



Collaboration Essential for Effective 4K Expansion

By Dan Wuori

As the South Carolina General Assembly inches closer to its anticipated expansion of 4-year-old kindergarten, many well-meaning advocates have emerged to echo a similar refrain: *Stick to the public schools*. After all, they argue, South Carolina's existing 4K programs are nationally recognized for their quality.

With the outstanding nature of these programs almost wholly undisputed it may seem counterintuitive for anyone - let alone a recently departed public 4K administrator - to applaud lawmakers for thinking otherwise. But I need to do just that.

You see, the wholesale expansion of public school 4K poses a real - if widely unforeseen - threat to the state's early childhood community in its entirety - and thus to thousands of South Carolina families who depend upon this diverse network of programs to provide early care and education.

With nearly 120,000 children enrolled in roughly 2,800 programs across the state, South Carolina's private for-profit, non-profit, and faith-based early childhood providers enable tens of thousands of working parents to participate in the labor force - many of them by necessity. This early care is often costly to parents because it is costly to provide, with many small businesses dependant upon the larger ratios afforded by preschool classrooms to offset the tremendous costs associated with infant and toddler care.

It's not overstatement to suggest that losing thousands of 4-year-olds to the state's public schools would threaten the very viability of many such providers. At minimum, working parents would be forced to shoulder the burden of much higher tuition rates for those younger children remaining.

What's more, many public schools are currently ill equipped to meet the needs of preschoolers. Whether its lack of available classroom space, equipment and busses designed for larger children, or the lack of wrap around care that spans the full workday, there are many reasons to explore the benefits of expansion through non-district providers.

For six years South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness has served as a source of 4K expansion funding across the state. 1,220 South Carolina 4-year-olds accessed 4K through First Steps in 2005-2006 alone.

While the lion's share of this funding has benefited - and continues to benefit - the state's public school districts, the initiative is also home to the state's first ever public-private 4K partnership classrooms. Like public school classrooms, these non-district sites employ certified teachers and because of additional childcare licensing requirements they not only meet, but exceed, the state's celebrated 4K quality standards.

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Certainly there is room for improvement among many of the state's private preschool providers – some of which may be currently unprepared to offer programs of sufficient quality to warrant public funding. And doubtless there are communities – particularly those in South Carolina's most rural areas – where thriving networks of non-district providers simply do not exist. Yet neither is reason to exclude – or endanger – high quality programs with the capacity to expand their services to at-risk children.

Fortunately for working South Carolina families, each of the major legislative proposals now before the General Assembly provides at least some avenue for the expansion of 4K in non-district settings, often in partnership with First Steps. While it would be easy to quibble over the details of this plan or that, lawmakers are to be commended for getting one thing fundamentally right: 4K cannot expand in one sector to the detriment of all others.

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