

***Strong Beginnings* State Evaluation 2024–25 Annual Report**



MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

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and Evaluation Center
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STATE EVALUATION OF *STRONG BEGINNINGS*

In partnership with the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP), the Engaged Research and Evaluation Center (formerly Community Evaluation Programs) at the Office of University Outreach and Engagement at Michigan State University (MSU) is conducting a multi-year external evaluation of the *Strong Beginnings* pilot. In addition to these efforts, the Clinton County Regional Education Service Agency (CCRESA), as a contractor for MiLEAP, is conducting separate local and regional data collection processes. The evaluation of *Strong Beginnings*, which began in 2021, aims to assess effective components of the program for improving child and family outcomes and to inform MiLEAP’s decisions about a potential statewide expansion of the program. This report summarizes the findings from the fifth year of the *Strong Beginnings* pilot program.

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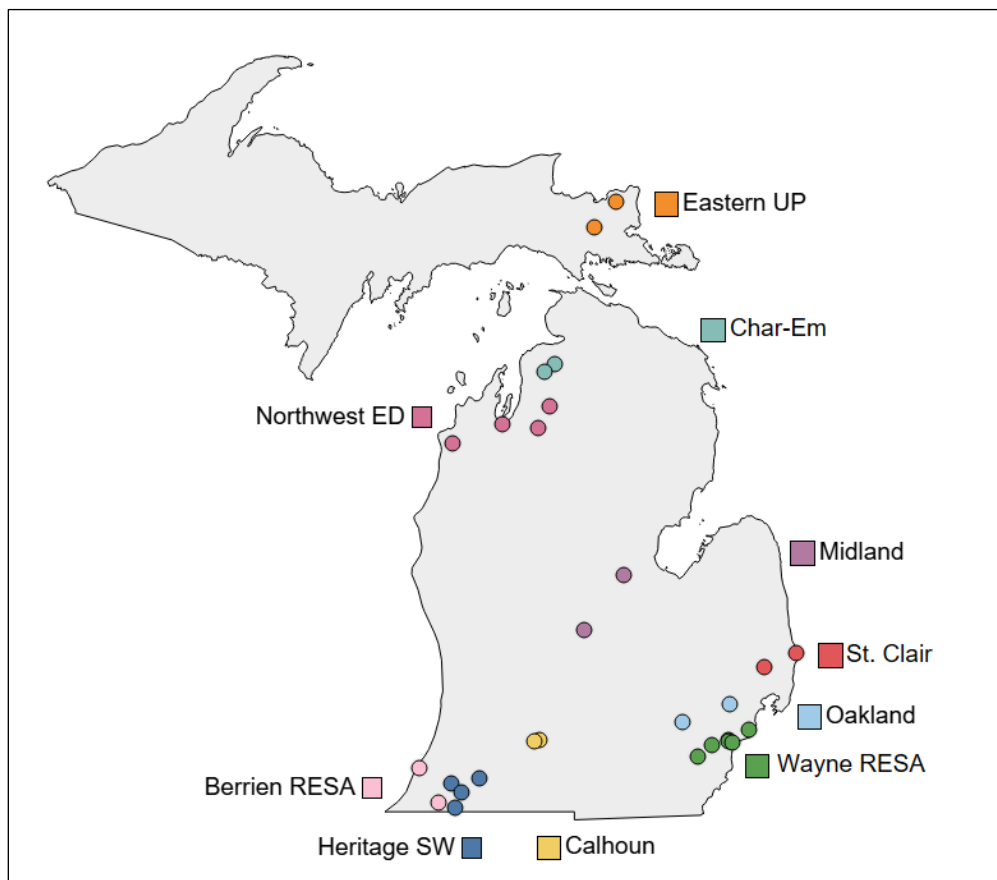
***STRONG BEGINNINGS* OVERVIEW**

Modeled after Michigan’s nationally recognized Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) for four-year-olds, *Strong Beginnings* was launched in 2021 as a pilot state-funded PreK program for three-year-olds. *Strong Beginnings* recently ended its fifth year with 28 sites across the state (Figure 1). Each site had one classroom. Like GSRP, by providing high-quality preschool instruction that supports both academic and social-emotional development, the pilot aims to ensure that children from diverse backgrounds enter kindergarten ready to learn.

Research supports the value of a two-year PreK model, with findings from states like New Jersey showing that two years of preschool can yield lasting academic benefits through tenth grade (Barnett & Jung, 2021). *Strong Beginnings* is designed to close the achievement gap that often emerges before kindergarten, as a result of income and racial inequities (Kruzik et al., 2024; Shavlik et al., 2021). By increasing access to high-quality instruction for three-year-olds, the program boosts school readiness—especially for vulnerable populations—increasing the likelihood of long-term academic success (Anasari et al., 2019; Infurna & Montes, 2020).

While the enrollment process and management structure of *Strong Beginnings* align with GSRP, the program was independently developed by CCRESA to meet the unique developmental needs of three-year-olds. The program also aligns with Michigan’s Top 10 Strategic Education Plan by prioritizing equitable access to high-quality instruction regardless of race, income, language, or ability. Through this approach, *Strong Beginnings* contributes to the state’s broader efforts to reduce opportunity and achievement gaps and promote educational equity from the beginning of children’s education.

Figure 1. 2024–25 *Strong Beginnings* Site Locations by ISD



HISTORY AND FUNDING

Planning Michigan's first early education program for three-year-olds began in 2017, when MDE used federal funding from the Race to the Top-Early Childhood Challenge to begin developing *Strong Beginnings*. Over the next three years, MDE refined the program's conceptual framework to reflect its dual priorities of equity and access. Additional financial support came from the federal Preschool Development Grants Birth Through Five Program. From the outset, *Strong Beginnings* was intentionally modeled after the state's existing high-quality PreK program for four-year-olds—GSRP. The *Strong Beginnings* pilot was officially launched in January 2021 and facilitated by CCRESA under the direction of MDE and MiLEAP.^a During the first year (Cohort 1), four intermediate school districts (ISDs, but some of them known as regional education service agencies) were selected to operate a total of 10 classrooms. This initial 'legacy' cohort included Berrien RESA, Heritage Southwest ISD (formerly Lewis Cass), Northwest Education Services (formerly Traverse Bay Area ISD), and Wayne RESA. In the 2021–22 school year (Cohort 2), these ISDs added two more classrooms, expanding services to 177 three-year-olds. In the 2022–23 school year, the funding transitioned to the state through the Michigan School Aid Act. During the same year (Cohort 3), the same ISDs continued to operate in the same classrooms, serving 178 children. In the 2023–24 school year (Cohort 4), *Strong Beginnings* expanded to include six additional ISDs: Calhoun, Charlevoix-Emmet, Eastern UP, Midland County, Oakland Schools, and St. Clair County. The number of classrooms per ISD varies, ranging from two to six, depending on regional need. The pilot continued through the 2024–25 school year, maintaining the same classroom and program structure established in the 2023–24 school year. The 2025–2026 school year will initiate Phase Two of the pilot program. Phase Two will examine variations of the current program model, including part-day programming, five-day-per-week programming, multiage grouping with the Great Start Readiness Program, and explore ways to strengthen inclusive classroom practices. The 2025–2026 school year will also include the addition of two classrooms within previously participating ISD/ESA partners and four additional classrooms within four new ISD/ESA partners: Eaton RESA, Ingham ISD, Lapeer ISD, and Menominee County ISD.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Strong Beginnings prioritizes enrollment for children from families with household incomes up to 250% of the federal poverty level (FPL). Like GSRP, enrollment is tiered, beginning with children from families with incomes at 0–50% of FPL, followed by those in higher income brackets up to the 250% FPL threshold. With approval, programs may enroll children with a family income above 250% of the FPL, if space remains available after all eligible lower-income children have been placed.

