

From Implementation to Impact



*An Evaluation of the South Carolina
First Steps to School Readiness Program
2006*

Executive Summary



Conducted by
High/Scope Educational Research Foundation



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About The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation

The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation is an independent, nonprofit 501(c) 3 organization with headquarters in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Founded in 1970, High/Scope's mission is to lift lives through education so everyone can succeed in life and contribute to society. Its vision is widespread participatory education in which students and teachers are partners in shaping the learning experience. To this end, it engages in evaluative research, development of curriculum, training, and assessment materials, and dissemination through educational services and publishing. These activities target teachers and service workers, primarily in early childhood programs and also in elementary schools and out-of-school youth programs. It also disseminates research findings to those who influence children's lives, such as teachers, service workers, parents, administrators, policymakers, academics, and researchers. The Foundation also has initiatives in early childhood literacy and elementary education through movement.



The law creating First Steps not only provided for the establishment and enhancement of services directed toward young children and their families, it also established an evaluation process for monitoring and improving the effectiveness of the First Steps program. Under the law, an evaluation of the program effectiveness of First Steps is to be conducted by an external evaluator, and an evaluation report is to be provided to the South Carolina General Assembly every three years. The legislation also stipulated that the external evaluation be supervised by a three-person committee with two committee members to be appointed by the General Assembly and one by the First Steps Board of Trustees. The members of the three-person committee have worked with the First Steps Board of Trustees and the Office of South Carolina First Steps to oversee the external evaluation presented herein.

The First Steps Board of Trustees contracted with the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation to conduct this external evaluation. The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization in Ypsilanti, Michigan that focuses on research in the areas of early childhood development and education. The three-person committee has worked closely with High/Scope researchers to ensure that the evaluation is impartial, comprehensive and instructive, and we endorse this report as possessing each of these qualities. We appreciate the cooperation of the many groups that have contributed to this evaluation. We have enjoyed excellent working relationships with High/Scope, the First Steps Board of Trustees, the Office of South Carolina First Steps and with the county staff, board members and service providers.

This evaluation focuses on the second three years of First Steps, a period during which the initiative began its shift from start-up and initial implementation toward a more focused concentration upon child outcomes. The report details the tremendous successes of the First Steps initiative to date, and outlines important challenges still to be addressed. We hope that all involved in this initiative to improve the school readiness of our children will find the report a useful blueprint for action.

Members of the Three-Person Committee:

Susan Shi
Patty Kay
Dexter Cook

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Overview of the Evaluation	8
Who Is Being Served?	8
What Is the Range of the Services Being Provided?	8
What Is the Quality of the Services Being Provided?.....	8
Do the Services Impact the Outcomes of Participants?	9
Problems During the Evaluation.....	10
Early Education.....	14
Methods.....	15
Findings.....	16
Quality Enhancement Programs and Child Care Expansion	17
Methods.....	19
Findings.....	19
Parenting and Family Strengthening.....	22
Methods.....	23
Findings.....	23
The Added Value of First Steps.....	25
Methods.....	26
Findings.....	26
Recommendations.....	28
Looking to the Future.....	29
Program Investments	29
Data Management.....	31
Bureaucracy and Collaboration.....	32
First Steps' Self-Improvement Strategies	33
References.....	36

Introduction

Shortly after being elected governor of South Carolina in November 1998, Governor Jim Hodges began talking with officials from North Carolina about Smart Start, North Carolina's early childhood education and health program. Governor Hodges was eager to launch such a program in South Carolina where one in seven children arrived in first grade unprepared for school. Less than two months into Hodges' administration, South Carolina lawmakers introduced legislation for what would eventually become the state's First Steps to School Readiness Program. First Steps would be

a comprehensive, results-oriented initiative for improving early childhood development by providing, through county partnerships, public and private funds and support for high-quality early childhood development and education services for children by providing support for their families' efforts toward enabling their children to reach school ready to learn (Section 59-152-010 South Carolina Enabling Legislation, 1999).

