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Federal grant, groundbreaking partnership to aid 1,260 at-risk children

Columbia, S.C. – Early childhood educators in some of South Carolina’s most impoverished communities are about to embark on three years of intensive public-private collaboration aimed at improving school readiness for their communities’ neediest children.

“We’ve got a terrific opportunity here for public school teachers, child care providers and Head Start to join forces,” said State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex. “We can take advantage of cutting-edge research on how the brain develops and how children learn reading and math, then use that knowledge to show educators how they can produce the best possible results with kids.”

The initiative, called *Bridges to Early Learning*, will launch during the 2007-08 school year.

“This collaboration among public schools, Head Start centers and private preschools is a testament to our state’s commitment to meeting the needs of our youngest, neediest children,” said First Steps Director Susan DeVenny. “This initiative also creates an unprecedented partnership among our organizations that will be fueled by \$4.8 million in combined federal, state and local funds.”

The primary funding source will be a recently awarded \$2.4 million U.S. Department of Education grant spanning three years – one of only four grants awarded nationwide through the federal Early Childhood Educator Professional Development grant program.

Bridges to Early Learning will operate in the following counties: Allendale, Charleston, Clarendon, Florence, Lee, Marion, Marlboro and Williamsburg. An average of 90 percent of students in the participating communities qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. An estimated 130 educators will participate in professional development involving study groups, coaching and graduate courses, ultimately impacting an estimated 1,260 children.

Bridges to Early Learning will receive resources or funding from the following partners: ETV, First Steps County Partnerships, Head Start, local school districts, the South Carolina Department of Education, the South Carolina Department of Social Services, South Carolina First Steps, South Carolina State University and the University of South Carolina.