Evaluation Snapshot of South Carolina First Steps Local Partnerships FY 2019-2023

About: An evaluation led by Child Trends examined how South Carolina First Steps local partnerships have met their legislative goals, purposes, and core functions, as well as what impacts their services had on young children and families in South Carolina during fiscal years 2019-2023.

Evaluation methods used



1 survey of 276 local partnership staff and boards



4 focus groups with 14 local partnership staff and boards



9 interviews with families



Up to 23 program guidelines reviewed



5 child and family outcomes analyzed

Question 1: How did First Steps local partnerships meet their intended legislative objectives?

Answer: Local partnership staff, board members, and families overwhelmingly agree that local partnerships are meeting their legislative goals, purposes, and core functions.

Question 2: How are First Steps' guidelines aligned with national model guidelines?

Answer: First Steps is well-aligned across monitoring standards and has opportunities to continue streamlining data reporting expectations.

Question 3: What was the impact of First Steps local partnerships on expected outcomes for children and families?

Answers:

- The number of families and children served by First Steps decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, but later increased, exceeding pre-pandemic levels.
- Programs funded by First Steps improved two-generation outcomes, as seen in improved parenting quality and interaction scores over time.
- ▶ In FY 2020, children enrolled in First Steps programs were significantly less likely to be absent in their kindergarten year and significantly more likely to achieve higher kindergarten readiness assessment scores compared to their peers. These effects were not found in later years.¹







How this goal was measured



Key findings about children and families served by First Steps

South Carolina's youngest children are healthy and safe.

Assessments of parenting quality



Families showed significant improvement in their parenting quality scores over time.^a

South Carolina's youngest children are actively supported by their families and communities.



Child attendance data



Children were significantly less likely to be chronically absent in their 2020 kindergarten year, but significantly more likely to be chronically absent in later years.^b

South Carolina's youngest children arrive at school ready to reach their highest potential.

Parent-child interactive reading assessment



Kindergarten readiness assessments

Adults and children showed significant improvement in the quality of their shared reading over time.^c

Children were significantly more likely than their peers to achieve higher kindergarten readiness assessment scores in fall 2020.^d

^a To be included in this analysis, families had to complete at least two Keys to Interactive Parenting (KIPS) assessments or at least one Healthy Families and Parenting Inventory (HFPI) during the evaluation period.

^b For this analysis, children were propensity-score-matched with peers not enrolled in First Steps programs. ^c To be included in the analysis, adults and children had to participate in at least two Adult-Child Interactive Reading Inventory (ACIRI) assessments during the evaluation period.

^d This finding was only significant during FY 2020 and not in other years. For this analysis, children were propensity-score-matched with peers not enrolled in First Steps programs.

¹ These findings highlight the valuable role of First Steps local partnerships while also reflecting the significant challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted operations and outcomes across all education-related sectors during the evaluation period. Other community-level factors may also explain outcome changes beyond children and families' participation in programs funded by First Steps, such as community demographics or investments in early childhood at the community or state level.