



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
July 27, 2006

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## **First Steps Begins Accepting Provider Applications for Private 4K Expansion Pilot Program**

**Columbia, S.C.** – First Steps to School Readiness announced today that it has begun accepting applications for an innovative 4-year-old kindergarten (4K) expansion pilot to operate within non-school district settings. The pilot was established by the 2006 General Assembly in response to Circuit Court Judge Thomas W. Cooper’s ruling in the school funding suit that S.C. must expand early education programs for low-income children. The General Assembly allocated nearly \$8 million for First Steps to expand 4K in private settings and \$16 million for the State Department of Education to expand 4K through the state’s public schools. The pilot extends to income-eligible children residing in the school funding suit’s trial and plaintiff districts.

“In South Carolina, and across the nation, there is a growing recognition that high quality early education increases the probability of long-term academic success, especially among disadvantaged children,” said S.C. First Steps Director Susan DeVenny. “We’re grateful for the General Assembly’s leadership on behalf of the state’s youngest learners and believe this program marks a renewed emphasis on early childhood education in South Carolina.”

Private for-profit, private non-profit, faith-based, Head Start and other non-school district settings may apply if they meet the following qualifications:

- be licensed, registered OR approved by the SC Department of Social Services;
- use an approved, research-based curriculum;
- offer 180, 6.5-hour instructional days per year; and
- employ a teacher who has at least a two-year degree in early childhood education and is working toward a four-year teacher education degree.

The groundbreaking pilot program will allow parents to choose centers across district and county lines to accommodate work schedules or other matters of convenience. While only income-eligible children from the 36 districts involved in the suit will qualify for state funding during 2006-2007, eligible providers need not be located within a plaintiff district.

Children who meet eligibility requirements may not be charged to participate, and approved centers will be reimbursed up to \$3,077 per eligible child enrolled, with additional funding possible for both equipment and transportation. Eligible children must reside in a plaintiff school district, be four years old by September 1, 2006, and qualify for Medicaid or free- or reduced-price lunch.

“We had a very short timeframe during which to develop a truly pioneering program to serve S.C.’s 4-year-olds. We’re not only proud of the result, we’re actually ahead of our deadline,” said Dan Wuori, S.C. First Steps deputy director. “What we are unveiling is an accountable 4K system designed to produce real results.”

In recent weeks, S.C. First Steps has ramped up efforts to spread the word about the pending application process. Information has been funneled to child care providers via the First Steps county partnership offices, and a webpage ([www.scfirststeps.org/4K.htm](http://www.scfirststeps.org/4K.htm)) has been set up that allows providers to request updates and download an application to become an approved center. Providers may also request a mailed or faxed application.

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

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