Priority enrollment is also given to children with additional indicators of need. This includes children with an active individualized education program (IEP), those experiencing homelessness, children in foster care, and those in families receiving public assistance. When two children fall within the same income bracket, further criteria guide placement decisions. These include having a diagnosed disability or developmental delay, demonstrating severe or challenging behavior, having a primary home language other than English, living in a household where parents have low educational attainment, or where abuse or neglect has occurred.

^a All information reported as well as additional information about the pilot can be found in the *Strong Beginnings* Implementation Manual (CCRESA, 2025).

Other factors contributing to eligibility are grouped under environmental risk. This includes experiences such as the loss of a parent due to death, divorce, incarceration, military deployment, or other absence; sibling issues; being born to a teen parent (under age of 20 when the first child is born); residence in a high-risk neighborhood with high poverty or crime rates and limited access to critical community services; and prenatal or postnatal exposure to toxic substances known to cause learning or developmental delays. These criteria ensure that *Strong Beginnings* serves children who stand to benefit the most from early, high-quality educational support.

ISDs are encouraged to develop a common application procedure for *Strong Beginnings* and Head Start to streamline enrollment. When a child qualifies for both programs, the family is first referred to Head Start. However, depending on seat availability and family preference, a family may enroll their qualifying child into *Strong Beginnings* instead.

Strong Beginnings classrooms offer a minimum of 120 full days of instruction over 30 weeks. ISDs are encouraged to exceed these recommendations to increase the program’s academic impact. All classrooms are required to meet Michigan’s early childhood quality standards and maintain a low staff-to-child ratio of 1:7. Each classroom is staffed by a lead teacher and an associate teacher, ensuring personalized attention and support. In addition to classroom instruction, each *Strong Beginnings* team includes a family liaison who plays a critical role in engaging children’s caregivers. The liaison supports family participation, promotes child development at home, and helps families access resources that foster long-term well-being and independence.

STRONG BEGINNINGS PROGRAM SITE CHARACTERISTICS

Strong Beginnings program site characteristics, including community resources, geographic type, and child poverty levels, are summarized in Table 1, All *Strong Beginnings* ISDs serve children from rural areas, and four also serve children from suburban and urban settings. Although the program is intended to serve low-income families, some sites are located in areas with greater community resources, allowing them to better support diverse family needs.

Table 1. Characteristics of *Strong Beginnings* Program Sites

| Grantees | Child Opportunity Level of Program Sites ¹ | Geographic Type of Program Sites ² | % of Children Living ≤ 185% FPL (by Program ZIP Codes) ³ |
|--------------|---|---|---|
| Berrien RESA | Low, Very Low | Rural | 64% |
| Calhoun | Very Low | Rural, Urban | 62% |
| Char-Em | High, Moderate | Rural | 33% |
| Eastern UP | Low | Rural | 50% |
| Heritage SW | Moderate, Low | Rural | 50% |
| Midland | High, Low | Rural | 30% |
| Northwest ED | High, Moderate, Low | Rural | 42% |
| Oakland | Very High | Rural, Urban | 6% |
| St. Clair | High, Very Low | Rural, Suburban | 50% |
| Wayne RESA | Moderate, Low, Very Low | Rural, Suburban, Urban | 57% |

1 Child Opportunity Level accessed from Child Opportunity Index 3.0 (diversitydatakids.org, 2024).

2 Geographic types are from Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates data set and follow Geverdt and Maselli’s (2024) recommendations for determining a ZCTA’s primary geographic type (US DOE, 2023).

3 While 250% FPL is the threshold for *Strong Beginnings* priority enrollment, data were only available for the percentage of children under six who are at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

To better understand these differences, the Child Opportunity Index 3.0, designed by Boston University was used (diversitydatakids.org, 2025). This index evaluates the neighborhood-level resources available to support children’s development based on educational, health, environmental, and socio-economic indicators. Scores are categorized from “Very High” and “High” (indicating well-resourced communities) to “Low” and “Very Low” (indicating communities with limited supports). To supplement these scores, the percentage of children under six-years-old classified as living below the poverty line is also provided. Together, these data illustrate that *Strong Beginnings* operates across a diverse range of communities—from well-resourced to mixed- to low-resource areas.

POPULATION SERVED

A summary of the demographic characteristics and eligibility factors of the 398 children enrolled in *Strong Beginnings* across 10 ISDs in the 2024–25 program year is displayed in Table 2 and Table 3. The gender distribution was nearly balanced, with 52% female and 48% male children. Racial and ethnic backgrounds varied, with most children identified as White (62%), followed by Black or African American (20%), Hispanic or Latino (10%), multi- or Biracial (5%), Asian (4%), and American Indian or Alaska Native (2%). Table 2 breaks down this demographic data by ISD, highlighting regional differences in enrollment. For example, Berrien enrolled the highest proportion of Black children (55%), while Charlevoix-Emmet served a 97% White population.

Table 3 focuses on economic eligibility, showing that *Strong Beginnings* is serving its target population—children from families experiencing economic disadvantage. In 2024–25, 97% of enrolled children came from households with incomes at or below 250% of FPL. Several ISDs, including Wayne RESA, St. Clair County, Heritage Southwest, and Berrien served over 50% of children living at or below 100% of the FPL, underscoring the program’s focus on serving families with the greatest financial need. Eastern UP received approval from CCRESA to enroll children over the 250% income requirement in March 2025 to increase enrollment at these sites.

