



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

December 6, 2005

**CONTACT**

Meghan McGuire  
(803) 734-0479

**\*\*\*EMBARGOED UNTIL STUDY RELEASE – 12:01 A.M., DECEMBER 6, 2005\*\*\***

**LOW INCOME STUDENTS REAP LARGEST REWARDS FROM PRE-K IN SOUTH CAROLINA**

**Columbia, S.C.** – A new study of South Carolina’s state-funded pre-kindergarten (pre-k) programs suggests significant improvements in the early language and literacy development of participating students, with the largest gains posted by children from low-income families.

The study, *The Effects of South Carolina’s Early Childhood Programs on Young Children’s School Readiness*, released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) of Rutgers University, estimates the growth of incoming kindergartners who participated in pre-k through either the state’s Child Development Program or the SC First Steps to School Readiness Initiative as 4-year-olds.

The researchers concluded that as a result of attending South Carolina pre-k programs at age 4:

- South Carolina children showed gains in vocabulary that were 42 percent higher than those of children without the program. This translates into an additional three months of progress in vocabulary growth due to participation, an important outcome as a strong predictor of general cognitive ability and future reading success.
- South Carolina’s preschool programs had strong effects on children’s understanding of “print concepts,” including letter knowledge and letter-sound associations. The program produced a 102 percent increase in growth in print concept awareness among all enrolled children, with still greater gains (8 percent higher) produced by the 61 percent of current 4-year-old students in the program who qualify for lunch subsidies.

“The study reinforces South Carolina’s national leadership in providing high quality pre-k, in both public and private settings,” remarked Susan DeVenny, executive director of the state’s school readiness initiative, South Carolina First Steps.

“While it’s clear that all share in the benefits of high quality pre-k, this study echoes what may be the field’s best established fact: high risk children --particularly those from low income families-- have the most to gain,” said DeVenny. “The NIEER research further reinforces our state’s priority, set forth in the mid-1980s with the establishment of the South Carolina Child Development Program: to reach children in greatest need.”

The NIEER study is the second recent report to suggest strong pre-k effects for low-income students. In 2004, the South Carolina Department of Education’s long-term study, *What is the Penny Buying for South Carolina*, reported that pre-k participants who qualified for free or reduced-price lunches in 1995-

– continued –

1996 scored significantly higher than similar non-participants, on both the PACT English Language Arts and Mathematics tests as fourth and fifth graders.

During the 2004-2005 school year, just under 31 percent of South Carolina's 4-year-olds participated in state-funded pre-k, through public schools or the First Steps initiative (which operates equivalent pre-k classrooms in both school and private child care settings who meet quality requirements). Recent estimates suggest that an additional 14 percent of South Carolina's 56,054 4-year-olds receive services through Head Start, preschool special education, or the ABC Child Care Voucher System.

"Nearly half of the state's 4-year-olds access some form of publicly subsidized pre-k," notes Dan Wuori, First Steps' school readiness officer. "The questions now are: Are we consistently reaching the right kids, and how do we coordinate this access across public funding streams to ensure uniform quality and results?"

Many of the field's best-known studies confirm the benefits of targeted early intervention for low-income children. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, an intensive two-year model pre-k program targeting low-income preschoolers (ages 3 and 4) and their parents in the 1960's, has now tracked its original participants through age 40. The long-term study estimates a wide variety of educational and societal benefits, and is widely known for its "return on investment" findings to both participants and taxpayers. In March 2003, the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank reported a return on investment of \$16 on every dollar invested in the Perry project.

South Carolina is widely regarded as a leader in early childhood education. One of only nine states to offer full-day 5-year-old kindergarten to all children, the state also ranks highly in access to publicly-funded 4k: South Carolina is one of only seven states where 100 percent of school districts offer either half- or full-day pre-k, according the NIEER's 2004 State Preschool Yearbook, *The State of Preschool*. NIEER currently ranks South Carolina 4<sup>th</sup> in nation for pre-k access.

The South Carolina evaluation, jointly funded by First Steps and the SC Department of Education, was part of a larger study of high quality, state-funded pre-k programs in five states. The other states were Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma and West Virginia.

"This is terrific news for early childhood education in South Carolina," said DeVenny. "Today we applaud the efforts of pre-k teachers across the state. It's clear that their work is making a difference – particularly for low income kids."

###

*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.*