

ELIGIBILITY

Age

The Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) was designed to provide high-quality preschool to children at risk for low educational attainment in the school year before they are eligible for kindergarten; children enrolled in GSRP must be at least four, but less than 5, years of age as of the date specified for determining a child's eligibility to attend school under section 1147 of the revised school code, MCL 380.1147 and Public Act 85 of 2015 (PA 85).

For GSRP, this means a child must turn 4 years of age on or before September 1. The provision for parent choice included under section 1147 also applies however. This means that parents of children who will turn 4 after September 1, but on or before December 1, may apply for early entry into GSRP. Applications submitted that meet this condition must be considered alongside all other applications when enrollment decisions are made. This includes referral to Head Start for any qualified child, regardless of age.

An assumption is made that parents opting to enroll their child in GSRP early, expect to also use the provision for parent choice under section 1147 to enroll their child early in kindergarten the following fall. If there is a change to the plan to enroll in kindergarten early, a second year of GSRP is permissible to avoid a break in educational programming for the child. This requires that the parent apply for a second year of GSRP and, if still eligible, the child may be accepted based on the ISD's prioritization process and available space.

Income

Income for each family must be verified before determining that a child is eligible to participate in the program. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) strongly encourages use of the *Income Verification* form, found in the resources for this section, and encourages programs to maintain copies of all eligibility documents along with the eligibility verification form in the child's official record.

Grantees should provide annual training to employees responsible for determining and verifying income eligibility. All staff must have clear understanding of effective practices to protect personally identifying information.

Income means total cash receipts before taxes from all sources, with the exceptions noted below. Income includes money wages or salary before deductions; net income from self-employment; regular payments from Social Security or railroad retirement; payments from unemployment compensation, strike benefits from union funds, workers' compensation, veterans benefits (with the exception noted below), public assistance (including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Security Income, Emergency Assistance money payments, and non-Federally funded General Assistance or General Relief money payments); training stipends; alimony, child support, and military family allotments or other regular support from an absent family member or someone not living in the household;

private pensions, government employee pensions (including military retirement pay), and regular insurance or annuity payments; college or university scholarships, grants, fellowships, and assistantships; and dividends, interest, net rental income, net royalties, and periodic receipts from estates or trusts; and net gambling or lottery winnings. The *Income Eligibility Guidelines* can be found in the resources for this section.

Grantees may consider the income:

- Of the last 12 months,
- Of the preceding calendar year, or
- At the time of enrollment.

For example, if neither the last 12 months or the preceding calendar year accurately represents the family's situation at the time of enrollment (e.g., because the parent is recently unemployed) then the GSRP grantee should use its judgment in deciding if it seems likely that the current situation more accurately reflects a family's likely economic status during the period of the child's enrollment.

A family includes all persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption, living within a household who are supported by the income of the parent or guardian of the child enrolling or participating in the program. A parent who is not living in the prospective child's home and is not likely to return to that home anytime in the near future (i.e., during the child's participation in GSRP) should not, however, be included when determining family size (with the exception of a deployed parent). Programs must make individual judgments about whether the absent parent is truly part of the child's family or not and to document, in the child's file, the decision and the reasons for that decision.

For parents who have joint custody, the total number of family members for both families are summed and then divided in half, rounding up when necessary. For example, if both custodial parents have remarried and each has a child from this marriage, the family size is 2 custodial parents + 2 spouses + 2 children + GSRP child = 7; divided by 2 = 3.5, or rounding up, 4. If one parent is paying any child support to the other parent, the income of the parent receiving the child support should be used for determining income eligibility. If neither parent is providing any child support to the other, the program should count half of each parent's income and the sum of these two should be used by the program in determining income.

A child from a family that is receiving public assistance, a child in foster care, or a child who is homeless is eligible for Head Start. If a child in foster care or a child who is homeless has been referred to Head Start but is not enrolled, the family may apply for GSRP. In these cases, the family's income is considered to be in the lowest quintile, 0 – 50% FPL. Additionally, a child with an individualized education program (IEP) recommending placement in an inclusive preschool setting who is income eligible for Head Start must be referred to the local Head Start agency. However, if the child is not eligible for and enrolled in Head Start, the family may apply for GSRP and the family's income is considered to be in the lowest quintile, 0 – 50% FPL.

If a family claims it has no income, the family is also eligible for Head Start and must be referred to the local Head Start agency. If the family is unable to provide

income documentation, the program must determine the accuracy of the verbal report of income. Grantees can gather information (i.e., living arrangements, assets, etc.) to make an informed judgment about the family's income status.

