



2025-2030 Strategic Plan

Approved June 19, 2025 by the Board of Trustees

Overview

South Carolina First Steps is a state agency and non-profit organization working collaboratively to ensure that all children start school ready to reach their highest potential. In partnership with parents, early educators, communities and other organizations serving young children, First Steps offers programs for children birth to age 5 and their families.

There is a First Steps Local Partnership in each of the state's 46 counties. The First Steps 4K program provides a high-quality preschool experience for vulnerable four-year-old children in 366 classrooms across South Carolina. SC First Steps also serves as the convener for the state's Early Childhood Advisory Council, resulting in high levels of collaboration between Head Start, the SC Departments of Education, Social Services, Public Health, Health and Human Services, Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, the Children's Trust of SC, the business and medical communities, and several other organizations serving young children and families.

Enabling Legislation

South Carolina First Steps' activities are enabled through the S.C. Code of Laws:

- **59-152.** Establishes First Steps as a state agency and its local partnership structure.
- **63-11-17.** Outlines the structure of the First Steps Board of Trustees and the Early Childhood Advisory Council.
- **59-156.** Details First Steps as the private provider arm of the state's Child Early Reading Development and Education Program (CERDEP).

Considerations

- Approximately **280,000 children** birth to age five live in South Carolina.
- Approximately **116,000 (41%) live in poverty or a low-income household**.¹
- Approximately **56,000 children** enter kindergarten each year in South Carolina. **61% of incoming kindergartners** did not achieve "demonstrating readiness" on the state's kindergarten readiness assessment in fall 2024.²
- South Carolina's **K-12 system** significantly benefits from a strong system of early care and education.
- South Carolina's **economic vitality** depends on citizens who are intellectually, emotionally and physically ready to thrive.

Commitments

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

The Goal

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

Strategies

There are three core strategies to support the goal. Each strategy is supported by measurable tactics that will be reviewed and updated annually.

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

¹. American Community Survey 2019-2023. Poverty or low-income household defined as at or below 185% of the federal poverty line. ². SC Department of Education. Readiness assessment is administered within first 45 days of school.

1. Strengthen the First Steps 4K model.

In 2023-24, over 4,000 children participated in First Steps 4K. In Fall 2024, twenty-eight percent (28%) achieved "demonstrating readiness" on the kindergarten readiness assessment.³ The current allocation for First Steps 4K is \$41.7M (55% of total budget). **Increase the percentage of children demonstrating readiness on the KRA by 47% over the next five years.**

Tactics

1.1 Reduce chronic absenteeism.⁴ Revise the 4K site agreement to improve attendance expectations. Encourage attendance by engaging families and providers, incentivizing and celebrating progress. *The current chronic absenteeism rate in First Steps 4K is 57%.*

1.2 Strengthen the consistency of high-quality teacher-child interactions, classroom environment and instructional support. Utilize the research-based Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) to inform teacher, teacher assistant and director training provided by First Steps. CLASS observations and coaching will help 4K coaches provide focused technical assistance in 3 domains: teacher-child interactions, classroom environment and instructional support. *Deidentified CLASS scores will be available annually.*

1.3 Increase the number of on-site coaching hours in 4K classrooms monthly. There are currently eighteen 4K coaches providing on-site technical assistance across 46 counties. *Average number of hours per site is under review for 2024-25.*

1.4 Decrease teacher turnover. Consider establishing minimum compensation standards and reporting for First Steps 4K teachers and teacher assistants as part of the site agreement. The average salary for individuals working in child care is \$13.71 with no benefits.⁵ *SCFS doesn't require compensation reporting.*

1.5 Increase utilization of First Steps 4K. In 2024-25, 58% of 4K slots were fully utilized. *Slot utilization rate is determined using the number of students present for at least 120 days (3,220) over the number of slots funded (5,551).*

³ Education Oversight Committee CERDEP Evaluation Report 2025. ⁴ Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of the school days a student is enrolled. For example, if a student is enrolled for a total of 220 days and is absent for 22 or more of those days, they are considered chronically absent. If a student is enrolled for a total of 100 days and is absent for 10 or more of those days, they are considered chronically absent. ⁵ South Carolina. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2025.

2. Increase access and utilization of programs that are both evidence-based and high-intensity through First Steps Local Partnerships.

