain programs are more appealing to families than others, driving program improvement.	
Services will be described across all early childhood programs using a matching process to families so that they can select a program that best meets their needs.	

Proposed Process

1. Determine family income. Use information to discern if the family is 100% of the federal poverty level, or more. If 100%, describe services offered by Head Start.
2. If family is 101-185% or Medicaid eligible do NOT describe Head Start services as they are not eligible. Describe First Steps 4K programming, curriculum and First Steps Scholarship for aftercare, and SC Child Care scholarship options.
3. Connect with the First Steps 4K enrollment specialist to describe these options in more detail.
4. When family selects a program, 4K navigator supports enrollment in the program and records information regarding why that program was selected. If the family does NOT enroll, the 4K navigator maintains count of children who decline an available spot and the reason(s) why.
5. For the piloting districts, this information will be shared with SCDE and district administration will not have to submit the current Formstack survey.

Pilot a variety of strategies to move from point-in-time data to “real time” data communication to allow the waitlist to serve as a catalyst for a supported matching process to begin. There are several strategies that could be utilized to do this and consequently reduce administrative burden when fully implemented.

a. Use a waitlist platform as initial point of communication that a family is on a waitlist and the matching process should begin. While there are a number of portals and websites related to early childhood, these have not reduced the 4K waitlist and cannot be modified to do so in a cost-effective way. These options were explored to utilize existing infrastructure without additional cost; however, it will cost an estimated \$100,000 minimum to enable First 5 to complete notifications to First Steps enrollment specialists, Head Start, and SC Child Care scholarship participants. Currently, there are only 6 districts participating in First 5, with an additional district participating with only parenting programs, but not 4K. As a result, First 5 cannot currently be the platform to pilot more effective waitlist communication in needed districts nor would it be scalable soon. Palmetto PreK does not have the necessary backend technological requirements to match students on a waitlist with a 4K spot as it was initially developed as a proof of concept for First 5 for parents to utilize. Palmetto PreK was launched in 2019 and has been fully functioning for several years without solving this problem, as it exists for a different goal: to notify families of opportunities and alert programs to interested families.

Many other sectors utilize a waitlist platform, and investigations of these show that most platforms range from \$200 to \$6,000 per year which is the most cost-effective strategy researchers have found should the pilot need to be scaled statewide. The waitlist platform used to pilot would be determined by early childhood leaders and funded through the same source as 4K navigators, but would need to be one that all districts can utilize and works with all student enrollment systems and existing statewide preschool enrollment portals.

b. Pilot a direct and immediate communication process between building administration, First Steps 4K enrollment, 4K navigators, and local Head Start. When a program has reached capacity, parents should be copied on a secure email that includes these three early childhood options and includes available demographics for enrollment (family income and Dial scores as available), phone number and address. This will serve the same function as waitlist technology, but may add to administrative burden requiring an additional email/step during enrollment.

c. Pilot automated Student Information System (SIS) generated communications when “waitlist” tag is used to communicate information with a 4K navigator, First Steps enrollment specialist and local Head Start. This process would be the most efficient; however, after communication with stakeholders and SIS experts, would be more costly in time and financial resources to build using existing structures. This remains a relevant long-term consideration while not a feasible solution to pilot currently.





Related Practice and Infrastructure Changes:

Changes to the infrastructure and practices related to enrollment, waitlists, and support for families making decisions about their child's 4K experience will greatly improve 4K enrollment in programs selected by families based on their unique preferences and needs. While there are websites to facilitate this for families the number of different places to find similar information can be overwhelming, so these resources aren't used efficiently. There are also challenges of communication between programs that are full, and those with open seats. Despite being compliant with legal requirements, some current practice does not best meet the needs of families and children in accessing free, high quality 4K. In certain areas of the state, there are issues of availability that result in limited access to state-funded 4K, and high numbers of children on waitlists.

Infrastructure: Availability of Affordable 4K:

There are not currently any licensed, ABC quality participating, or First Steps Centers in Abbeville county. Because Abbeville is one of the plaintiff districts in the lawsuit that enabled CERDEP programming, commonly referred to as "the Abbeville lawsuit" it is the recommendation that a concerted effort and plan be developed to increase options for CERDEP programming and early childhood education in Abbeville. Other counties without licensed ABC child care or a First Steps program include: Abbeville, Calhoun, Edgefield, Fairfield, and McCormick. Jasper has one First Steps center that is registered instead of licensed and not rated in the quality system. These counties would benefit from additional early childhood education options for children and families, and it is recommended that support from SC DSS in the forms of existing child care grants with guidance and support from Child Care Resource and Referral technical assistance providers be incentivized in these counties.

County	# Head Start Centers	# Licensed Child care (Non-First Steps)	# Exempt from Licensure	# Registered Family Child Care
Abbeville	1	1	1	9
Calhoun	1	1	0	0
Edgefield	1	2	4	4*
Fairfield	0	4	2	9*
McCormick	1	0**	1	1

*Family Child care Home that is licensed instead of registered.