After debate over funding levels and governance structure, the state House and Senate agreed on a compromise bill that Hodges signed into law on June 28, 1999. The new program was initially funded at \$20 million the first year. The purpose of First Steps as outlined in Section 59-152-20 of the legislation is to

develop, promote, and assist efforts of agencies, private providers, and public and private organizations and entities, at the state level and the community level to collaborate and cooperate in order to focus and intensify services, assure the most efficient use of all available resources, and eliminate duplication of efforts to serve the needs of young children and their families.

The goals of First Steps were identified in section 59-152-30 and are to

- Provide parents with access to the support they might seek and want to strengthen their families and to promote the optimal development of their preschool children

- Increase comprehensive services so children have reduced risk for major physical, developmental, and learning problems
- Promote high-quality preschool programs that provide a healthy environment that will promote normal growth and development
- Provide services so all children receive the protection, nutrition, and health care needed to thrive in the early years of life so children arrive at school ready to learn
- Mobilize communities to focus efforts on providing enhanced services to support families and their young children so as to enable every child to reach school healthy and ready to learn

First Steps is a comprehensive initiative designed to help prepare children for school by providing funding to support early childhood services through community/county collaborations that address the unmet needs of young children and their families. Funding for this initiative originates at the state level, where it is dispersed to the 46 counties that use it to support a range of programs designed to strengthen families and prepare children for school.

First Steps is a community-driven effort. Counties determine their greatest needs and use First Steps funds to support or enhance the services or programs that will bolster the school readiness of its children. This process has resulted in varied strategies. Examples include improving quality through quality-enhancement grants, staff training and professional development, providing child care vouchers or scholarships to low-income families, expanding 4K classes from half day to full day, establishing new 4K classrooms, expanding Head Start programs, providing summer readiness programs to eligible children entering kindergarten in the fall, and improving parenting skills through programs such as Parents as Teachers (PAT), Parent-Child Home (PCH), and Even Start, as well as English as a Second Language (ESL) training and other family literacy models. Health strategies have included collaborating with local Department of Health and Environmental Control offices to provide expanded health home visitation programs, nutrition education, screenings, free prescriptions, free car seats, dental care, and technical assistance for parents and child care providers. Other strategies have included

making programs mobile so as to bring to children and families services such as library programs and health services and attempting to increase public awareness regarding existing services and referral services (Child Trends, 2003b, exec. summary, pp. 17–19).

First Steps began initially serving children, their families, and their communities with state-allocated monies and a required 15% local county match. The first year's allocation was \$20 million. State funding for First Steps increased to \$30 million in fiscal year 2001 then gradually fell to about \$18 million in fiscal year 2005. Total state appropriations have totaled \$94,880,000 between 1999 and 2004. Because First Steps has garnered significant corporate and community support as well as federal funding (more than \$25 million), it has been able to decrease its reliance on state funds from 100% in 1999 to less than 72% in 2004 (South Carolina Office of First Steps, 2005a).

As would be expected, as funding has declined over the years, so have expenditures. Over the past four years, total expenses declined 41%, with spending of state allocated funds decreasing while spending of private donations of cash, services, and materials and federal grants have increased.

Even though allocations and subsequent expenditures have both declined in the past four years, First Steps has consistently invested in several types of programs. Specifically, during its six years of operation, First Steps has invested over \$27 million dollars enhancing early education, over \$36 million strengthening parents and families, over \$8 million increasing access to and enhancing the quality of child care, and just over \$4 million providing health care and other services to children and families.

Over time, First Steps has maintained its commitment to quality enhancement programs, child care expansion, and health programs with steady funding levels. Its investment in family skills and literacy programs have increased. Even though spending on early education has declined, it remains the second largest First Steps investment. Spending on transportation and other programs (e.g., public awareness campaigns) have steadily declined.

