

Carolina Collaborative for Early Childhood Innovation

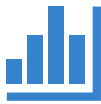
A process for implementing and testing innovation



The Carolina Collaborative for Early Childhood Innovation (CC4ECI) is a funding model designed to provide resources for First Steps local partnerships to implement and test innovative programs for children and families in their community. Through innovative programming and iterative feedback loops, local partnerships will identify what works, for whom, and in what conditions.

Moving from evidence-based practice to practice-based evidence

Research has demonstrated evidence of the impact for various early childhood interventions. However, there are circumstances, conditions, and communities that exist where evidence-based programs are not as effective in meeting the needs of children and families. To maximize engagement and improve outcomes for children and families, a process that identifies what works for whom is needed. Developing funding models that encourage and evaluate innovation can generate evidence for the effectiveness of early childhood interventions that are tailored to unique community conditions.



Current state

Local partnerships implement evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions informed by program designers



Future state

Local partnerships generate evidence for innovative interventions informed by program users

CC4ECI moves beyond proving what works to improving outcomes for communities

Adapted from the IDEAS Impact Framework, the CC4ECI evaluation approach moves beyond asking whether an innovation works, on average, to asking:



What about it works?

If we understand the key strategies that produce desired outcomes. We are better able to reproduce them.



In what contexts does it work?

If we understand the context in which the program was implemented, we can adapt the program for other settings.



How does it work?

If we identify the skills, beliefs, and attitudes that underly behavior change, we may be able to increase the program's impact.



For whom does it work?

If we know who is and who is not responding to the program, we can make targeted changes to promote equitable outcomes.

CC4ECI is based on principles of co-creation and shared learning



Listen

Infuse community voice throughout the process.



Learn

Facilitate a cohort learning model during implementation.



Iterate

Test and adapt strategies based on rapid-cycle learning.

South Carolina First Steps prepares children for school and life success

South Carolina First Steps is the state's only dedicated, comprehensive early childhood initiative focused on getting children ready for school and life success. As both a state agency and a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, First Steps works with families, early educators, and partners statewide to support children from birth through age five. We take a holistic approach to accomplishing our mission, offering services that improve children's health, strengthen families, expand access to quality child care, increase participation in four-year-old kindergarten, and help transition rising kindergartners into school.

Across the state in every county, First Steps works to ensure that every child has the opportunity to benefit from quality early childhood programs. Through a network of 46 local partnerships, we offer direct services to families and caregivers, share knowledge of community resources and referrals, and mobilize partners in building a more efficient and effective early childhood system. The South Carolina First Steps state office provides technical assistance, evaluation support, and financial accountability to the network of local partnerships.

Shifting from funder-focused to community-focused innovation

Historically, early childhood innovation programs have been developed by the state office. When the state office was in the driver's seat, innovation grants were awarded based on programs that implemented an existing program model, addressed clearly articulated needs, and furthered the organization's goals as articulated in the agency's strategic plan.

Traditional funding approaches have posed challenges for some local partnerships. Some local partnerships have faced chronic challenges with recruiting and retaining clients in their programs or retaining the workforce necessary to implement their programs. In response, local partnerships may continue to implement the same program that does not achieve the intended effect, or they may bounce from one program to the next without reflecting on why the program failed to achieve the desired outcomes.

CC4ECI provides a process for putting families in the driver's seat and local partnerships in the passenger's seat, allowing partnerships to identify what, when, and how a program is working within their community. From identifying the problem to proposing solutions, community members work alongside program experts to innovate, implement, and test innovative strategies that result in higher engagement and improved outcomes for children and families.

Introducing the first cohort of CC4ECI grantees

The first cohort of CC4ECI launched in fall 2023 with an application phase. Ten First Steps local partnerships submitted a letter of intent. Seven local partnerships were invited to apply, and four local partnerships submitted a grant application. After an external review and interview process, three local partnerships were awarded a grant. The post-award period is split into a start-up phase and implementation phase that funds learning, implementation, and evaluation.

| County | Focus Area | Program Description |
|---------|----------------------|---|
| Lee | Parenting | Layers intensive home visiting programs into a wrap-around program to improve parent and child outcomes. |
| Pickens | Health and parenting | Adapts Family Connects, a universal home visiting program, to a county without a birthing hospital. |
| York | School transitions | Modifies the curriculum and structure of Countdown to Kindergarten to increase access to school transition supports in the community. |

For more information, visit scfirststeps.org