Table 2. *Strong Beginnings* Child Demographics by ISD

| ISD | N | Female | Male | AIAN* | Asian | Black* | NHPI* | White | Multi* | Hispanic* |
|-----------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Michigan | 398 | 52% | 48% | 2% | 4% | 20% | 0% | 60% | 5% | 10% |
| Berrien RESA | 31 | 48% | 52% | 0% | 0% | 55% | 0% | 29% | 10% | 6% |
| Calhoun | 28 | 46% | 54% | 0% | 43% | 36% | 0% | 7% | 14% | 0% |
| Char-Emmet | 29 | 59% | 41% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 97% | 3% | 0% |
| Eastern UP | 16 | 44% | 56% | 19% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 69% | 13% | 0% |
| Heritage SW | 57 | 46% | 54% | 2% | 0% | 11% | 0% | 61% | 12% | 14% |
| Midland Co | 30 | 40% | 60% | 3% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 77% | 10% | 10% |
| Northwest ED | 58 | 59% | 41% | 2% | 0% | 0% | 2% | 93% | 0% | 3% |
| Oakland | 29 | 38% | 62% | 0% | 10% | 10% | 0% | 62% | 0% | 17% |
| St. Clair Co | 29 | 69% | 31% | 0% | 0% | 7% | 0% | 90% | 3% | 0% |
| Wayne RESA | 91 | 56% | 44% | 0% | 0% | 45% | 0% | 34% | 0% | 21% |

* Some categories were abbreviated: AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native, Black = Black or African American, NHPI = Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic = Hispanic or Latino, and Multi = Multi- or Biracial. Sum of percentages per ISD may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Table 3. Strong Beginnings Children by Family Income (% of FPL) and ISD

| ISD | N | 0-50% * | 51-100% | 101-150% | 151-200% | 201-250% | 251-300% | 301%+ |
|-----------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| Michigan | 398 | 33% | 14% | 23% | 15% | 13% | 1% | 2% |
| Berrien RESA | 31 | 48% | 13% | 19% | 6% | 10% | 3% | 0% |
| Calhoun | 28 | 18% | 7% | 29% | 29% | 14% | 4% | 0% |
| Char-Emmet | 29 | 38% | 7% | 21% | 10% | 21% | 0% | 3% |
| Eastern UP | 16 | 13% | 0% | 19% | 6% | 44% | 0% | 19% |
| Heritage SW | 57 | 49% | 11% | 16% | 12% | 4% | 4% | 5% |
| Midland Co | 30 | 37% | 10% | 13% | 13% | 27% | 0% | 0% |
| Northwest ED | 58 | 10% | 5% | 33% | 29% | 22% | 0% | 0% |
| Oakland | 29 | 34% | 7% | 34% | 17% | 7% | 0% | 0% |
| St. Clair Co | 29 | 55% | 0% | 17% | 21% | 7% | 0% | 0% |
| Wayne RESA | 91 | 29% | 36% | 22% | 7% | 5% | 0% | 1% |

* FPL = Federal Poverty Level. Sum of percentages per ISD may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Table 4 presents the incidence of six eligibility factors, besides the family income level, used to determine enrollment priority for *Strong Beginnings* participants in each ISD. Environmental risk is the most prevalent factor across the state, affecting 37% of all enrolled children and representing the largest eligibility category in nearly every ISD. MiLEAP defines environmental risk as the presence of one or more of the following conditions: the loss of a parent due to death, divorce, incarceration, military service, or absence; teen parenthood; homelessness; residence in a high-risk neighborhood; or pre-/postnatal exposure to toxic substances. Notably, the incidence of environmental risk varies widely by ISD, ranging from 0% in Oakland to 75% in Eastern UP. Other eligibility factors also show substantial variation across districts. For example, 43% of children in Calhoun ISD and 53% in Wayne RESA speak a home language other than English. Disability or developmental delay was most common in Eastern UP (25%), Heritage SW (18%), Midland (17%), and St. Clair County (17%), while exposure to abuse or neglect was most frequently reported in Midland (10%) and Heritage SW (9%).

Table 4. Strong Beginnings Child Eligibility Factors by ISD

| ISD | N | Environ-mental Risk | Home Language Non-English | Low Parental Education | Disability/ Delay | Abuse/ Neglect | Severe/ Challenging Behavior |
|-----------------|------------|---------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------------------|
| Michigan | 398 | 37% | 19% | 7% | 9% | 5% | 1% |
| Berrien RESA | 31 | 35% | 6% | 6% | 10% | 0% | 0% |
| Calhoun | 28 | 4% | 43% | 7% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Char-Emmet | 29 | 34% | 0% | 0% | 7% | 7% | 0% |
| Eastern UP | 16 | 75% | 0% | 6% | 25% | 6% | 0% |
| Heritage SW | 57 | 44% | 7% | 19% | 18% | 9% | 5% |
| Midland Co | 30 | 50% | 0% | 10% | 17% | 10% | 3% |
| Northwest ED | 58 | 17% | 2% | 2% | 5% | 7% | 2% |
| Oakland | 29 | 0% | 34% | 0% | 7% | 0% | 0% |
| St. Clair Co | 29 | 24% | 0% | 3% | 17% | 7% | 0% |
| Wayne RESA | 91 | 63% | 53% | 7% | 3% | 4% | 0% |

CLASSROOM QUALITY: CLASS

Classroom quality is regularly monitored in all *Strong Beginnings* classrooms to facilitate ongoing evaluation and program improvement. During the 2024–25 year, all classrooms were required to use the Classroom Assessment Scoring System 2nd Edition Pre-K – 3rd (CLASS), developed by TeachStone, to evaluate classroom quality. This tool, also used by both GSRP and Head Start, measures the quality of teacher-child interactions across three domains: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support (Teachstone, 2023).

Each classroom is observed twice per year—once at the beginning and again at the end of the year—by an Early Childhood Specialist who is trained in the CLASS tool and has passed the CLASS Reliability Test within the past year. These specialists ensure consistency and accuracy in the scoring process. However, teaching teams that have not changed from the last program year can omit the observation at the beginning of the current program year. CLASS scores range from 1 to 7, with 1–2 designating low quality, 3–5 indicating mid-range quality, and 6–7 indicating high-quality interactions. According to the CLASS reference manual, the average domain scores are 5.0 for Emotional Support and Classroom Organization, and 3.25 for Instructional Support (Teachstone, 2023). These levels are considered developmentally appropriate for benchmarks for pre-K through third grade to support optimal child development. A detailed summary of the most recent average CLASS scores for each domain and indicator is provided in Table 5.

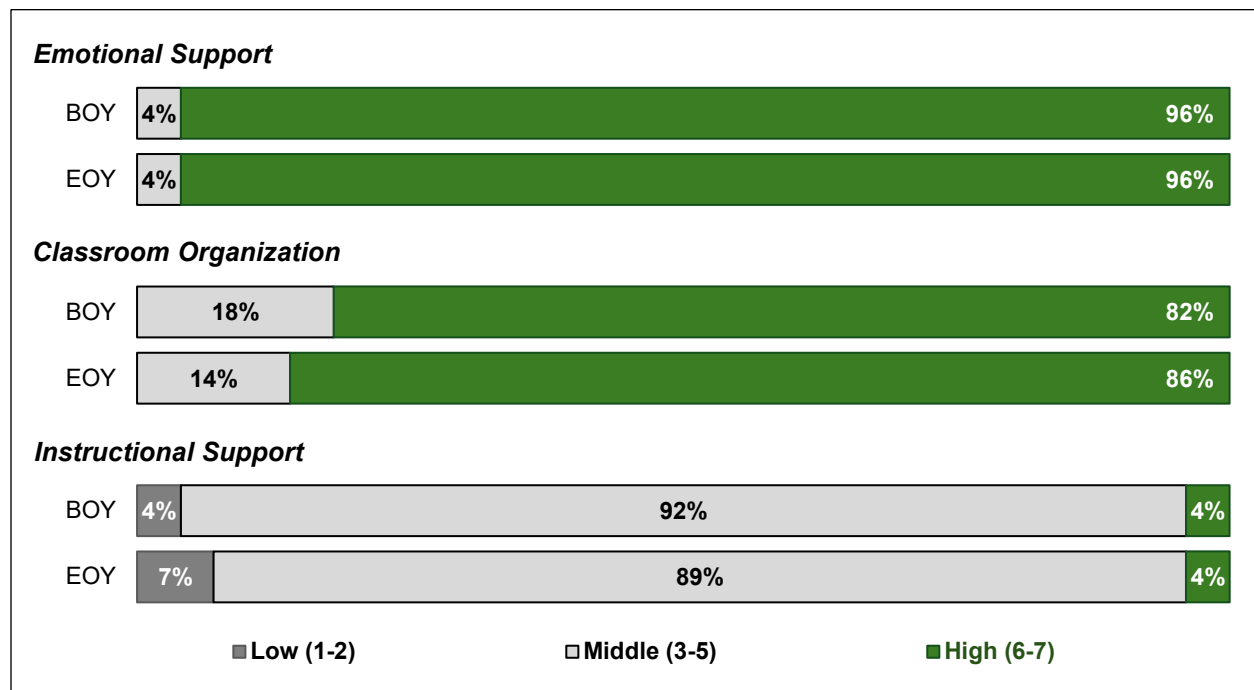
Table 5. Distribution of Classrooms by End-of-Year CLASS Quality Levels

