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IMPROVED PACT SCORES A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION AT SC FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS

Columbia, SC – News of improving PACT scores during 2004-2005 not only buoyed spirits within South Carolina schools this week, it was cause for celebration among those working to ensure the preparedness of the state's preschoolers. The South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness initiative began direct service to children in eighteen counties during the 2000-2001 school year, making this week's 3rd grade results the first to contain any children touched by First Steps programming.

"While the initiative was still clearly in its beginning stages, we did provide services that year - including new and expanded 4K slots to children in nine counties," said Susan DeVenny, Executive Director. "This is the first PACT release to include First Steps participants in even a limited number, so we're delighted not only to have reached this important milestone, but we're thrilled by the news that the scores are rising."

First Steps partnerships exist in each of the state's 46 counties, filling locally identified school readiness gaps under the supervision of community partnership boards. Since inception the initiative has expanded high-quality 4K in both the public and private sectors, enhanced child care quality, and provided intensive parenting supports. In 2004, First Steps implemented "Countdown to Kindergarten," a school transition program for rising kindergartners recently identified as a "Promising Practice" by the National Governors' Association. Because of First Steps' focus on improved early development, many original participants will not reach the 3rd grade testing threshold for several more years.

"Ultimately, we exist to improve the academic performance of the state's children," explained Dan Wuori, South Carolina School Readiness Officer. "First Steps simply begins its work earlier than the public schools - something critical to improving long-term outcomes like those measured by PACT."

Research now suggests that significant language and achievement gaps exist long before most children begin formal schooling. One prominent study by Hart and Risley suggests a gap of 30 million words spoken in the homes of the best- and least-educated parents by age 3. "Clearly, early experiences are key," notes Wuori.

"You can be sure we'll be trending PACT scores for many years to come," says DeVenny. "We're confident that South Carolina's investment in young children is one that will pay long-term dividends to taxpayers."

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South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness ('First Steps') is a comprehensive, results-oriented statewide education initiative to help prepare children to reach school healthy and ready to succeed. Public and private support are combined through county partnerships to enable individual communities to address the unmet needs of young children and their families.

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