In 2023-24, First Steps Local Partnerships directly served 60,727 children across all program types (evidence-based, evidence-informed, low- and high-intensity). Of those 60,727 children, 5,214 children (about 9%) we served by programs that were both evidence-based and high-intensity. The current budget for Local Partnerships is \$27.6M (38% of total budget). **Increase the percentage of children served by evidence-based, high-intensity programs to at least 20% over the next five years.**

Tactics

2.1 Ensure programs are delivered with fidelity to model. The maximum effect of an evidence-based model occurs when the program is implemented as designed. There is limited capacity for routine monitoring of model fidelity. *Baseline data in the 2024 Child Trends evaluation of First Steps Local Partnerships.*

2.2 Increase enrollment and retention rates within programs offered by First Steps Local Partnerships. When program enrollment and/or completion rates are low, it impacts our ability to serve and strengthen more families. *Baseline data pending.*

2.3 Strengthen local and regional collaboration to achieve administrative efficiencies and collectively serve more children and families. Sharing administrative costs and cross promoting services can increase capacity within counties and across contiguous counties to serve more children. *Baseline data pending.*

2.4 Expand the parent engagement component in publicly funded preschool classrooms. Provide technical assistance and funding for Local Partnerships to partner with 4K in any setting and/or Head Start to expand parent education and support. *Baseline data pending.*

2.5 Expand capacity and training for promising school readiness practices. SC First Steps can intentionally research, share and fund promising practices and approaches occurring in SC or nationally. *Baseline data pending.*

2.6 Increase awareness and value of school readiness services and supports. Consumer research would be required to obtain baseline for current consumer awareness related to the perceived value of early childhood, prenatal care, home visiting, WIC, Head Start, 4K and other resources. *No baseline available.*

2.7 Strengthen the impact of technical assistance provided to child care providers through First Steps Local Partnerships. Thirteen Local Partnerships currently provide technical assistance in 133 child care programs. The primary assessment being used now is the Environmental Rating Scale. Utilize CLASS observations and coaching to ensure continuous quality improvement. *Deidentified CLASS scores will be available annually.*

2.8 Strengthen the training and policies provided by SC First Steps to Local Partnership staff and board members. SCFS will develop training focused on key core competencies for staff and board success. *A learning management system (LMS) is in development.*

3. Strengthen collaboration and alignment between all organizations serving children birth to age five.

SC First Steps serves as the convener for the state's Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC), resulting in high levels of collaboration between several state agencies and other organizations. The current allocation for the ECAC is \$3.4M (4% of total budget). **Increase utilization rates for all early childhood services.**

Tactics

3.1 Increase enrollment in publicly funded preschool. In partnership with SC Department of Education, Head Start Collaboration Office and SC Department of Social Services. *Baseline data pending.*

3.2 Reduce teacher turnover in publicly funded preschool settings by increasing collaborative training and support, and by building awareness of career pathways in early care and education. In partnership with SC Department of Education, Head Start Collaboration Office, SC Department of Social Services, SC Technical College System, Coordinating Council for Workforce Development and SC Commission on Higher Education. *Approach to data collection pending.*

3.3 Expand collaborative outreach efforts to increase utilization of Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program. In partnership with the Department of Public Health. *The current coverage rate is 58.6% (or 98,256 women).*⁶

3.4 Increase availability for and utilization of home visiting programs for families with children age 5 and under. In partnership with Children's Trust of SC. *There are currently 5,389 families served statewide.*⁷

3.5 Increase the number of women accessing prenatal care. In partnership with the SC Department of Public Health and SC Department of Health and Human Services. *Seventy seven percent (77%) access adequate or adequate plus prenatal care (defined by the Kotelchuck Index).*⁸

3.6 Increase developmental screening rates for children ages 9–35 months. In partnership with SC Department of Public Health, SC Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, and Children's Trust of SC. *Forty five percent (45%) of children ages 9-35 months in SC received a developmental screening.*⁹

3.7 Increase the percentage of children with a medical home. In partnership with the SC Department of Public Health and SC Department of Health and Human Services. A "medical home" is a comprehensive, coordinated and patient centered approach. *Fifty four percent (54.7%) of children ages 0-5 in SC have a medical home.*¹⁰

⁶. SC Department of Public Health (2024). ⁷. National Home Visiting Resource Center (SC, 2024). ⁸. Birth data from SC Department of Public Health (2022). ⁹. National Survey of Children's Health (2022-2023). ¹⁰. National Survey of Children's Health (2022-2023). ¹¹. Administration for Children and Families (2023).

Foundations for Success

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

- **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 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.