South Carolina's Birth Through Five Plan Progress Brief
2024

INTRODUCTION

In February 2022, the South Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) released *For Our Future: South Carolina's Birth through Five Plan* – a roadmap for optimizing the state's early childhood system and working towards a shared vision of success for every child. The plan represents the collaboration of numerous state agencies, input from dozens of leaders, and the voices of thousands of parents and caregivers.

We present this brief to provide updates for ECAC priorities established in 2024. A more comprehensive report is planned for later this year and will share progress in achieving the Birth through Five Plan overarching goals, and ECAC priorities for 2025-2026.

KEY TAKE AWAYS

✓ **More children were enrolled in public Pre-k in 2023-2024 than in 2021-2022**

  ➢ 2023-2024 Pre-k enrollment did not exceed participation reported in 2022-2023

✓ **Infrastructure for the early childhood integrated data system (ECIDS) is established**

  ➢ Thirteen key policies approved by ECAC in 2024

  ➢ A repository for publicly available data, the ECAC Data Hub, is nearly complete

✓ **More children are enrolled in programs that support their success**

  ➢ WIC increased enrollment substantially from an annual average of 86,233 in 2021-2022 to an annual average of 99,395 in 2023-2024

  ➢ The number of children served in home visiting programs increased from 3,848 in 2021-2022 to 5,503 in 2023-2024

✓ **More children are enrolled in early intervention services**

  ➢ BabyNet increased service enrollment from 8047 children in 2021-2022 to 8,330 in 2023-2024.

✓ **Progress continues in promoting and supporting personal and social skill building**

  ➢ A range of activities are underway to support children and their caregivers: certified endorsement of skills that support parents and caregivers; focus on reflective supervision among key home visitor staff, and policymakers receiving and responding to testimony about the impact of suspension and expulsion

Last year the ECAC approved five priorities that build skills, increase access to high quality programs, and improve data governance and infrastructure. Three of the five priorities approved addressed increasing enrollment or participation in services. TABLE 1 provides an overview of these specific priorities and enrollment over time.

TABLE 1: Program Enrollment in Key Early Childhood Programs

Key Priorities: Increase numbers of children enrolled in early childhood programs	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
More children enrolled in public pre-K	19,328	24,288	21,245
More children engaged in early childhood programs:			
- WIC	86,233	92,799	99,395
- Parenting and Home Visiting	3,848	3,956	5,583
- Healthy Steps	Not available	4,088	4,609
More children referred/	17,277	17,614	18,175
Eligible for early intervention services	8,047	8,206	8,330

PRIORITIES – In Detail

Following, the 2024 priorities are republished, and progress is outlined in greater detail.

PRIORITY 1: Increase participation in publicly funded preschool programs

To reduce achievement gaps, including but not limited to race, ethnic group, and income, and to ensure that more eligible children are enrolled in high quality programs, increasing participation in programs was a priority in 2024. High quality programs include Head Start, a federally funded program, state supported programs like First Steps 4K, and state, federal and locally supported programs like public school pre-K.

Progress: Access to high quality early education can reduce achievement gaps for low-income children. Using data from the PreK Dashboard, hosted by the Education Oversight Committee, TABLE 2 shows pre-K experiences of income eligible children (pupils in poverty). Higher numbers of children participated in programs in 2023-2024 compared to 2021-2022. However, more children participated in pre-K programs according to parent reports in 2022-2023.

TABLE 2: Pre-K Experience of Pupils in Poverty According to Education Oversight Committee

	Based on actual child enrollment and assessment data		Based on kindergarten entry survey self-reported from parents		Total children served
YEAR (LINK TO EOC REPORT)	**CERDEP DEPT OF EDUCATION**	**CERDEP FIRST STEPS 4K**	**OTHER PUBLIC PRE-K (NON-CERDEP, INCLUDES HEAD START)**	**PRIVATE 4K**	**TOTAL**
SY2021-2022	7,469	1,902	9,180	777	19,328
SY2022-2023	8,462	1,725	11,729	2,372	24,288
SY2023-2024	11,812	2,546	6,795	92	21,245

TABLE 2 Data Source: https://dashboardsc.sc.gov/preK

PRIORITY 2: Collect, integrate, and share data to better understand who is served, where service gaps exist, and where to target resources and services

The importance of integrated data is exemplified by the complexity of pre-K enrollment. To understand where to "fill slots or build slots," partners must collect and report data that includes all pre-K enrollments, not just those required by CERDEP legislation. A fully functioning shared and integrated data system will allow questions like these and others to be answered.

Progress: Through 2024 the ECAC reviewed and approved 13 policies that build and support a robust integrated data system. Internally, the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) program expanded its research and coordination capacity through the hiring of a Strategic Data Partnership fellow from Harvard University, a position funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. With support from the fellow, initial data governance infrastructure mandated by the Early Learning Extension's (ELE) State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) grant were completed. Further, the ECIDS data access request process and procedures for new data contributors wishing to join the ECIDS initiatives were build out as well.

A new ECIDS Data Hub website will launch this spring. The Data Hub will be a resource that provides access to datasets, reports, and dashboards related to the experiences of young children and their families from organizations and agencies across the state. In addition to providing links to information on ECIDS partner websites, the Data Hub will also feature new interactive dashboards and research-based reports from ECIDS staff researchers, such as an interactive dashboard to view current datapoints from the ECAC's Birth through Five Plan. The

Data Hub will also make its data governance documents available to visitors, provide links and instructions to prospective data partners, and host the ECIDS application for research-related data access requests.

