

SCFS FY26-27 Comprehensive Grant Application

OVERVIEW

The SC General Assembly has invested in SC First Steps and its 46 local partnerships to ensure as many children as possible are intellectually, physically and emotionally ready to continue learning and thriving. Increasing the number of children, especially those who are economically vulnerable, who can achieve “demonstrated readiness” on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment is a primary expectation.

Within this application SC First Steps is offering three types of state funding to support these goals: 1) recurring Formula funding 2) recurring READY funding and 3) non-recurring funding for Innovation Investments.

All funding contained in this Comprehensive Grant Application is for the period of **July 1, 2026 – June 30, 2027**.

Any partnership on corrective action at the time of award is ineligible to receive any competitive award (READY or Innovation Investments).

At the time of the release of this application the funding outlook is as follows:

1) Formula Funding

Formula funding is recurring state appropriation funds that are distributed to counties through a State Board-approved allocation model.

Amount available per partnership for FY26-27: local partnerships received their proposed FY26-27 formula funding allocation via email from Kerry Cordan, Chief Partnership Officer.

The funding formula adopted by the First Steps state board beginning with the 2019-20 fiscal year (FY20) includes the option of a “noncompliance penalty” if a local partnership fails to meet one or more minimum qualifications to receive a grant, as defined by the First Steps legislation.

The formula funding grant application process is embedded within this comprehensive application, and is designed to:

1. Assess partnership compliance with minimum qualifications for formula grant funding that correspond to § 59-152-90 and §59-152-70 of the First Steps legislation (excerpted language is included as Appendix I to this application).

Unmet minimum qualifications will become part of a state board approved Corrective Action Plan to the local partnership. Unmet qualifications that are not

resolved within the timeframe specified in the partnership's Corrective Action Plan may result in a future noncompliance penalty to the local partnership's formula funding amount, to be determined by the state board. (e.g. match and carry forward penalties adopted in FY19)

2. Evaluate local partnership performance in meeting the best practices contained within the First Steps Program Guidelines and Fiscal and Operations Manual for the year ending June 30.
3. Document the local partnership's plans for meeting minimum qualifications and best practices for the upcoming program year.
4. Connect the local partnership's current year activities and plans for the coming year to the goals and objectives of its Comprehensive Plan.
5. Identify priorities for how South Carolina First Steps can support the local partnership in the coming year.

2) READY Funding

READY Funding is **competitive**, one-year funding, that aims to expand one or more programs supported by Formula or other non-First Steps funding.

Minimum amount available statewide for READY awards: \$2,910,000

READY awards must:

- Prioritize evidence-based programs for children from birth through age three who live in rural communities and in communities where kindergarten readiness scores are consistently below the state average.
- Limit funding to any one county to 10%, currently \$300,000
- Expand child- or family- focused programs including parenting, health, and early care and education

3) Innovation Investment Funding

Innovation Investment funding is designed to reduce administrative costs and increase reach for evidence-based and high-intensity programs.

Anticipated Assuming SC First Steps' request to the General Assembly is successful, the estimated total amount of funding for Innovation Investments is \$2,500,000-\$5,000,000 in **non-recurring funding**. There is no geographic cap on the level of funding.

Innovation Investment awards are **competitive**, one-year funding. Current Innovation Investment grantees that are meeting the terms of their supplemental award agreement will receive funding priority in FY26-27.

Requests for Innovation Investments must include:

- Collaboration between 2 or more geographically contiguous counties/partnerships
- Implementation of an evidence-based AND high-intensity program
- Serving a minimum of 50 additional/new children or families
- One administrative lead partnership
- Strong technical assistance at the state and/or national level

For 2026-2027, Innovation Investment focus areas will be:

- Parenting education and home visiting (priority: PAT, HIPPY)
- Early care and education with parenting (priority: LEAP for K with Parenting)
- Health

Considerations for application development:

- There is no monetary cap per partnership for Innovation Investments
- The lead partnership will be responsible for overall project supervision, financial management, data collection, and reporting. Only the lead partnership will apply directly for, and receive, the Innovation Investment funding. Participating partnerships may be included as subcontractors within the lead partnership's Innovation Investment budget.
- If program supervision is performed by the lead partnership and daily supervision by a participating partnership, a joint supervision plan needs to be clearly defined in the collaboration agreement.
- Collaborating partnerships must submit an Innovation Investment collaboration agreement, signed by the Executive Directors and Board Chairs of all participating local partnerships, as part of the application (template provided).
- Local partnerships may participate as collaboration partners in multiple Innovation Investment projects.
- Local partnerships on Corrective Action may be a participating partnership within an Innovation Investment project but will be ineligible to receive funding from the lead partnership until all Corrective Actions are resolved.
- Partnerships wishing to apply as the lead agency for multiple Innovation Investments are encouraged to consult with their Program Officer prior to submitting the application.