| CLASS Item | % Low (1-2) | % Middle (3-5) | % High (6-7) |
|--------------------------------|-------------|----------------|--------------|
| Emotional Support | 0% | 4% | 96% |
| Positive Climate | 0% | 7% | 93% |
| Negative Climate* | 0% | 0% | 100% |
| Educator Sensitivity | 0% | 11% | 89% |
| Regard for Child Perspectives | 0% | 14% | 86% |
| Classroom Organization | 0% | 14% | 86% |
| Behavior Management | 0% | 18% | 82% |
| Productivity | 0% | 7% | 93% |
| Instructional Learning Formats | 0% | 32% | 68% |
| Instructional Support | 7% | 89% | 4% |
| Concept Development | 7% | 89% | 4% |
| Quality of Feedback | 11% | 79% | 11% |
| Language Modeling | 4% | 71% | 25% |

* Data was reverse coded; higher scores are better; N = 28

Most *Strong Beginnings* classrooms excelled in Emotional Support and Classroom Organization, as depicted in Figure 2. The percentage of classrooms rated as providing high-quality emotional support was maintained from the beginning to the end of the year at a high level, at 96%. The proportion of classrooms providing high-quality classroom organization rose from 74% reported at the end of the previous year to 82% at the start of the 2024–25 program year and to 86% at the end of it. Most classrooms reached the benchmark for Instructional Support with 89% within the Middle Level, and 4% of classrooms reached the high-quality range at both time points.

Figure 2. CLASS Domain Quality Ranges: Beginning of Year (BOY) vs. End of Year (EOY)

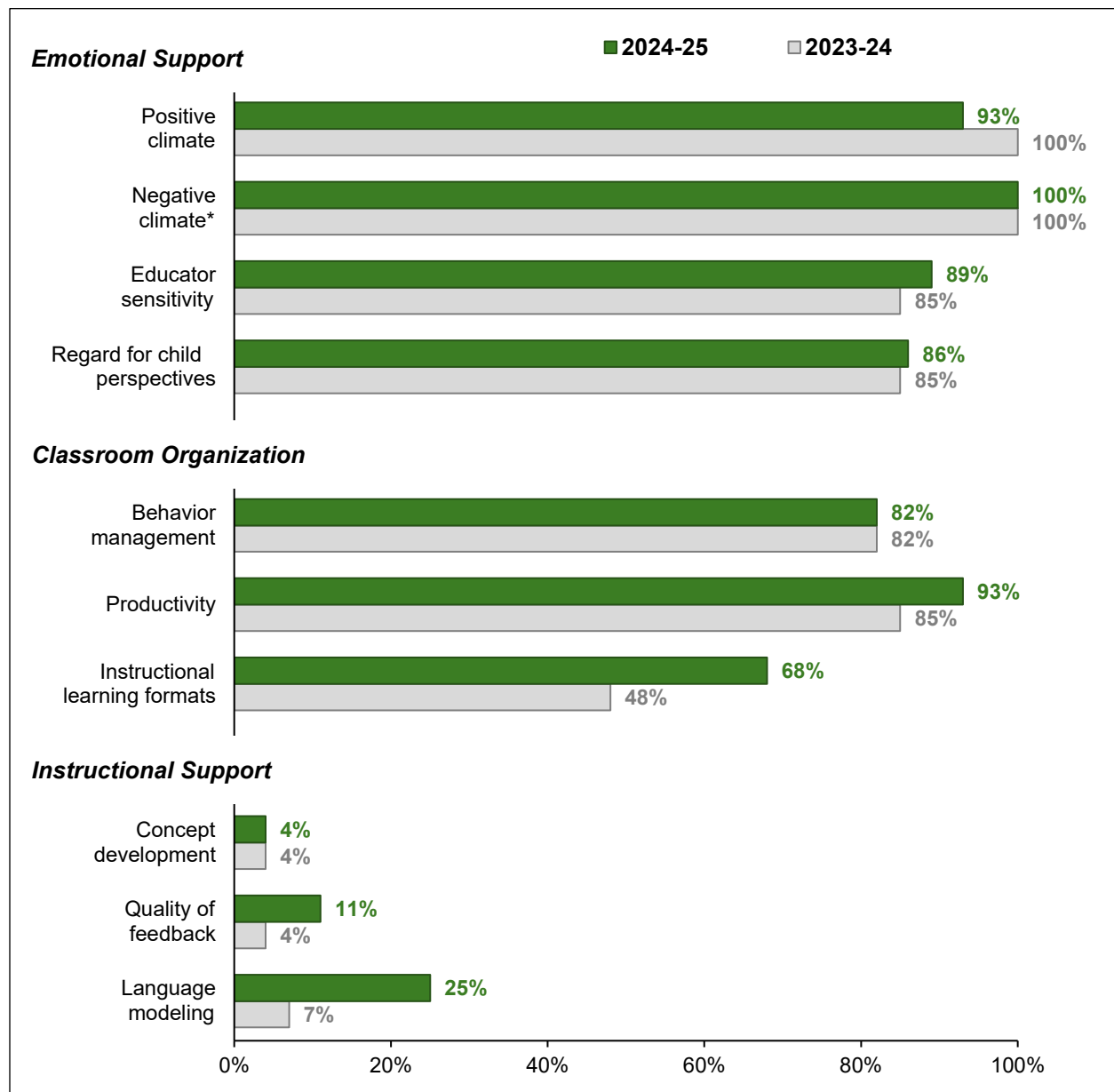


As the *Strong Beginnings* pilot continues to scale up, in 2024–25, CCRESA implemented a custom professional development course for program staff to support quality growth. This training may have positively influenced classroom quality, as reflected in the noticeable improvements in this year's scoring data. Also, compared with the previous year's data, significant improvements in CLASS high scores were observed in Instructional Learning Formats (an increase of 20 percentage points) and Language Modeling (an increase of 18 percentage points). See Figure 3 for details.



