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**SOUTH CAROLINA FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS ACT REAUTHORIZED THROUGH 2013**

*Early childhood education initiative will help SC's young children prepare for school for years to come*

**Columbia, S.C.** – In a ceremonial bill signing, Governor Mark Sanford today signed legislation that reauthorizes First Steps to School Readiness until 2013. The signing took place at Arthurtown Child Development Center in Columbia, where Governor Sanford was joined by special guest former Governor Jim Hodges and SC First Steps Director Susan DeVenny.

“We’ve said from day one that if we’re going to make a difference in children’s lives, we have to make that difference early,” Gov. Sanford said. “The fact is that far too many kids enter school without the tools they need to be successful. I think First Steps will continue to play a large role in changing that trend, and an increasingly important role given Judge Cooper’s recent ruling on the need for these types of programs for at-risk children. First Steps has also succeeded in recognizing that different families have different needs, and has created choices for parents when it comes to early childhood education - something we believe is needed in the educational system as a whole.”

Approved by the S.C. General Assembly in 1999, the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Act was authorized through July 2007. New legislation to extend First Steps passed unanimously earlier this year in both the House and Senate and was sent to Governor Sanford’s desk for signature. The Governor officially signed the new bill on February 21, 2006.

“It is exciting to see First Steps reauthorized until 2013, and to watch community partners continue to support families and young children as they prepare for school and life success,” said former Governor Jim Hodges.

“Thanks to our elected leaders, First Steps can continue to play a strong role in ensuring quality, accountability, collaboration and leadership among all partners serving children and families,” said First Steps Director Susan DeVenny. “Research proves that children can succeed at higher success rates, in school and in life, if they arrive at the starting gate healthy and ready to learn. First Steps’ only goal is to provide local solutions for parents as they prepare their children for school success.”

Since inception, First Steps has helped families prepare over 330,000 young children for school through community-based public and private partnerships. First Steps works to meet the needs of children under six through programs that strengthen families, improve children’s health and well-being, increase the quality of child care and early education opportunities, and transition children successfully into kindergarten.

The Arthurtown Child Development Center opened to the community in 1999, under the leadership of Vital Connections at the United Way of the Midlands. Since 2002, the center has benefited from a partnership with First Steps to help enhance the quality of life for children and area residents.

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*South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness 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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