- Applicants may be asked to participate in a post-application virtual interview with SC First Steps.
- There is additional guidance in the Budget Section of this application on how and where to allocate standalone or blended requests.

ADDITIONAL FUNDING CONSIDERATIONS

Countdown to Kindergarten, Summer 2027

At this time, there is not funding available for a separate Countdown to Kindergarten application for Summer 2027. Local partnerships that wish to support this program should include CTK in their FY26-27 Comprehensive Grant Application using Formula funding (up to the 25% limitation on evidence-informed programming).

Current HIPPY Restoration Grantee Partnerships

The HIPPY Restoration funding opportunity will not be offered in FY26-27. Partnerships wishing to sustain or grow their HIPPY program should include it in their FY26-27 Comprehensive Grant Application using Formula, READY, and/or Innovation Investment funding.

DSS PAT Reimbursement (Community Pathways)

Service reimbursement from SCDSS - in the form of Traditional and Community Pathways - represents a significant source of potential funding for local partnerships seeking to enhance and/or expand their Parents as Teachers program. Additional information and budgeting guidance will be provided.

SCORING CRITERIA

The following criteria will be used to score your application:

- Detailed responses to each question that show thoughtful consideration of all aspects of the question
- Quality of work and past performance
- Understanding of, and strategies to improve, areas of opportunity
- Alignment with strategic plan and overall goals
- Prioritization of strategies that have the most impact for the most children or families
- Strengthen systems and the collective impact
- Demonstrates data-driven decision making

GRANT SUBMISSION

Comprehensive Grant Application Submission, Phase 1:

Submission of this comprehensive application and required attachments (see checklist) by April 15, 2026 at 11:59pm.

Formula Funding Submission Phase 2:

Additional documentation (see checklist) must be submitted through the Phase 2 application form by July 15, 2026 at 11:59pm.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

For technical assistance with this application, please contact your Program Officer or Kerry Cordan, Chief Partnership Officer.

It is highly recommended that any local partnership considering applying for Innovation Investment funding contact Jade Wright, Director of Innovation as soon as possible, who will arrange for custom technical assistance from program, grants, and/or finance staff as needed.

One-on-one meetings and office hours with Program Officers and Program Managers will be offered.

FY26-27 COMPREHENSIVE GRANT APPLICATION

Application Fields

Unless otherwise instructed, provide answers to each question, regardless of the type(s) of funding your local partnership is applying for.

Be concise but detailed in your responses. DO NOT ASSUME knowledge about your local partnership by the reviewer.

SECTION 1: PARTNERSHIP PERFORMANCE

This application section will assess the partnership's performance on meeting Minimum Qualifications and implementing best practice guidelines for First Steps local partnerships, across five domains:

1. Governance
2. Operations and Accountability
3. Fiscal and Resource Development
4. Program Strategies
5. Core Functions

Instructions for Completing this Application Section

At the end of each fiscal year, Program Officers provide their assigned partnerships with a Year-End Review document that performs two essential functions:

1. Outlines any concerns with the partnership meeting Minimum Qualifications (legislatively required conditions for receiving a state grant from SC First Steps) and, if necessary, identifies the need for Corrective Action Plans for the upcoming fiscal year.
2. Provides feedback to the partnership for future goal setting and quality improvement, using the Continuous Quality Improvement Rubric.

When addressing the questions within this section, you should:

- Describe what has gone well, what needs improvement, and what steps the partnership is taking or plans to take to improve based on assessment of the partnership and feedback from state office staff.
- Reference any Program Officer feedback from the Year-End Review and other monitoring or feedback, as applicable

- Address any impact of your partnership review on your FY26-27 budget and/or Comprehensive plan

Performance Domain: Partnership Governance

Q: Provide an overall assessment of your partnership's performance related to board governance in 2025-2026, including successes and challenges, and what improvement strategies are planned for 2026-2027.

Performance Domain: Operations and Accountability

Q: Provide an overall assessment of your partnership's performance related to operations and accountability in 2025-2026, including successes and challenges, and what improvement strategies are planned for 2026-2027.

Performance Domain: Fiscal and Resource Development

Q: Provide an overall assessment of your partnership's performance with fiscal compliance in 2025-2026, including successes and challenges, and what improvement strategies are planned for 2026-2027.

Q: Describe progress to date with securing and managing grants and other non-First Steps funding in 2025-2026, including level and type of grants and/or donations.

Q. Describe any refinements you made to your fiscal practices to align with core competencies presented this year including, but not limited to, strategic thinking, financial know-how, budgeting and planning, cash flow analysis, cost control, accountability and adaptability.