Student loans are excluded as income. This is true whether student loans are federally insured or commercially issued. Student grants for tuition/books are exempt from income calculations. However, grants for room/board/living expenses should be used to calculate income. Scholarships, fellowships and grant funds received in cash and not used for qualified educational expenses are also considered income.

If a parent is an active member of the U.S. Armed Forces, [certain pay can be excluded from family gross cash income](#) (<http://www.irs.gov/publications/p3/ar02.html>). Please be aware that an adjusted family income may make the family income-eligible for Head Start, and in that case, must be referred to Head Start. The following are NOT included as gross cash income for active duty U.S. Armed Forces personnel:

- Living Allowances – Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) even if BAH is used to pay mortgage interest and taxes, Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS), housing and cost of living allowances abroad, Overseas Housing Allowance (OHA).
- Moving Allowances – moving household and personal items, storage, moving trailers or mobile homes, temporary lodging, dislocation, military base realignment, and closure benefit.
- Travel Allowances – annual roundtrip for dependent students, leave between consecutive overseas tours, reassignment in a dependent restricted status, transportation during ship overhaul and inactivation, per diem.
- Family Allowances – specified educational expenses for dependents, emergencies, evacuation to a place of safety, separation.
- Death Allowances - burial services, death gratuity payments to eligible survivors, travel of dependents to burial site.
- In-kind Benefits – dependent-care assistance, legal assistance, medical/dental care, commissary/exchange discounts, space-available travel on government carriers.
- Other payments – disability, group-term life insurance, professional education, ROTC educational and subsistence allowances, uniform allowances, survivor and retirement protection plan premiums.

The best documentation of income is a copy of the most recent tax return. Alternate forms of documentation are paycheck stubs (indicate pay period: bi-weekly, weekly, etc.), W-2 forms, written statements from employers, or documentation showing current status as recipients of public assistance. The program's documentation verifying the income calculation must be signed by the staff member and retained in the child's file.

Documenting Risk Factors

There are seven risk factors. Based on the prevalence data, family income is the main factor in determining eligibility for GSRP. Tiered income eligibility ensures

that GSRP finds and provides services to its target population and focuses on those most at risk. However, risk factors must be collected and considered before enrolling a child in GSRP.

When deciding whether a situation or condition should be considered a risk factor, the most important question to ask is whether and how the situation puts the child at risk of school failure and how the risk factor will have a negative impact on the child's development. If the situation or condition is not something that puts the child's educational future at risk, then it is not a risk factor for that child.

The seven risk factors used to determine GSRP eligibility are:

1. Low family income
2. Diagnosed disability or identified developmental delay
3. Severe or challenging behavior
4. Primary home language other than English
5. Parent(s) with low educational attainment
6. Abuse/neglect of child or parent
7. Environmental risk

The same condition or concern should not be counted twice; e.g., a child with severe or challenging behavior should not also be considered as having a developmental delay in the social/emotional domain. Additionally, more than one situation under environmental risk may apply to a child and should be documented; however, environmental risk may be counted as only one risk factor.

It is recommended that programs record all risk factors for each child at the time of enrollment; additional risk factors that staff become aware of beyond the enrollment period are also recorded. The documentation is helpful in designing program services for children, making referrals for family members and helping to create summaries of risk factor prevalence locally and state-wide. When "parent report" can be used as documentation, the interviewer and the parent can sign and date a form indicating which risk factors pertain. Alternately, a note can be included in the file with the staff member's signature and date indicating WHAT the parent reported; e.g., to document parent report of low educational attainment, the following could be noted:

*8/12/10 - At the intake interview, Ms. Brown reported that she has a GED and the child's father has not graduated from high school.
Julie Smith, Lead Teacher*

The chart, *Risk Factor Definitions*, found in the resources for this section, will help to further define each of the risk factors and suggest possible ways to document them. MDE collects risk factor information on each enrolled child in the *Child Information and Staff Report (CISR)*, and documentation is reviewed during monitoring.

Sensitive Interviewing

Many programs use a brief phone interview to initially screen children to determine whether they might be eligible. A family that seems to have an eligible child should be invited for a more in-depth interview. Giving parents a list of questions or factors to fill out on their own is not recommended; many topics are confidential and can be uncomfortable to address. Parents should be assured that confidentiality is strictly maintained and that the program carefully protects personal information. Sensitive interviewing techniques help to build the strong relational foundation for helpful and appropriate services for children and families.