



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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First Steps' rural poverty initiative gains federal backing

First Steps' initiative to overcome school readiness barriers for children in poverty has been boosted by a recent U.S. Department of Education award totaling \$4.15 million over three years. Through the Early Reading First grant, 54 teachers in two rural communities will receive intensive training – based on cutting-edge research – to prepare children to read.

First Steps is one of only 32 Early Reading First grant recipients nationwide this year.

“South Carolina must continue targeting our efforts to enhance children’s early learning experiences,” said state First Steps Director Susan DeVenny. “Putting the spotlight on strong reading foundations is another step in the right direction for our youngest learners.”

The *South Carolina Early Reading Collaborative* will launch in 2008 in Darlington and Lee counties for early childhood teachers in public schools, Head Start centers and private preschools. The initiative will impact nearly 500 children in 3-year-old and 4-year-old classes.

Teachers will participate in training, study groups and in-classroom coaching. In addition to professional development, the *South Carolina Early Reading Collaborative* initiative will offer:

- 10-week summer programs for extremely at-risk students;
- Assistance to teachers working with students who are native Spanish speakers; and
- Home visits by family educators to help parents reinforce learning at home.

“This grant will provide an abundance of print-rich materials in 3- and 4-year-old classrooms,” said Mamie Bostic, Darlington County First Steps Executive Director, adding that the training and materials are resources these teachers need to prepare children for school.

The *South Carolina Early Reading Collaborative* will be evaluated by Michigan-based High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, allowing leaders to determine its efficacy as the state continues to evaluate responses to the December 2005 ruling in the state school funding equity lawsuit. Circuit Court Judge Thomas Cooper ruled that South Carolina must do more to help its youngest, neediest children reach school ready to learn.

“This opportunity will be a pivotal component of Lee County First Steps’ goals for the next three years as we ensure that services are delivered to our 3- and 4-year olds,” said Alexis D. Pipkins Sr., Lee County First Steps Executive Director.

Additional *South Carolina Early Reading Collaborative* partners are: Darlington and Lee County School Districts, Wateree and Darlington Head Start programs, Bishopville-Lee Child Development Center and Lynchburg-Elliott Child Development Center.

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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.