Performance Domain: Core Functions

Q: Describe your partnership's progress to date in 2025-2026 with supporting and strengthening your local early care and education system. Be as specific as possible and include a description of how your core function activities have impacted families with young children.

Q: Describe your 2026-2027 plans within core functions that will further strengthen your local early care and education system?

Specifically address each core function domain, including:

- Serving as a local portal, including but not limited to having a dedicated, accessible physical space with publicized hours

- Serving as a system convener of collective efforts to address unmet needs of preschool children
- Supporting state level readiness priorities (KRA, First Steps 4K, First Five SC)

Performance Domain: Program Strategies

Q: Provide an overall assessment of how your programs have performed during 2025-2026 to date. Include successes and challenges with recruiting and retaining clients, hiring and retaining staff, rate of completion (percent of enrollees who complete the program or achieve the recommended model dosage), and program outcomes.

If your partnership was on a programmatic Corrective Action Plan in 2025-2026, describe efforts to achieve compliance with program guidelines.

SECTION 2: REQUEST FOR 2026-2027 FUNDING

In this section, you will describe their data-driven rationale for selecting programs, how they will be implemented and funded, and how they support First Steps' overall goal of 75% of Kindergartners demonstrating readiness by 2030.

Key Considerations

We encourage local partnerships to think through the following considerations before selecting programs to continue or initiate:

Need. The number of young children under age 6 and the number and percent living in a low-income household.

Current impact. The impact of programs and/or services currently offered and county level performance on the kindergarten readiness assessment.

Potential impact. The potential impact of programs and services that are more high intensity in nature and more likely to impact demonstrated readiness within the first 45 days of kindergarten. Programs or services that are most likely to prepare children for school are relationship based and occur over a minimum of 6-12 months.

Operational capacity. Do the number and type(s) of program strategies align with actual staffing capacity and level of funding? Consider reducing or streamlining program offerings to serve more children with high intensity services.

Local and/or regional partnerships. What opportunities are available within the local early childhood system for advanced collaboration (braided funding, designated administrative lead)? Are there opportunities to expand reach through expanded local or regional partnerships with organizations also offering parent education, home visiting, quality care and education technical assistance or other related services?

Degree of connectivity. How do your parents with young children experience the early childhood system in your county? Are all services pre-natal through five highly utilized? Do all programs know eligibility and value of services and support and actively advocate for all? Do organizations providing these services share capacity, utilization and impact data? If yes, how is that data used to plan for increased collaboration and/or communication. If not, how would you address that in 2026-2027?

Program Selection

Considerations for decision making:

- The 2026-2027 Program Guidelines provides the catalog of available programs and the guidelines for each program, establishing required components for implementation.
- A minimum of 75% of state funding allocation must be for evidence-based programs. Up to 25% may be allocated to evidence-informed programs.
- If you need assistance selecting the program or service that will have the greatest impact with the greatest reach, please contact your Program Officer for support.
- The **Program Selection Worksheet** is available to help decision making on the selection of funded programs for 2026-2027.

Estimated Need for Services in Your Early Childhood System

Within the grant application, you will be provided with a data table that provides current information on population statistics for your county.

Funded Programs for FY26-27

In this section, you will complete a table that requires entry for each program including Service Delivery Unit and Projected to Serve (PTS) for each funding source.

The table will calculate total projected to serve based on data entered.

Q: For each program you have selected, describe how each source of funding (formula, READY, Innovation) supports your capacity to increase reach (align budget with projected to serve) with the greatest impact.

Q: If your local partnership is requesting READY funding, describe how this funding will expand your reach and/or impact. If your READY request is not funded, or funded at a level less than requested, what effect would that have on your programmatic offerings (i.e., would require reducing staff, reduced caseloads, reduction in programs, etc.)?

Q: If your local partnership is participating in one or more proposed Innovation Investment projects, describe your partnership's role within each project.

Q: If your partnership serves as the administrative lead for an Innovation Investment project, provide a detailed plan for how your partnership will effectively manage the project including staffing, client recruitment, model fidelity, financial management, data collection and reporting.

Q: Describe your data-driven decision process for selecting your proposed programs and target populations. How has your partnership changed its program offerings and/or target populations from 2025-2026 to better align with the Key Considerations listed above? For continuing programs, what strategies do you plan to implement to increase retention, achieve full model dosage, and improve client outcomes? How do your proposed programs align with your partnership's Needs and Resources Assessment and Comprehensive Plan?

Q. Describe any collaborations with implementation partners (including other local First Steps partnerships) and how the collaboration will reduce administrative burden, leverage public and philanthropic funding, and reduce service duplication. If possible, estimate the impact of these collaborations on increasing the number of low-income children under 6 receiving services.

Budget Guidance

BUDGET DEVELOPMENT

The local partnership's proposed budget for FY27 should align with what the local partnership proposes in its grant application narrative and the level of local funding.

