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May 31, 2005

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**Countdown to Kindergarten, South Carolina!**

*by Stephanie Seay, South Carolina Teacher of the Year 2005 - 2006*

Lazy days of summer. Long days in the hot sun. Baseball, swimming, iced tea, hot sand, fireflies. These are the harbingers of summer we all welcome and, frankly, yearn for this time of year. As we usher in the season of sunshine, sunscreen and leisure, we also usher in a new crop of graduates. From preschool, Kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school grads to college and post-graduate mortar board sporters, South Carolina can be proud of these students of all ages who have met the standards for promotion. To these hard working children and young people, we say "Congratulations!" Use the summer months to extend the learning successes you have achieved. You will continue to go far.

There is also in the Palmetto State a very young, very ready group of young learners, just preparing for school. Recent South Carolina census estimates place the birth to age 5 population at over 331,000, up 4 percent since 2000. This cohort of children is learning every day, through play and quality interactions in the home, at preschool, or in child care settings in communities all across the state. Parents are a child's first and best teacher. Child care providers serve "in loco parentis," as early education partners in approximately 66 percent of homes with children under the age of 6, where mothers work outside of the home. Families and early educators alike are daily preparing children to be ready for school success...in their most formative years.

Each year, I join Kindergarten teachers across this state as we welcome approximately 55,000 new Kindergarten students into our classrooms, ready to learn and uniquely poised to begin the formal education journey our recent high school graduates did thirteen years ago. Believe it or not, these children --just five years old-- have already passed their prime learning years. Between the ages of 0-4, most all of the brain's neural connections have been formed, predicting school achievement and life success. Sadly, some children begin school far behind, and often remain behind during their academic years without remediation and extra support. These children may not graduate or achieve in the workplace of the future. This is why early education is so vital, and a job best achieved through partnerships at the community level: parents, child care and preschool teachers, faith and agency partners, school and local leaders in public and private sectors.

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South Carolina can be proud of its leadership for young children, and steps taken to focus more intently on early education. We can be proud that our state has provided 4-year-old Child Development for our most at-risk children since the mid-1980's, and has provided full-day Kindergarten for our youngest learners since the late 1990s. More recent successes include the creation five years ago of First Steps partnerships across South Carolina, focused entirely on children ages 0-5 and local strategies to strengthen children's readiness for school. These collaborative, community and state coalitions focus on readiness strategies that make a difference, in the years where science and medical professionals tell us we must: birth to five. We are all making progress, together, neighborhood by neighborhood, to increase our children's preparedness for school.

I join Governor Sanford as he proclaims June 1 "International Children's Day," honoring the unique role of children worldwide, and serving as the 2005 launch of South Carolina's Countdown to Kindergarten, our state's nationally-recognized school transition strategy. I am proud to serve as this year's Ambassador for Countdown to Kindergarten, a partnership initiative designed to assist rising Kindergarteners and their families make a successful bridge into school. Built on the community infrastructure of First Steps, local partners and school professionals will spend summer months NOT lounging by the TV or pool, but working intently with rising Kindergarten students and their families, introducing them to important learning materials and parent involvement techniques, and providing books and teaching toolkits for the home. I am proud to say that during this summer alone, Countdown to Kindergarten will reach nearly 1300 children and their families in 35 counties! This community-based model focuses local partners and limited resources on building sustainable, early school successes for children and involvement strategies for their families. To the many hundreds of Countdown partners, volunteers, and supporters across the state, I say thanks. Your time is a great gift to these children.

I am honored to serve this state as its Teacher of the Year. But I am most proud of the work we can all do together, united in mission, to bring children to the Kindergarten door more prepared for learning and not "left behind." To get involved in your local Countdown to Kindergarten program, contact your local First Steps partnership today. You can make a difference and together we must. Take it from a Kindergarten teacher: each day following the birth of a child is truly the "Countdown to Kindergarten!"

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*Stephanie Seay was recently named State Teacher of the Year for the 2005-2006 school year by the South Carolina Department of Education. Seay has taught school for ten years and recently completed the school year at Wellford Elementary in Spartanburg, where she is a kindergarten teacher. Seay will take a yearlong sabbatical from the classroom to represent South Carolina's 50,000 teachers.*