Picture credit: www.michigan.gov/mileap/

Figure 3. Percentage of High-level CLASS Scores at the End of Year, 2023-24 vs 2024–25



* The negative climate was reverse-coded to align high score with good quality.

SITE DIRECTOR'S SURVEY RESULTS

GENERAL OPERATIONS

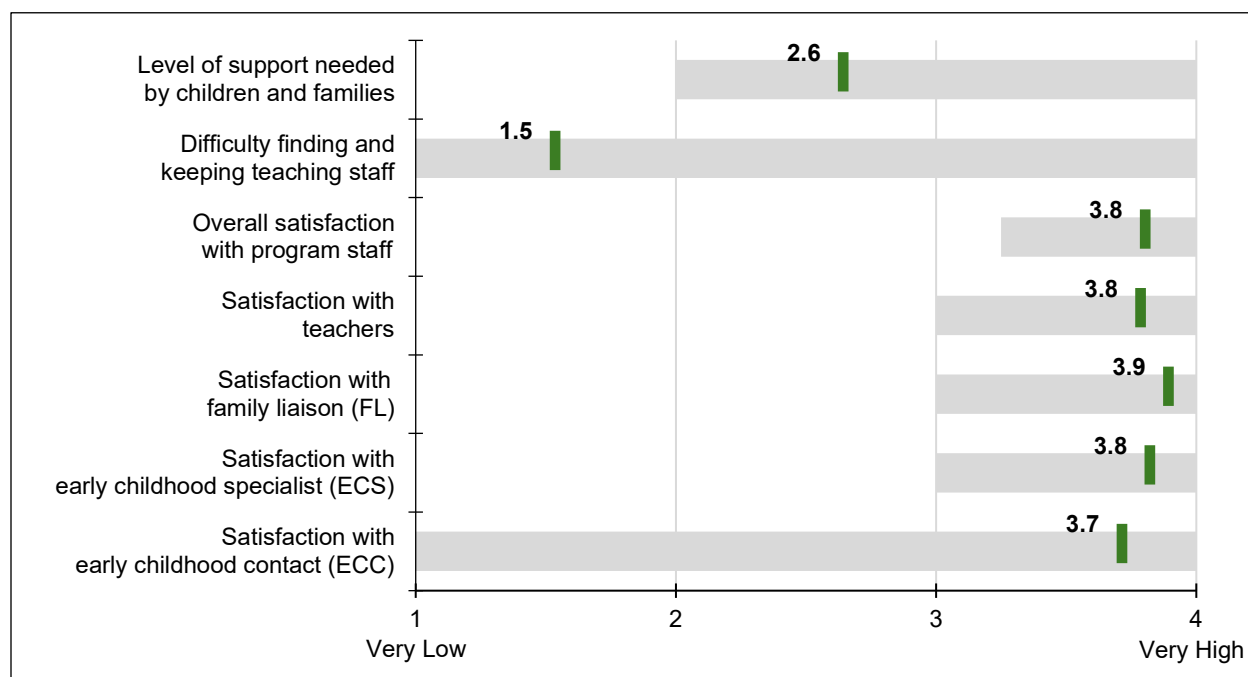
All 28 *Strong Beginnings* sites started their programming in September 2024 and ended mostly in June (64% of sites); several completed their program in May (32%) and one site in April (4%).

According to the directors, 68% of sites (19) received adequate funding to pay for the program's associated expenses. Those directors that were concerned about the inadequate grant of money

mentioned higher than expected administrative and/or salary expenses and higher program expenses.

The directors were very pleased with their program staff overall (average of 3.8 on a scale from 1 to 4 where 4 means "very high" score). Moreover, the average score for difficulty finding and keeping teaching staff was relatively low, at 1.5. (Figure 4). This positive result is not surprising given a very high percentage of sites that were able to retain their teaching staff (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Key Statewide Indicators - Mean and Range of Scores

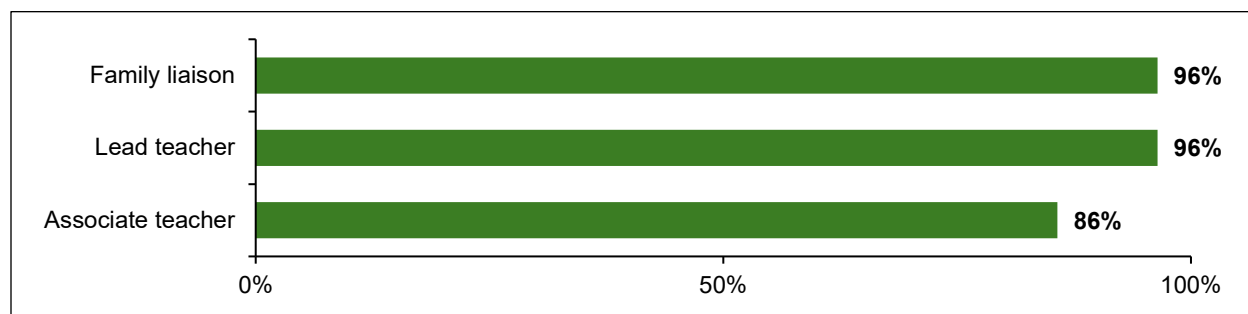


PROGRAM STAFFING

Generally, retaining the teaching staff for the entire year was not an issue, as at least 86% of sites were able to keep the positions filled for the entire duration of the program in 2024–25 (Figure 5). About 11% of sites indicated that they hired more than one associate teacher this year.

Only a minority of sites hired one or two teachers that had not met full credential requirements for the program, thus requiring a compliance plan. Specifically, 8 lead teachers were hired on a compliance plan (i.e., 29% of all sites). Ten associate teachers were hired on a compliance plan (i.e., 36% of the sites in the *Strong Beginnings* programs for 2024–25).