If you need assistance customizing the budget template (adding funds, programs, or tabs), please email your fiscal analyst and include the fund and program codes you would like included.

If you need assistance with budget development, schedule time with your Program Officer and fiscal analyst to discuss.

General Budget Guidelines

1. Funding sources marked as "SCFS state funding" have the following restrictions which apply to all SCFS-issued state funds:
 - a. No more than 13% of SCFS-issued state funds may be used for program 101 – Administration
 - b. No more than 12% of SCFS-issued state funds may be used for program 180 – Core Functions
 - c. A minimum of 75% of SCFS-issued state funds must be allocated to evidenced-based programs
2. Use the **Budget Narrative** section of the Budget pages to explain how the program's different funding sources (Formula, READY, Innovation, and other funding) will be blended/braided to achieve performance targets and detailed descriptions of the items within a specific line.
3. Partnerships must document a 15% match of their combined SCFS state funding total via private funds, other grants, or in-kind contributions. In-kind contributions will not be included in the budget. Instead, partnerships who are using in-kind contributions to meet the match requirement must submit a list of in-kind contributions for FY27 with the grant application.
4. Payroll should be budgeted to as few fund codes as possible.
5. Fringe benefits should be charged by fund as a percentage of payroll charged to each fund.
6. The budget must include both revenues and expenses. Only revenues from private funds may exceed expenses.
7. The board chair must sign the budget summary page which must be included with the grant application

SCFS STATE FUNDING: EIA ALLOCATION

Funding Source	Fund Code	Restrictions
Base EIA Allocation	550	
Prior Year Carryforward	560	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 15% of prior year award • It is suggested to budget no more than 50% of the anticipated carryforward (final carryforward amount will be determined after the prior year audit has been completed)

SCFS STATE FUNDING: READY FUNDS

Funding Source	Fund Code	Restrictions
READY	130	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs may not be funded 100% with READY funds
Prior Year Carryforward	121/131/141	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 15% of prior year award • Must be used for expenses related to the original purpose of the award • It is suggested to budget no more than 50% of the anticipated carryforward (final carryforward amount will be determined after the prior year audit has been completed)

SCFS STATE FUNDING: INNOVATION INVESTMENT FUNDS (LEAD PARTNERSHIPS ONLY)

Funding Source	Fund Code	Restrictions
Innovation Investment	160	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If applying for more than one innovation project, each project must be budgeted in a separate column • If proposing a multi-partnership innovation project, payments to partner local partnerships should be listed as contractual expenses with applicable budget narrative of how those funds will be spent by the partner
Innovation Investment Carryforward 1.0 (awards effective 7/1/25)	161	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 15% of prior year award • Must be used for expenses related to the original purpose of the award • It is suggested to budget no more than 50% of the anticipated carryforward (final carryforward amount will be determined after the prior year audit has been completed)
Innovation Investment Carryforward 2.0 HIPPY (awards effective 9/1/25)	161	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not be used past 9/30/26 • Up to 15% of prior year award • Must be used for expenses related to the original purpose of the award

NON-SCFS FUNDS

Funding Source	Fund Code	Restrictions
Parents as Teachers – Community Pathways	213	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detailed guidance will be provided soon
Parents as Teachers – DSS Referral (Pilot counties only)	212	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships should budget conservatively for this funding based on projections made using FY26 data
Private Funds/Outside Grants	Varies depending on funding source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships may budget for private funds or outside grants where there is an executed grant agreement, letter of award or contract. The grant award documentation should be included with the budget submission Partnerships are responsible for understanding and adhering to restrictions given by the funder

CRITERIA FOR BUDGET EVALUATION

- Budget items are reasonable and necessary to achieve the desired impact of the program or service. Line-item budget narratives should provide detailed justification for proposed expenditures.
- Proposed budget blends/braids funding both internally and in collaboration with outside organizations (including other local partnerships, as applicable) to achieve economies of scale and reduce administrative burden.
- Priority to intensive programs that have a lower per-child cost of SC First Steps funding, achieved through the model design and/or through collaboration, use of independent contractors, economies of scale, regional approaches, or other means.
- The local partnership's financial performance history

CHECKLIST ITEMS:

- ✓ Fund 550 total equals the partnership's proposed allocation amount for FY27
- ✓ All proposed program strategies for FY27 are included (include all programs independent of funding)
- ✓ The percentage of state funds allocated to Evidence-Informed Programs does not exceed 25%
- ✓ Cost allocation percentages align with the partnership's time study on file with SCFS
- ✓ The percentage of state funds budgeted to Administration (101) does not exceed 13%

- ✓ The percentage of state funds budgeted to Core Functions (180) does not exceed 12%
- ✓ List of in-kind contributions (if using in-kind to meet match requirement)