PRIORITY 3: Expand support to help families access the services and supports they need.
A range of initiatives are underway to understand the environment and maximize opportunities for families to obtain the program and services they need. Projects include completing a language access landscape analysis, increasing access to parenting and home visiting programs, promoting enrollment in programs like Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program and Healthy Steps, and submitting collaborative applications to finance this work.

Progress: More children and families participated in programs compared to previous years. TABLE 3 shows enrollment in WIC, parenting and home visiting programs, and Healthy Steps, a clinic-based program supported by First Steps, Department of Public Health and Department of Social Services.

TABLE 3: Enrollment in Early Childhood Programs: WIC, Parenting and Healthy Steps

YEAR	WIC ENROLLMENT (ANNUAL AVERAGE)	PARENTING AND HOME VISITING ENROLLMENT	HEALTHY STEPS ENROLLMENT
2021-2022	86,233	3,848	Early implementation: Data not available
2022-2023	92,799	3,956	4,088
2023-2024	99,395	5,583	4,609

TABLE 3 Data Sources:

WIC: https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wic-program.

Home Visiting: National Home Visiting Resource Center NHVRC) State Profiles present data provided by both Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) and non-MIECHV data. NHVRC profiles include participant data from the following evidence-based models: Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up, Early Head Start Home-Based Option, Family Connects, Family Spirit, Healthy Families America, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, Maternal Infant Health Outreach Worker Program, Nurse-Family Partnership, and Parents as Teachers. https://nhvrc.org/state_profile/south-carolina-2022/, https://nhvrc.org/state_profile/south-carolina-2023, https://nhvrc.org/state_profile/south-carolina-2024/

Healthy Steps: https://issuu.com/scfirststeps1/docs/scfs-annual-report-fy23?fr=xKAE9_zU1NQ, https://issuu.com/scfirststeps1/docs/scfs-annual-report-fy24?fr=xKAE9_zU1NQ

Two milestones also were achieved in systems building and strengthening. First, Carolina Family Engagement Center and the Research and Evaluation and Measurement Center at the University of South Carolina completed a landscape analysis funded through the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth-5 (PDG B5). The project examined the need for and availability of language access services for limited English proficient (LEP) parents/caregivers of children (Dual Language Learners) ages 3-5 enrolled in publicly funded early childhood education and care programs. According to report authors, "The provision of language access services would benefit from a systemwide or state level approach to ensure assistance is available to all LEP parents regardless of which program or provider they choose or zip code they reside in." https://www.earlychildhoodsc.org/media/tcfblcxj/prek-dual-language-learner-landscape-analysis-and-needs-assessment-findings-presentation.pdf.

Second, A range of partners, led by the Department of Social Services, was awarded its second PDG B5 three-year grant in September 2024. The grant allows early childhood system partners to continue and build efforts that strengthen existing programs and the early childhood workforce. The grant brings eight million dollars per year to South Carolina to support and enhance the early childhood system.

PRIORITY 4: Expand access to screening, identification of disabilities and referrals for treatment and services

Early identification of delays or disabilities is essential to assuring that young children receive the treatment they need to thrive. A statewide screening registry is the first step. Assessment, referrals, and intervention then can follow.

Progress: Assessments and referrals are important steps in securing early intervention services. BabyNet referrals have increased since 2021. Last year they increased to more than 18,000. The percent of children determined eligible for BabyNet remains steady (46/47% eligible), meaning that as referrals increase, so do numbers of children who need these important early services. TABLE 4 reflects these data.

TABLE 4: BabyNet Referrals and Eligibility

YEAR	# REFERRED	# ELIGIBLE WITH INDIVIDUAL FAMILY SERVICE PLAN	% ELIGIBLE
2021-2022	17,277	8,047	47%
2022-2023	17,614	8,206	47%
2023-2024	18,175	8,330	46%

PRIORITY 5: Promote and support personal and social-skill building

Nurturing and responsive relationships in early childhood are the foundation for lifelong resilience and mental health. The following activities will support strong foundations: professional development that includes reflective supervision, as well as training about trauma-informed care and pyramid models; access to consultation to address challenging behaviors; and updating suspension and expulsion policies in early childhood settings.

Progress: South Carolina Infant Mental Health Association (SCIMHA) offers "Endorsement for Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused Practice Promoting Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health" an internationally recognized, evidence-informed system of [infant and early childhood mental health competencies](). Professionals pursuing an Endorsement designation complete specialized education, work, in-service training and reflective supervision/consultation. BabyNet leaders encouraged and supported their network of providers to pursue endorsement. To date, 14 people earned SCIHMA endorsement, and another 15 people are in the process of earning endorsement.

Reflective supervision is an essential requirement in Parents as Teachers (PAT) programs. Through 2025 intentional emphasis will be placed on this practice, assuring that PAT home visitors are receiving the support they need so they can engage with families.

In 2023, the SC Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children (JCLCC) identified preschool suspension and expulsion as an issue to address. In 2024, the Committee held dedicated meetings related to the topic, inviting multiple state agencies and organizations to testify on the matter. The Committee also filed legislation in 2024 to create common definitions and address data collection and reporting. While the legislation did not leave Committee, the issue remains of interest to the JCLCC.

IN SUMMARY

In 2024, South Carolina saw key advancements in early childhood education, data integration, and family support services. Public Pre-K enrollment increased since 2021-2022, though it did not surpass 2022-2023 levels. Family support services expanded, with WIC enrollment rising in 2023-2024 and increased participation in home visiting and early intervention programs like BabyNet. The Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) and the nearly completed ECAC Data Hub promise improved data accessibility. These initiatives demonstrate the state's continued commitment to improving early childhood outcomes. A full progress report is expected late 2025.