

DRAFT

Proposed 2025-30 Strategic Plan for SC First Steps

Last Updated: April 29, 2025

OVERALL GOAL

At least 75% of South Carolina's children are ready for kindergarten by 2030.

CORE STRATEGIES

This plan is organized around three core strategies, each supported by measurable tactics:

1. **Strengthen the First Steps 4K model** | Page 2
2. **Increase access and utilization of evidence-based, high-intensity programs through First Steps local partnerships** | Page 3
3. **Strengthen collaboration and alignment among organizations serving children birth through five** | Page 4

KEY COMMITMENTS

South Carolina First Steps is committed to a strategic plan that is:

- **Data-driven**
- **Collaborative**
- **Grounded** in what we are legally obligated and funded to do
- **Focused** on serving South Carolina's most economically vulnerable children

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- The wellbeing of South Carolina's **K-12 education system** depends on the strength of its early childhood system.
- South Carolina's **economic vitality** depends on a strong early childhood system for a thriving workforce.

KEY NUMBERS

- Approximately **280,000 children** age 5 and under in South Carolina. *Source: American Community Survey 2019-2023.*
- **42% (118,000) of those children** live at or below 185% of the federal poverty line. *Source: American Community Survey 2019-2023.*
- **61% of the 56,000 children** entering kindergarten each year are not achieving "demonstrating readiness" on the state's kindergarten readiness assessment (KRA). *Source: SC Department of Education.*
- Approximately **4.5% (5,200) children** age 5 and under are currently served First Steps-funded programs that are evidence based and high intensity.

STRATEGY 1

Strengthen the First Steps 4K model.

Current allocation in First Steps budget = \$41.7M (55%). School year 2023-24: Enrollment = 4,119 served for at least one day through day 180; 28% achieved “demonstrating readiness” on the kindergarten readiness assessment in fall 2024.

STRATEGY 1 TACTICS

- 1.1 Increase the percent of First Steps 4K sites participating in ABC Quality and achieving a B or better rating.** Baseline: Eighty six (86%) of First Steps 4K sites are enrolled in ABC Quality. Sixty three (63%) are at B or higher.
- 1.2 Reduce student absenteeism in the First Steps 4K program.** School year 2023-24: 4,124 students were served for at least one day through day 220. 57% of students met the Department of Education’s definition of chronic absenteeism (absent $\geq 10\%$ of the school days enrolled in First Steps 4K).
- 1.3 Strengthen the consistency of high-quality teacher-child interactions, classroom environment and instructional support.** Institute CLASS assessment, a validated and widely used assessment to monitor quality in those 3 domains, in First Steps 4K classrooms. CLASS training begins fall 2025 for 330 classrooms; initial assessments begin late January 2026.
- 1.4 Increase capacity for teacher level coaching based on data produced by CLASS assessment.** There are currently eighteen 4K coaches providing an average of 4 hours of on-site technical assistance monthly across 46 counties.
- 1.5 Develop minimum teacher pay guidelines as part of First Steps 4K provider agreement.** Average hourly salary for individuals working in child care is \$13.71. It is estimated that few teachers receive benefits. Minimum teacher salary guidelines are not currently included in the First Steps 4K provider agreement.
- 1.6 Track and support utilization of SC’s early childhood degrees offered at technical colleges and universities.** Baseline unknown currently.
- 1.7 Reduce teacher turnover and improve approach to onboarding and continuous training at multiple skill levels.** National preschool turnover rate is estimated at 15-20%.
- 1.8 Increase the number of children meeting kindergarten readiness benchmarks on the Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment.** Spring 2024 checkpoint = social and emotional (82%); physical (85%); language (78%); cognitive (77%); literacy (75%); and mathematics (68%)
- 1.9 Increase the number of First Steps 4K programs that offer a parent engagement component that is both evidence based and high intensity through Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) or in partnership with a First Steps local partnership.** School year 2023-24: HIPPY served 178 children in eighteen First Steps 4K providers across 8 counties. Other high intensity parent education programs offered in First Steps 4K classrooms have not been inventoried.

STRATEGY 2

Increase access and utilization of programs that are both evidence based and high intensity through First Steps local partnerships.

Current allocation in SC First Steps budget = \$27.6M (38%). Fiscal year 2023-2024=60,727 children and/or families served by First Steps funded programs across all types (evidence based, evidence informed, low and high intensity). Of those 60,727 children and/or families, 5,214 children and/or families (roughly 9%) were served by programs that were both evidence based and high intensity. Four percent (4.5%) of all children age 5 or younger (roughly 118,255 children) were served by a program that is both evidence based and high intensity.