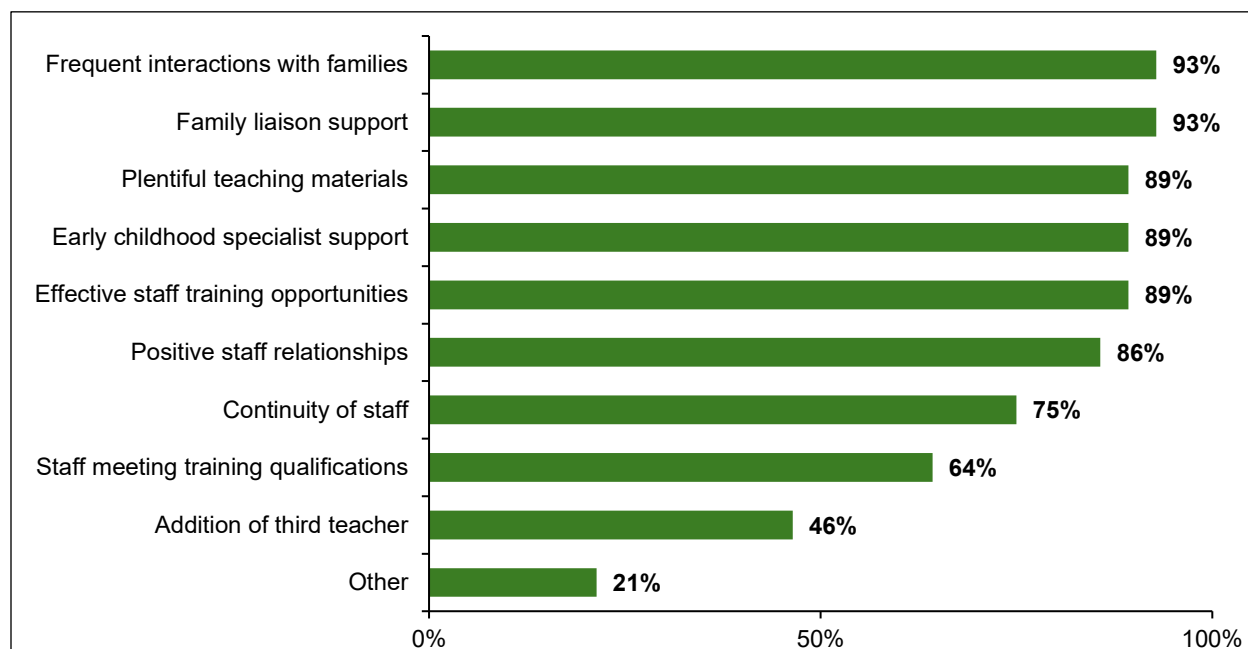
Figure 5. Percentage of Sites Retaining Program Staff for a Full Year



PROGRAM SUCCESSES

Overall, a majority of site directors indicated several factors that contributed to the successes for the teaching staff in 2024–25. Most common reasons (mentioned by at least 90% of site directors) were: frequent interactions with families, and support from the family liaison (Figure 6). Among the "Other" mentioned factors were miscellaneous staff support and high program standards and/or compliance plans.

Figure 6. Percentage of Sites Indicating Factors Contributing to Teaching Staff Successes

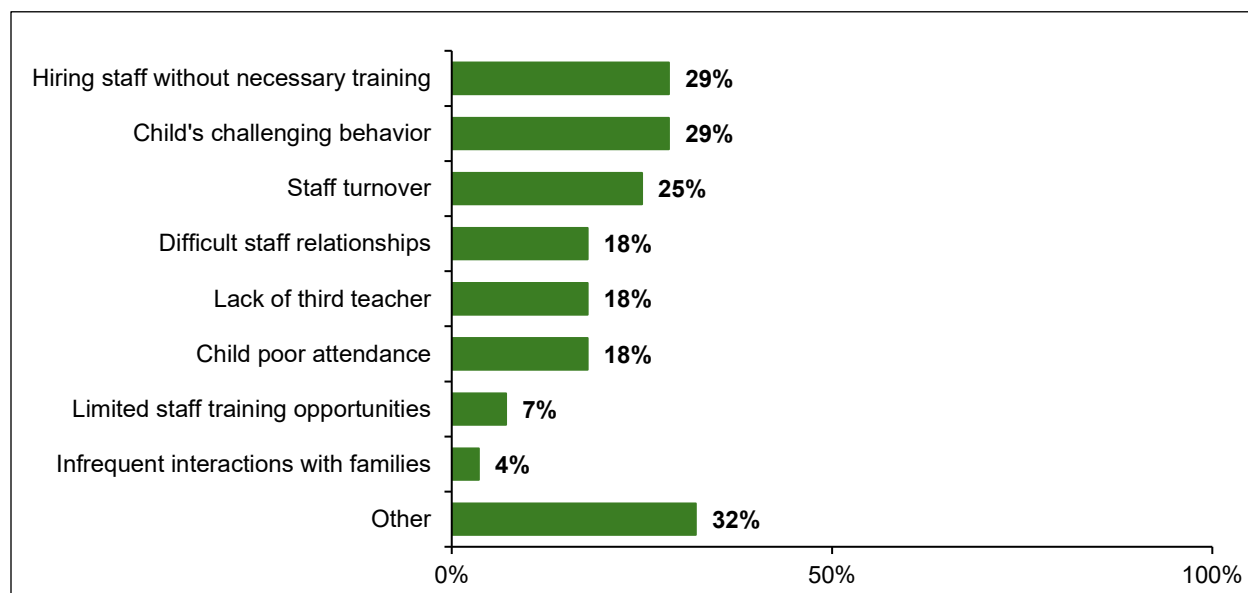


PROGRAM CHALLENGES

Overall, 21% of site directors indicated there were no specific factors contributing to challenges for the teachers. When challenges appeared (Figure 7), hiring staff without necessary training was most mentioned (29% of sites), followed by staff turnover (25%), and difficult staff relationships (18%). Non-staff related issues included many comments about children's challenging behavior (29% of sites) or poor attendance (18% of sites). Some of the "Other"

challenges mentioned were staff work/life balance challenges, or general funding was insufficient to support an extra person.

Figure 7. Percentage of Sites Indicating Factors Contributing to Teaching Staff Challenges



PROFILE OF THE DIRECTORS

There were 25 directors managing 28 *Strong Beginnings* sites. A vast majority of the directors were White [not Hispanic] (76%), followed by Black or African American (12%). Over half (56%) of the directors had a master's degree as their highest education credential. Many (24%) directors had post-master's education already completed (e.g., Ph.D. degree) or were in the process of realizing this goal.

Some directors were new to program management (0 years of experience) and some were seasoned managers with 30 years of experience. On average, the directors had almost 12 years of experience (11.8), and about half of them had 10 years or more managing any program. With regards to experience managing the *Strong Beginnings* program, a possible tenure is much shorter because the program has been in existence for only five years. The number of years of experience managing this program ranged from zero to five. On average, directors were in this position for 2.5 years, and about 60% of them were in this position for at least two years.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES

In designing *Strong Beginnings*, MiLEAP identified the pilot as “a unique opportunity to learn the need for and then provide supports that will strengthen the foundation for both children and families as they begin their journey through the school system” (CCRESA, 2024, Section 7a, p. 1). A key feature of *Strong Beginnings* is its emphasis on family engagement, which includes providing individualized support at both the child and family levels. To fulfill this goal, each classroom is required to have a family liaison—a professional dedicated to connecting families with resources, information, and ongoing support.

The specific responsibilities of the family liaison are shaped by the needs of the community they serve. For example, in areas designated as food deserts, liaisons may focus on connecting

families to food pantries or meal programs. In communities with large immigrant populations, they may prioritize sharing information about bilingual or English-learning programs. Regardless of context, family liaisons collaborate with both families and *Strong Beginnings* staff to identify family needs, offer targeted resources, and empower caregivers to become advocates for their children and themselves.

Family engagement was evaluated through two tools in the 2024–25 program year: family satisfaction surveys and the Family Liaison Self-Reflection Rubric. The rubric is designed to guide professional growth and self-assessment of family liaisons, supporting their continued development in building strong school-family partnerships.

