



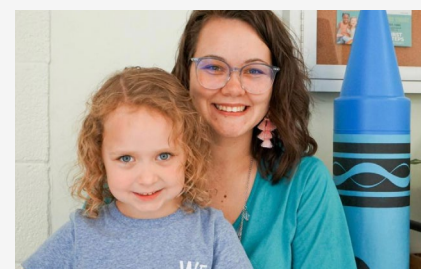
## Using Community Voice to Shape Policy

**SUMMARY:** In a project called “Your Voice Matters,” conducted from 2021-2022, South Carolina First Steps worked with Listen4Good (L4G) to solicit and act upon authentic feedback from its early childhood stakeholders throughout the state. Using the data collected through its work with L4G, First Steps successfully built a centralized feedback system with providers across the state, drove impressive family response rates, and engaged and educated state legislators on the impact of supporting early childhood programs and services.

### About South Carolina First Steps and Listen4Good

South Carolina First Steps (First Steps), established in 1999 by the South Carolina state legislature, is the state’s only dedicated, comprehensive early childhood initiative focused on getting children ready for school and life. As both a state agency and a 501c3 nonprofit, First Steps partners with families, early educators, and communities to support the success of children from birth to age five.

Listen4Good (L4G) is a capacity-building nonprofit that helps social sector organizations build and sustain high-quality feedback systems from the people and communities they serve. Since 2016, L4G has provided more than 675 organizations with services and expert guidance on how to build feedback loops that improve program effectiveness, impact, and service delivery.



## Building a Centralized Feedback System

First Steps joined the L4G program in 2021 to solicit and act upon feedback from parents/ caregivers, teachers, childcare providers, parent educators, technical assistance staff, grantee staff and board members, and their own staff. First Steps branded its L4G work as “Your Voice Matters.”

First Steps rolled out the survey to independent local partnerships throughout the state, who are the direct implementers of the family-serving programs. To remove the administrative burden from providers, First Steps assigned an Evaluation Coordinator to serve as the central point of contact, responsible for collecting and analyzing data, and meeting with stakeholders at the county and state-wide level to understand and communicate impact throughout the network.

***“Many of our partners do not have the capacity to take this on, and with Listen4Good’s support, we built a system to take on that work more centrally.”***

*— Dr. Chelsea Richard, First Steps’ Director of Research and Strategy*

According to Dr. Chelsea Richard, First Steps’ Director of Research and Strategy, “Many of our partners do not have the capacity to take this on, and with Listen4Good’s support, we built a system to take on that work more centrally. We co-created the survey questions with partner nonprofits, and took on the heavy lifting by providing them with the reports, the social media images, and resources for closing the loop with families.”

With this structure, First Steps has heard from families and childcare providers in 30 of the 46 counties in the state.

Additionally, First Steps serves as the state office of Parents as Teachers (PAT), a nationally recognized, evidence-based home visiting program. In 2022, 38 of 39 PAT affiliates opted in to use the centralized feedback system to collect feedback from families participating in PAT across the state.



To sustain the feedback system, First Steps builds their listening tools, dissemination plan, and incentive structure alongside their local partnerships and program areas.

For all new projects, First Steps sends a special invitation to providers to co-design the survey and anticipate barriers early. The group has a discussion around two core questions:

1. What insight do we want to gain by surveying participants?
2. What actionable changes are under our sphere of control?

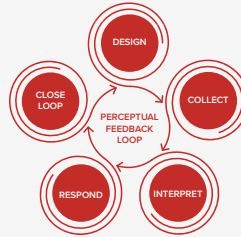
The group uses the L4G Client Survey template as a starting point and meets with their L4G coach multiple times to finalize their survey. Centralizing their feedback system will allow First Steps to compare services across programs and counties, as well as track changes over time.

## Driving Higher Response Rates

Most organizations in the social sector and public sector struggle with obtaining high response rates. However, organizations participating in L4G report improvements in their ability to achieve high response rates during their participation in the program. The average L4G participant response rate is 53%, which is high compared to the sector average (~30%). L4G participant response rates for electronic surveys are also higher than typical rates (~32% compared to ~18%).



**2,561**  
*Survey Responses*



**11**  
*Feedback Loops completed*

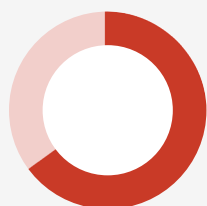
For example, through their listening work, SCFS learned that texting a survey link to families may increase response rates, as emailed links can get lost in an inbox.

Further, First Steps considered which incentives would balance value with the time burden for families taking the survey. As a state agency, First Steps does not offer cash or gift cards as incentives. First Steps has instead offered non-cash incentives to families for completing the surveys, such as books, board games, and puzzles. First Steps heard from parent educators that offering needed items, such as diapers & wipes, would also benefit families. Equipped with this knowledge, First Steps raffled 10 gift baskets with these items as an incentive to families who completed the survey.



First Steps also tested a two-tier incentive strategy during their feedback loop with families participating in PAT. Not only did families receive incentives to complete the survey, but each PAT affiliate that accomplished at least a 50% response rate received funds to purchase a meal for their parent educators and staff. The majority of PAT affiliates received the incentive, and the end result was an impressive 53% response rate.

As a result of First Steps's improvements and Listen4Good's resources, the agency improved family response rates by 40% year over year.



*Feedback gathered from families and childcare providers in*  
**30 out of 46**  
*counties in South Carolina*



**96%**  
*of respondents report being treated with respect by their parent educator*

## Engaging External Stakeholders

First Steps used the data gathered through its work with L4G to educate state legislators on the impact of supporting policy and budgetary changes to expand the footprint of state-funded, full-day four-year-old kindergarten for Medicaid eligible children in South Carolina.

*“In a recent survey by First Steps, two out of three parents reported that enrolling their child in First Steps 4K also allowed them to go to work or continue their own education.”*

*— Henry McMaster, Governor of South Carolina*

In **Governor Henry McMaster’s 2022 State of the State address**, he cited First Steps’s survey results to illustrate the progress being made to support families: “In a recent survey by First Steps, two out of three parents reported that enrolling their child in First Steps 4K also allowed them to go to work or continue their own education.”

The First Steps team has also shared their best practices with practitioners in other states and presented their feedback process at the Parents as Teachers national conference.

Through participating in the Listen4Good program, First Steps is leveraging its client experience feedback ecosystem to achieve its vision: to mobilize partners across the state in the building of a more effective and efficient early childhood state system.



**To learn more about the Listen4Good program,**

**Register for a free informational session**



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