**McCormick does have a licensed early childhood class that is in the Elementary School

These counties have limited options outside of public-school settings to offer state-funded 4K programming because there are fewer licensed or licensed-exempt settings for 4-year-olds in which to build First Steps 4K programs. As previously stated, Head Start grantees are selected by the federal funders, and as a result, there is limited impact that state recommendations can have on locations to build a head start program where a gap exists.

It is recommended that First Steps or other researchers consider if supporting licensed or registered child care homes in offering First Steps 4K programming appropriate for this setting is feasible and allowable under the law. By considering expansion of quality and kindergarten preparation in non-traditional First Steps settings, additional families could be served in areas without child care centers outside of the public school 4K classes. This expansion would increase the number of choices families have selecting 4K and provide CERDEP curriculum support and professional development where students not accessing CERDEP 4K, Head Start, or other publicly funded 4K are spending their 4-year-old year.



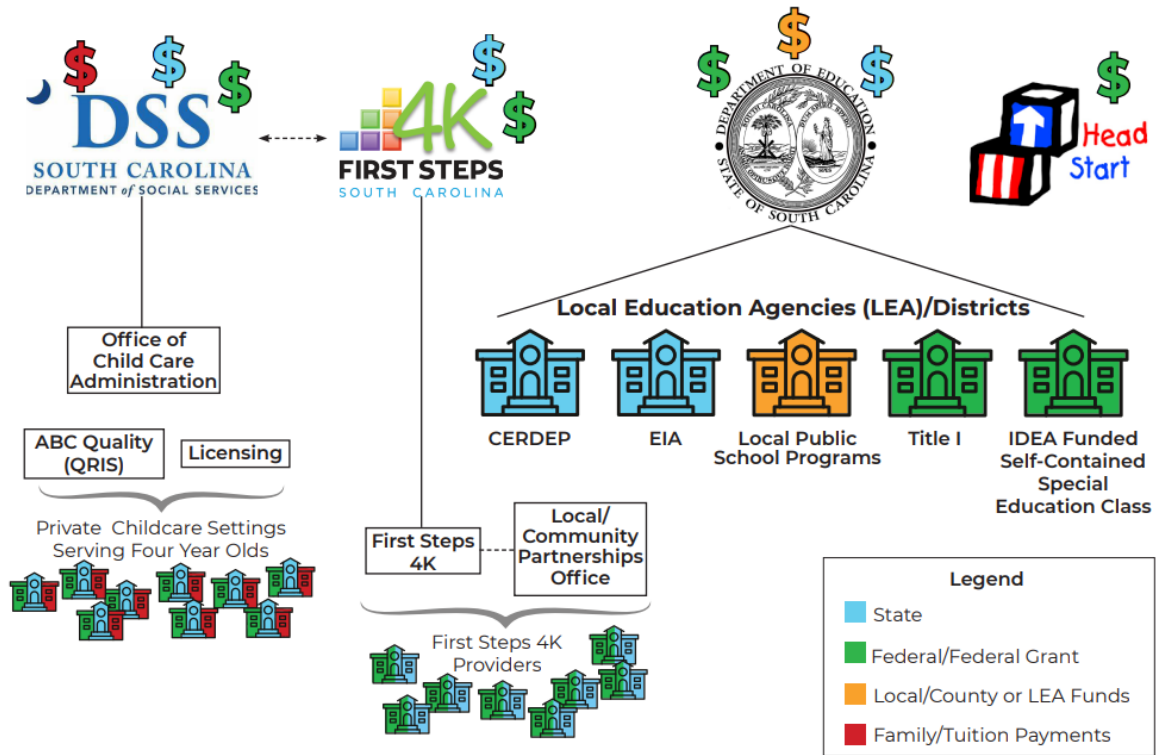
Conclusion:

There are many ways to improve the functioning of waitlists to improve access of free, full day 4K to eligible families. A focused, collaborative convening of early childhood stakeholders can implement a plan to pilot any combination of these strategies and evaluate their effectiveness, so that "real time" data and supported matching ensure that all eligible young children benefit from the state's investment in early childhood education.

Appendices

Appendix A: 4K Funding Streams

Funding Streams for 4K



* Students with disabilities receiving IEP services can be served in any of these 4K environments they are otherwise eligible for as determined by the IEP team, and IDEA federal funds pay the excess cost of special education services with the other funding source paying general cost of the program.

Appendix B: Head Start Program Performance Standards Part 1302 Program Operations Subpart A Eligibility, Recruitment, Selection, Enrollment, and Attendance:

1302.14 Selection process.

(a) *Selection criteria.* (1) A program must annually establish selection criteria that weigh the prioritization of selection of [participants](#), based on community needs identified in the community needs assessment as described in §[1302.11](#)(b), and including family [income](#), whether the child is homeless, whether the child is in [foster care](#), the child's age, whether the child is eligible for special education and related services, or early intervention services, as appropriate, as determined under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 U.S.C. 1400 *et seq.*) and, other relevant family or child risk factors.

