



1300 Sumter Street • Concord Bldg., Suite 100 • Columbia, South Carolina 29201  
Phone 803-734-0479 • Fax 803-734-1431 • Web site [www.scfirststeps.org](http://www.scfirststeps.org)

**Media Advisory**  
Tuesday, February 24, 2004

**CONTACT:**  
Felice Lampert, (803) 734-1025

**Business Leaders and Early Education Advocates  
Meet Feb. 26 to Focus on Economic Development**  
*First Steps/United Way luncheon features Oklahoma business  
leader who promoted universal pre-kindergarten program*

**Columbia, SC** – Early childhood advocates and business leaders from around the state will meet at the Columbia Conference Center on Thursday, February 26, 2004 at 12:00 noon to learn how investing in quality preschool can help economic development.

The event, sponsored by South Carolina First Steps and the United Way Association of South Carolina, features T.D. “Pete” Churchwell, a business leader who helped forge a strong community partnership in his home state of Oklahoma. Mr. Churchwell heads Oklahoma’s largest electric utility. This effort led to the creation of a universal pre-kindergarten program for that state’s children and a statewide commitment to school readiness.

“As we seek to improve the economic outlook for all South Carolinians, we must recognize what business leaders and top economists around the nation have discovered – the best investment we can make for the future prosperity of our state is an investment in our state’s youngest citizens,” said First Steps state director Susan DeVenny.

The Early Education = Economic Development luncheon takes place on the heels of a survey released last week by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) which points to the lack of investment nationally in preschool. The NIEER report states research demonstrates conclusively the need for greater state and federal investments in high quality preschool programs. South Carolina was ranked fourth, behind Oklahoma, Georgia and Texas in providing access to state-funded preschool programs.

“South Carolina stands as one of the nation’s leaders for making high quality preschool programs available,” said Steve Barnett, director of NIEER.

“South Carolina enrolled 29 percent of its 4-year-olds in the state preschool program, earning it the 4<sup>th</sup> highest ranking in the country,” said Barnett. “Further, the quality of the program stacks up among some of the highest in the nation by meeting seven out of 10 research-based quality standard benchmarks. Of those seven benchmarks, the state meets the most important ones by requiring the preschool teachers to have a bachelor’s degree with specialized early childhood training, as well as adequate class size and low staff to child ratios.

Barnett called for a greater investment in preschool by South Carolinians. “State financial support per child enrolled ranked only 33<sup>rd</sup> in the country. Greater state support would help ensure that all children served receive a highly effective preschool education. In addition,

-More-

the program could be expanded to bring this opportunity to even more of South Carolina's children."

For more information on the Early Education = Economic Development event, contact Sarah Conrad, United Way Association of SC at (803) 929-1000, ext. 14 or Debbie Robertson, SC First Steps at (803) 734-2362. To access the NIEER State Preschool Yearbook, visit the web site at [www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org).

Our Vision: Every child in South Carolina will arrive at first grade ready to succeed.

###