FAMILY LIAISON SELF-REFLECTION RUBRIC

Recognizing the lack of quick, accessible PreK family engagement professional development tools, the MSU team worked with CCRESA and *Strong Beginnings*’ family liaisons and administrators to create the Family Liaison Self-Reflection Rubric. This evaluative tool was designed to provide family liaisons with best practices, a space for self-reflection, and to foster professional development conversations between liaisons and their administrators. In listening to family liaisons describe their work, three themes emerged: relationship building with families, family support and advocacy, and collaboration with *Strong Beginnings* staff and administrators. The rubric is broken down into ten indicators, allowing participants to rate their behavior on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). Additional space was given for liaisons to explain their scores and provide examples. Overall, 19 family liaisons participated in two data collection periods: October 1st to October 15th, 2024 (Pre-Test) and (Post-Test) May 5th to May 15th, 2025.

A breakdown of the average pre- and post-test domain scores is available in (Figure 8. Family Liaison Self-Reflection Rubric by Domain and Survey Period). When looking at pre- and post-test averages, family liaisons considerably improved average scores in all domains, but most significantly, in Family Support and Advocacy.

Figure 8. Family Liaison Self-Reflection Rubric by Domain and Survey Period



Average pre- and post-test scores are available in Table 6. Of the 10 indicator scores, eight saw the average score increase by 0.2 to 0.8 points, and two indicators decreased the average score between 0.1 to 0.2 points between the pre- and post-test. Indicator 6 that addresses family liaisons providing resources, listening, and encouraging families, increased the most by 0.8 points. Indicator 4, family liaison’s follow-up with families on support, and Indicator 7, family liaison’s chat with families about child’s interests, both also saw 0.5 points average increases between the two

time periods. With scores inconsistent with provided evidence for Indicator 5, the research team added additional language to clarify the behavior expectations within it for future use of the rubric.

Table 6. Family Liaison Self-Reflection Rubric Scores by Indicator and Survey Period

| Indicator | Pre | Post | Change |
|--|------------|------------|------------|
| Atmosphere and Relationship Building (Indicator 1-5) | 3.9 | 4.1 | 0.2 |
| 1. I find ways to use all children's and families' names to show my interest in them. | 4.0 | 4.7 | 0.6 |
| 2. I chat regularly with all families in-person or check in with them over the phone. | 4.5 | 4.4 | -0.1 |
| 3. I return families' calls, texts, and emails within 48 hours. | 4.4 | 4.6 | 0.2 |
| 4. I follow up with individual families to see if my support to them was helpful. | 3.9 | 4.4 | 0.5 |
| 5. I promote a welcoming and inclusive environment for all families. | 2.8 | 2.5 | -0.2 |
| Family Support and Advocacy (Indicators 6-8) | 3.7 | 4.3 | 0.5 |
| 6. I strengthen families by providing resources, active listening, and encouraging them to be their own advocates. | 3.5 | 4.4 | 0.8 |
| 7. I chat with families about their child's interests and how they integrate them into their daily activities at home. | 3.5 | 4.0 | 0.5 |
| 8. I make sure families have support to address their child's social, emotional, and behavioral needs. | 4.2 | 4.4 | 0.2 |
| Professional Team Building (Indicators 9 & 10) | 4.5 | 4.7 | 0.2 |
| 9. My working relationship with classroom teachers is both positive and effective. | 4.6 | 4.9 | 0.3 |
| 10. My administrators provide me with strong support. | 4.4 | 4.6 | 0.2 |

N = 19.

FAMILY SATISFACTION SURVEY

To assess the effectiveness of family engagement efforts, the MSU evaluation team developed a family satisfaction survey for *Strong Beginnings* families. Lead teachers or family liaisons were asked to distribute links to the survey via email, paper copies available upon request. The survey was offered in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Burmese to increase accessibility. It focused on three key areas—instruction, communication, and support, and asked respondents to rate 12 items using a 4-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4).

A total of 341 responses were collected between April and May 2025. Seventy-nine cases were dropped for being duplicates or less than 12% complete. Of the 262 usable responses, representing an estimated 66% return rate, most respondents (84%) identified themselves as mothers, including step- and foster mothers. A little less than half (46%) of respondents identified their child as non-White, including 18% as Black or African American; 10% as Latino; 8% as Biracial, Multiracial, or mixed race; 6% as Middle Eastern, North African, or Arab American; 4% as Asian; and 2% as American Indian or Alaska Native.

Two economic questions were added to the 2024–25 survey that asked if families could improve their employment or training opportunities while their child attended *Strong Beginnings* programs, and what obstacles, if any, prevented them from making these improvements. A vast majority, 89% of families surveyed, reported at least one benefit outside of tuition savings (Figure 9). It is also noteworthy that about 9% of respondents were not looking for more work or training.

Figure 9. Family-Reported Economic Benefits from Child Participation in *Strong Beginnings*

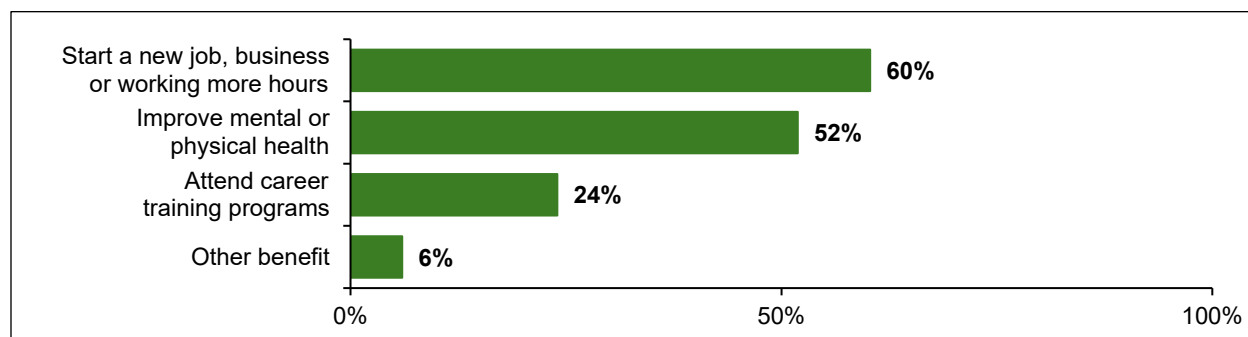


Table 7 presents the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each survey statement. Overall, family survey respondents were highly satisfied with the programs across all dimensions.

Table 7. Families in (Strong) Agreement with Positive Statements About the *Strong Beginnings*' Services and Impacts

| Survey Item | % Agree or Strongly Agree |
|--|---------------------------|
| Instructional Quality | |
| 1. My child loves going to this program | 98% |
| 2. My child has developed new skills and/or abilities from attending the program | 97% |
| 3. My child's classroom has plenty of toys and learning materials | 98% |
| 4. My child knows the rules and routines of this program | 98% |
| Communication | |
| 5. I feel the teachers have a good sense of my child's interests and how to work with my child | 98% |
| 6. The teachers design activities that expose my child to the culture, history, or communities we care about | 98% |
| 7. This program makes me, the caregiver, feel supported and welcomed | 97% |
| 8. I am well informed about what my child is doing at the program | 97% |
| 9. The field trips or special events I attended were well organized | 98% |
| Support | |
| 10. This program checked in with me about my child's interests and how we interact with each other at home | 97% |
| 11. This program makes sure I have support to address my child's social, emotional, and behavioral needs | 97% |
| 12. The family liaison at this program knows my and my child's name | 98% |
| 13. My family liaison spends time talking and listening to me | 98% |

Reported percentage is based solely on scoring 'Agree/Strongly Agree' or 'Disagree/Strongly Disagree.' Selection of 'I don't know' is not included in percentages but accounted for below.