The consistent investment over time in programs and services targeting parents, preschool, and child care are a direct reflection of county needs assessments. South Carolina suffers from above-average poverty compared to other states. According to Kids Count data from 2004, 23% of the state's children live in poverty, compared to 18%

nationwide. The median family income for families with children in South Carolina is \$43,000 compared to \$50,050 nationwide. In addition, 35% of the state's children live in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004). Just over half the state's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, the seventh highest percentage among states nationwide (University of South Carolina, 2005). Both South Carolina's infant mortality rate and incidence of low birth weight babies are higher than the national average. Infant mortality is 9.3 per 1,000 births in the state compared to 7.8 per 1,000 births nationwide. In addition, 10% of children are born with low birth weight compared to 7.8% nationwide (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004).

South Carolina has some of the poorest student achievement statistics in the country. The state ranked 41 out of 50 states in performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) fourth-grade reading test and 32 out of 50 on the NAEP fourth-grade math test. In terms of average SAT scores, the state ranked last among the states with an average score of 993 out of 1600 (University of South Carolina, 2005). The state's literacy rate is also quite low, with 25% of adults falling into the lowest of five literacy levels and 56% falling into the lowest two literacy levels, according to 1998 estimates from the National Institute for Literacy (Redder, 1998).

In 2004, 38% of South Carolina children lived in single-parent households, with 31% living with their mothers and 7% living with their fathers. Nationwide, 30% of children lived in single-parent households that year, 24% with their mothers and 6% with their fathers. Also in 2004, 7% of South Carolina children lived in households where grandparents served as caregivers, compared to 4% nationwide. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004). The proportion of children living in households where the household head dropped out of high school is 16% compared to 17% nationwide (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004).

In 2004, there were 1,631 licensed child care centers and 1,947 licensed family child care homes in South Carolina (National Child Care Information Center, 2004). Of the child care centers, only 132 (less than 1%) were accredited based on high quality standards established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children

(NAEYC). Clearly, First Steps investments in supporting children and families at risk and improving the quality of available services are well-warranted.

The legislation that created First Steps stipulated that accountability systems be a cornerstone of First Steps to School Readiness. The legislation requires the Office of First Steps to oversee ongoing data collection and to contract for “an in-depth performance audit due January 1, 2003, and every three years thereafter, to ensure that statewide goals and requirements of the First Steps to School Readiness initiative are being met” (Section 59-152-50[6]). Additionally, the “purpose of the evaluation is to assess progress toward achieving the First Steps goals and to determine the impact of the initiative on children and families at the state and local levels” (Section 59-152-160[C]). In order to ensure compliance and cooperation with the evaluation, the legislation also required that “during the course of the evaluation, if an evaluator determines that any state agency has failed to comply with the coordination and collaboration provisions as required in this chapter the final report must reflect that information.” Additionally, the legislation stated that “all County First Steps Partnerships shall cooperate fully in collecting and providing data and information for the evaluation” (Section 59-152-160[C]).

The first evaluation of the First Steps initiative was conducted by Child Trends and released in 2003. That evaluation took place when some counties’ programs had been in existence less than a year, and many others were still in an implementation phase. As a result, the 2003 evaluation focused primarily on the implementation of the First Steps initiative rather than outcomes. The report makes clear that the researchers felt that evaluating outcomes at such an early stage of the development of the First Steps initiative could potentially underestimate the effects of the programs. They attempted to determine whether First Steps had identified research-based best practices, implemented them effectively, and begun to provide them to the appropriate populations (Child Trends, 2003a, p. 11). Major findings from the Child Trends evaluation included the following:

- Administrative structures at the state and county levels were successfully created and county-level needs and resource assessments and strategic planning were conducted.