STRATEGY 2 TACTICS

- 2.1 Increase program completion rates according to model recommendations.** Under review.
- 2.2 Increase fidelity to model for programs administered by local partnerships.** According to an evaluation of First Steps Local Partnerships FY 2019-2023, by Child Trends (Fall 2024): Two programs administered by local partnerships had guidelines that were fully aligned during the five years of study. Another 14 programs were “mostly aligned.”
- 2.3 Strengthen local partnership program guidelines prioritizing evidence based and high intensity programs that offer strong state and/or national technical assistance and training; add cost per child/family and start up and infrastructure costs to strengthen program selection and overall return on investment.** Current program guidelines offer 40+ program options with varying degrees of training and technical assistance; and degree of evidence to ensure intended impact; and do not include fiscal insights.
- 2.4 Raise new funding to implement pilots in an effort to understand the best approach for ensuring higher levels of school readiness.** Fiscal year 2023-2024: First Steps received \$1.3M from the Duke Endowment and Doris Duke Foundation (ending June 2025) and \$15,500 from the Enterprise Mobility Foundation (ending June 2026). In the past we have also received federal funding to support pilots (\$1M).
- 2.5 Increase SC’s investment in evidence based and high intensity services for families with children birth to five.** Fiscal year 2023-2024 recurring state allocation for First Steps local partnerships = \$24.9M (for all program types). \$2.5M in non-recurring funds has been requested for “innovation investments.” This funding will support collaborative programs that are both high intensity and evidence based.
- 2.6 Increase overall awareness of and skills to support emotional, physical and intellectual readiness for young children, why it’s important, and utilization of all services.** Consumer awareness research needed to determine degree of awareness and self-report value of early childhood.
- 2.7 Increase partnerships to reduce administrative burdens and increase the total number of children participating in a First Steps funded programs of any type.** In fiscal year 2023-2024, 60,727 (roughly 50% of all children age 5 and under) were served by a program of some type funded by a First Steps local partnership.
- 2.8 Strengthen the impact of technical assistance and training provided to child care providers by First Steps local partnerships. Implement CLASS to improve coaching focus.** Currently: 133 child care programs served by local partnership child care technical assistance programs in 13 counties. Average improvement on the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale Version 3 (ITERS-3) = 0.5 points, from 3.67 to 4.17 (on the 7 point scale); Average improvement on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Version 3 (ECERS-3) = .48 points, from 3.67 to 4.15. CLASS is not currently used.
- 2.9 Identify best practices and bright spots in SC and nationally.** Currently under review.

STRATEGY 3

Strengthen collaboration and alignment between all organizations serving children birth through five.

Current allocation for the Early Childhood Advisory Council in SC First Steps budget = \$3.4M (4%).

STRATEGY 3 TACTICS

- 3.1 Increase the percentage of children with a pediatric medical home.** A medical home is a comprehensive, coordinated and patient centered approach. 54.7% of children ages 0-5 in SC have a medical home. *Source: National Survey of Children's Health, 2022-2023.*
- 3.2 Increase the percent of Black students living in poverty who achieve "demonstrating readiness" on the kindergarten readiness assessment.** Fall 2024 = 29%. *Source: SC Department of Education.*
- 3.3 Increase the percent of Hispanic students, living in poverty, who achieve "demonstrating readiness" on the kindergarten readiness assessment.** Fall 2024 = 22%. *Source: SC Department of Education.*
- 3.4 Increase the percent of White students, living in poverty, who achieve "demonstrating readiness" on the kindergarten readiness assessment.** Fall 2024 = 35%. *Source: SC Department of Education.*
- 3.5 Reduce the percentage of children in counties with low child care access.** July 2021=40% (*Source: SC Department of Social Services*); Goal in South Carolina's Birth through Five Plan = 35%
- 3.6 Increase the percentage of child care providers participating in ABC Quality.** July 2024=45.4% (*Source: SC Department of Social Services*); Goal in South Carolina's Birth through Five Plan = 53%
- 3.7 Expand access and utilization of evidence-based home visiting.** Under review.
- 3.8 Increase utilization rate for the special supplemental nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).** Coverage rate=58.6% (Q1, FY 2025); Average participation=98,256 women (Oct. 2024-Feb. 2025). *Source: SC Department of Public Health.*
- 3.9 Increase the number of women accessing prenatal care.** 77% accessing adequate or adequate plus prenatal care. *Source: 2022 birth data from SC Department of Public Health.*
- 3.10 Reduce maltreatment rate among young children.** 17 per 1,000 children birth-five victims of child maltreatment in South Carolina. *Source: 2023 data from Administration for Children and Families.*
- 3.11 Increase the number of children receiving a developmental screening ages 9-35 months.** 45% of children ages 9-35 months in SC received a developmental screening. *Source: National Survey of Children's Health, 2022-2023.*
- 3.12 Reduce teacher turnover in all publicly funded preschool settings.** Under review.
- 3.13 Increase the number of eligible 4-year-old children in publicly funded preschool.** Seventy eight percent (78%) or 4,587 of SC's eligible four-year-old children, living in rural counties, estimated to be served in publicly funded preschool (Head Start, First Steps 4K, CERDEP 4K in public schools). Sixty eight percent (68%) or 19,822 of SC's eligible four-year-old children, living in urban counties, estimated to be served in publicly funded preschool. These numbers do not include four-year-old children in subsidized childcare or locally funded programs.

Foundations for Success

Achieving the goals outlined in this plan will require strengthening key areas of capacity and infrastructure, including:

- **Advanced collaboration** among all organizations with funding for children birth to five.
- **Research and evaluation capacity**, including the development of the Early Childhood Integrated Data System, internal and external evaluators, etc.
- **Communications capacity** to engage families, providers, and the public.
- **State-level fiscal mapping** to maximize and ensure best of use of all existing early childhood funding.
- **Modern technology and data systems** to support service delivery, data collection, and decision-making.
- **Focused and effective training** for staff, local partnership staff and board members, and program implementers.
- **Updated fiscal and programmatic operating policies** to strengthen internal and external operations.
- **Regular progress monitoring** to track outcomes, inform decision-making, and drive continuous improvement.