(2) If a program serves migrant or seasonal families, it must select [participants](#) according to criteria in paragraph (a)(1) of this section, and give priority to children whose families can demonstrate they have relocated frequently within the past two-years to pursue agricultural work.

(3) If a program operates in a service area where Head Start eligible children can enroll in high-quality publicly funded pre-kindergarten for a full school day, the program must prioritize younger children as part of the selection criteria in paragraph (a)(1) of this section. If this priority would disrupt partnerships with local education agencies, then it is not required. An American Indian and Alaska Native or [Migrant or Seasonal Head Start program](#) must consider whether such prioritization is appropriate in their community.

(4) A program must not deny enrollment based on a disability or chronic health condition or its severity.

(b) *Children eligible for services under IDEA.* (1) A program must ensure at least 10 percent of its total funded enrollment is filled by children eligible for services under IDEA, unless the [responsible HHS official](#) grants a waiver.

(2) If the requirement in paragraph (b)(1) of this section has been met, children eligible for services under IDEA should be prioritized for the available slots in accordance with the program's selection criteria described in paragraph (a) of this section.

(c) *Waiting lists.* A program must develop at the beginning of each enrollment year and maintain during the year a waiting list that ranks children according to the program's selection criteria.

[CERDEP guidelines 21-2 \(sc.gov\)](https://www.sos.sc.gov/cerdep-guidelines)

Insert School Name/Logo Here
CERDEP Waiting List
2023-24

[illegible]

Supplement Per Child Information:

[child-care-scholarship-maximum-payments-allowed-ffy2023-pdf.pdf](#)

[copy-of-fee-scale-2024-2025.pdf](#)

[FS4K.SCDSS Provider Reimbursement Rates 2024-25.pdf](#)

Appendix C: Surveys Administered for Data Collection

CERDEP 4K:

1. Are there children on the CERDEP 4K waitlist for the 2024-25 school year?
2. How many children are on the CERDEP 4K waitlist for the 2024-25 school year?
3. How does your program facilitate finding a 4K spot for children on the waitlist? Please check all that apply:
 - a. Notify parents if a space becomes available at our program
 - b. Notify parents of other free, full-day 4K options nearby
 - c. Call/email other 4K programs and connect the family so they may choose a 4K program with open spots
 - d. None of these options
 - e. Other (please describe below)
4. Does your program have open spots in the CERDEP 4K classroom?
5. How many open spots are in the CERDEP 4K classroom?
6. What will you do to fill the CERDEP 4K spots? Please check all that apply.
 - a. Contact nearby First Steps 4K programs to see if there are children on the waitlist who could access these spots
 - b. Contact the local Head Start program to see if there are children on the waitlist who could access these spots
 - c. Other (please describe below)
7. Is there anything working really well with the waitlist process for CERDEP 4K? Please describe it below and tell us why.
8. Is there anything that could be changed to make the waitlist process better for families who are attempting to find 4K for their children? Please describe below.

Head Start 4-Year-Old Class Waitlist Survey:

1. Are there 4-year-old children on the Head Start waitlist for the 2024-25 school year?
2. How many 4-year-old children are on the Head Start waitlist for the 2024-25 school year?
3. Does your program facilitate finding a spot for 4 year old children on the waitlist? Please check all that apply.
 - a. Notify a family if a space becomes available at our program
 - b. Notify parents of other free, full-day 4K options nearby
 - c. Call/email other 4K programs and connect the family so they may choose a 4K program with open spaces
 - d. None of these options
 - e. Other (please describe below)
4. Please list the priority areas from the Community Needs Assessment that influence waitlist ranking at your program.
5. Does your program have open spots in the Head Start 4 year-old classroom?
6. How many open spots are in the 4-year-old classroom?
7. What will you do to fill the 4-year-old spots in your program? Please check all that apply.
 - a. Contact the local school district to see if there are children on the waitlist who could access these spots
 - b. Contact the local First Steps 4K program to see if there are children on the waitlist who could access these spots
 - c. Contact local child care centers to see if there are children on a waitlist who could access these spots
 - d. Other (please describe below)
8. Is there anything that is working really well with the waitlist process for Head Start (particularly for 4-year-olds)? Please describe it below.
9. Is there anything that could be changed to improve the process for families who are attempting to find 4-year-old preschool spaces for their children on waitlists? Please describe below.

EIA and Title I Survey (Administered via email):

1. Were there students on the Title 1 prek waitlist this school year (2024-25)? If so, how many?
2. How do the waitlists function? Are there criteria for enrolling students from the waitlist in a preK class or is it first come first serve off the waitlist?
3. Did you have open seats in the Title 1 prek class? Do you ever use Palmetto PreK or First5 portals to find students?