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Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation Helps Expand Georgetown First Steps' "Centers of Excellence"

Columbia, SC – Thanks to a donation from the Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation, the highly-lauded child care centers, Georgetown County First Steps' Centers of Excellence, will expand to disadvantaged children in counties along South Carolina's I-95 corridor.

In 2005, Georgetown County First Steps began these child care centers with public and private support to provide high quality early education experiences to at-risk children ages 0-4 in Georgetown County. The Centers are filling gaps for high quality child care services for Georgetown's working poor through flat-fee subsidies, rigorous program standards, ongoing training for staff, and required parent support training and involvement.

"We are so grateful for support from both the Bunnelle Foundation and the General Assembly," said First Steps to School Readiness Director Susan DeVenny. "Simply put, the Centers of Excellence work. They are currently making a difference in Georgetown County and will soon impact children in other parts of the state with quality early education that until now has been out of reach."

Elizabeth Lambert of Andrews remarked on her 11-month-old grandson's experience with Little Smurf Daycare, one of Georgetown County's four Centers of Excellence. "I really appreciate everything First Steps has done to allow [my grandson] to go to Smurfs Daycare," Lambert said. "We would not be able to afford for him to go to any daycare. Every time we pick him up from Smurfs I can see he is happy, clean and well taken care of. He is constantly learning new things. I cannot say enough about what a wonderful program First Steps is."

To help answer Judge Cooper's ruling in the school funding lawsuit that South Carolina must provide better early childhood education experiences for South Carolina's young children, the General Assembly allocated \$2 million to create Centers of Excellence in impoverished counties along the I-95 corridor. The Bunnelle Foundation has already contributed a total of \$400,000 to the Centers of Excellence and may donate funds next year, contingent on a dollar-for-dollar match by the state.

"The Bunnelle Foundation is committed to improving the quality of life for the disenfranchised and the disadvantaged," said Geales Sands, executive director of the Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation. "We agree with Judge Cooper that an integral part of improving the state's school system is to give disadvantaged young children the high quality early education experiences they deserve. These experiences create an academic and social platform on which children can build the rest of their lives."

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*The mission of the **Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation** is to improve the quality of life for Georgetown county citizens by focusing on causes consistent with the late Mrs. Bunnelle's values, with emphasis on: addressing the root causes of poverty, meeting basic human needs, advancing equitable economic growth and environmental conservation; and encouraging positive youth development. For more information please visit: http://www.ccfives.org/affiliates_bunnelle.html.*

***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 is combined through county partnerships to enable individual communities to address the unmet needs of young children and their families.*

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