Participants who responded to 'I do not know' or 'Not applicable' by question include: 1. = 3%, 2. = 3%, 3. = 3%, 4. = 3%, 5. = 3%, 6. = 4%, 7. = 3%, 8. = 3%, 9. = 15%, 10. = 4%, 11. = 4%, 12. = 6%, 13. = 9%; N = 262.

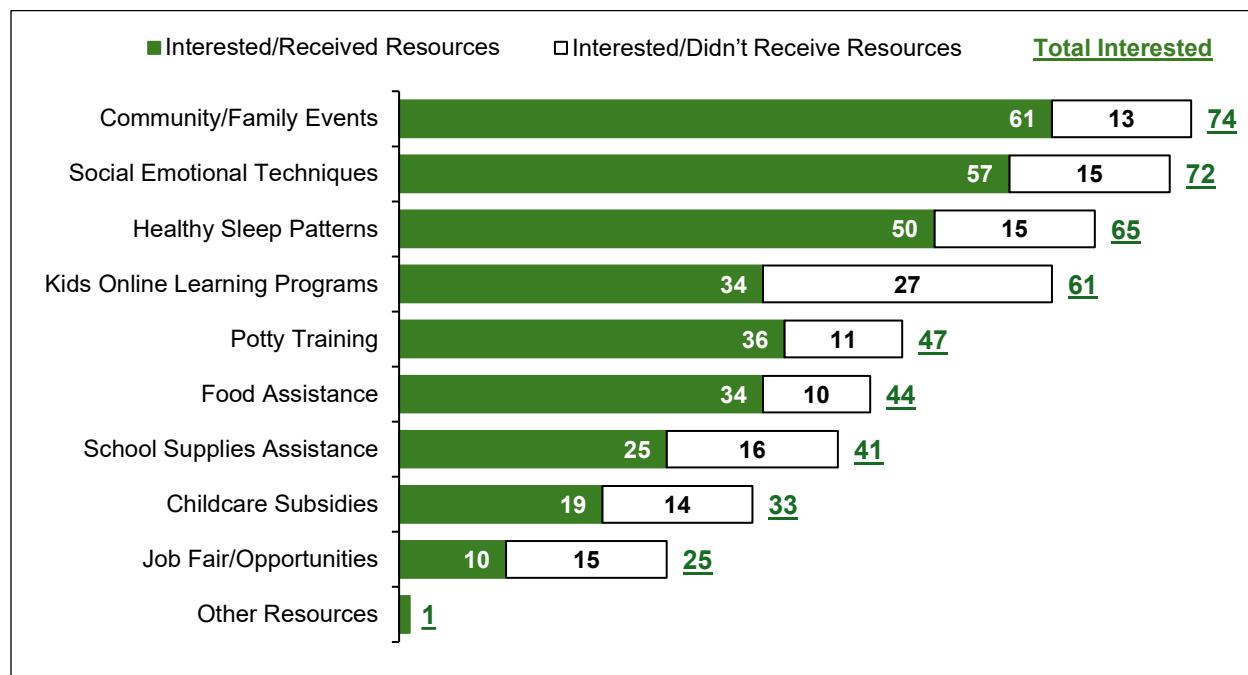
Some quotes from family respondents include:

- *“My daughter gets to learn and associate with other children. I get to work and be able to supply for my family.”*

- “Honestly, not having to pay for childcare has been extremely helpful. My daughter enjoys school and loves playing with her friends. I’m happy it’s an environment where she feels safe, comfortable and happy.”
- “The most helpful part of the program has been the caring and supportive staff. They truly take the time to get to know my child and help them feel safe and confident. We’ve also appreciated the consistent communication and the way learning activities are shared so we can support our child’s development at home.”

A key component of *Strong Beginnings* is providing families with support and information. Figure 10 details the number of inquiries by families into each topic, as well as whether they received resources or support for that topic. The most reported support received included community and family events (61 families), guidance on social and emotional development (57 families), and healthy sleep patterns (50). Families also expressed strong interest in additional topics, including potty training (36), food assistance (34), and online learning opportunities for their child (34).

Figure 10. Number of Respondent Inquiries into Support Received or Reported Interest In



CONCLUSION

Of the 398 children enrolled in *Strong Beginnings* in Year 5, 97% came from families with household incomes at or below 250% of FPL. About 58% had at least one non-income-related risk factor. *Strong Beginnings* mandate to target children whose backgrounds could hinder their school readiness has been met this year. Approximately 40% of *Strong Beginnings* children were non-White.

Survey feedback from families on *Strong Beginnings* remains consistently positive with questions receiving 97-98% of the responses from the Agree or Strongly Agree categories. Family Liaison

Self-Reflection Rubric domain score averages from 4.12 to 4.73 out of 5 points. Site Directors expressed a high level of satisfaction with their program staff and a low level of concern for staff turnover during the 2024–25 school year.

Strong Beginnings' high CLASS scores suggest that the pilot is successfully delivering high-quality PreK experiences to low-income and at-risk three-year-olds. In 2024–25, targeted professional development in classroom organization and instructional support appear to have been positively impacting CLASS scores. Given the strong link between classroom quality and PreK impact, maintaining and growing *Strong Beginnings* will be crucial to achieving long-term benefits for participating children.

The pilot's expansion into 28 classrooms and ten ISDs enables *Strong Beginnings* to reflect the state's geographic, socioeconomic, and racial diversity. Preserving this diversity—and confirming it through future data collection and reporting—will be vital to ensure that Michigan's investment in publicly funded PreK equitably serves all eligible children across the state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, *Strong Beginnings* in Year 5 demonstrates strong progress in delivering high quality experiences for its intended population. Several areas of continued or expanded support are recommended to strengthen program impact.

With noticeable changes to CLASS scores following the CCRESA custom professional development, expanding this effort to concepts within the Instructional Support domain will further improve classroom quality. Providing ongoing coaching or professional learning groups throughout the school year to support staff with varying levels of expertise will reinforce and deepen their mastery of skills introduced earlier in the year.

Families continue to report resources they are interested in receiving but have not received. Developing a centralized online list of child development materials and sharing it with all families could increase access to the resources. Information about healthy sleep, potty training, and social/emotional development techniques relevant to 3-year-old children would help ensure consistent messaging statewide.

With Phase Two of the pilot program beginning in 2025-26, variations of the *Strong Beginnings* model will be introduced. Clear communication and structured guidance will be essential to ensure consistent expectations across all settings and reducing staff uncertainty. Pairing updated implementation manuals with essential training and targeted coaching on specific model variations (e.g., inclusive practices, teaching practices for mixed-age classrooms, preserving planning time during full week programming) will help maintain the high level of classroom quality and family satisfaction that has been a cornerstone of *Strong Beginnings*.

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