- During the implementation phase, First Steps adhered to a set of guiding principles that were supported by research in early childhood development. These principles included focusing on the whole child, viewing school readiness as a multidimensional construct, emphasizing community mobilization and collaboration, and meeting specific community needs, among others.
- First Steps engendered a “culture of accountability” regarding expenditures and program implementation. This included adequate financial tracking and detailing of expenditures.
- First Steps had fostered collaboration and built capacity at the state and county levels in a way that should enhance services for young children and their families. First Steps’ programs were based on “best practices” in early education, child care, and parenting and family literacy.
- South Carolina spends substantially less per preschool child through First Steps than the school readiness programs in North Carolina or California. In fiscal year (FY) 2001, North Carolina’s Smart Start spent nearly \$370 per child younger than six. In FY 2001, California’s First Five spent nearly \$280 per child younger than six. First Steps spent just over \$120 per child in FY 2002.
- All counties met their fiscal year 2002 matching contribution with a statewide matching rate of more than 28% – substantially exceeding the enabling legislation’s 15% requirement.

This document summarizes the methods, findings, and subsequent recommendations of the second evaluation of the state of South Carolina’s First Steps to School Readiness Program, which was conducted by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.

The Child Trends 2003 evaluation was an implementation evaluation that asked the question “Is First Steps doing the right things in the right ways for the right people?” This High/Scope 2006 evaluation both revisits and moves beyond these research questions and findings. This is an outcomes evaluation that asks not only is First Steps doing the right things in the right ways for the right people but also asks whether the

programs supported by First Steps funding are getting the “right” results—that is, improving the readiness of children for school.

Overview of the Evaluation

The importance of strategically deciding which parts of an initiative like First Steps to focus on in an evaluation and what strategies to use cannot be overstated. Each individual part presents its own set of challenges to evaluation. Through an interactive process over the course of several months, High/Scope and First Steps staff and board members worked collectively to identify appropriate, necessary, and measurable evaluation questions. Four broad thematic questions shape the evaluation questions being asked and answered. Those questions are discussed below.

Who Is Being Served?

(Is First Steps serving the right people?) The First Steps initiative's mandate is to provide services to insure that all children are ready for first grade. Within that mission is an emphasis on the state's most disadvantaged children and families since they are more likely to not be ready for school. A basic concern is whether or not dollars are being spent on programs that reach the neediest South Carolinians. "Who is being served?" is a fundamental question in this evaluation.

What Is the Range of the Services Being Provided?

(Is First Steps providing the right services?) Counties are able to use their First Steps funds to support a wide range of programming. Funds are meant to expand, extend, improve, or increase access to services. Individual counties conduct community needs assessments that guide their investment strategies. The question "What services are being provided?" can also be posited as "Are First Steps funds being spent on well-documented, research-based programs that target and provide effective services to children and families at risk?"

What Is the Quality of the Services Being Provided?

(Are First Steps services implemented in the right ways?) A consideration of the impact of programs that benefit from First Steps funds on child outcomes cannot be

separated from an investigation of program quality. Dollars may be reaching target constituents to little or no effect if the quality of programming is inadequate.

Do the Services Impact the Outcomes of Participants?

(Are First Steps services getting the right results?) The most crucial concern for many supporters and skeptics alike of the First Steps initiative is its impact on outcomes. Specifically, everyone is interested in child outcomes that relate to school readiness. The question of impact, however, is not just limited to the assessment of child outcomes and how they are measured. Fundamental questions regarding the types of programs, the implementation of those programs, staffing issues, and how all of these factors influence outcomes must be considered as well.

This evaluation focuses on four specific areas of the First Steps experience: early education, child care (which includes quality enhancement programs and child care expansion), parenting and family strengthening (family skills and literacy programs), and the “value-add” of First Steps. Each of these four foci address issues critical to the future by providing insight into the experience and value of the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness initiative. The first three represent 80% of all First Steps dollars spent in FY 2003. First Steps investments have been concentrated in these areas since the initiative’s inception. In each of them, characteristics of the programs and characteristics and outcomes of program participants are described and/or evaluated. The fourth area of investigation, the added value of First Steps, focuses on a basic policy question: Does the strategy of investing in early childhood care and education programs through First Steps allow for efficiency, effectiveness, or innovation that otherwise might not have happened?

Problems During the Evaluation

As described in the full report in the data problems discussions, significant problems arose or became evident during the course of this evaluation. General problems which affected our ability to evaluate participant and program outcomes in the areas of early education, parenting and family strengthening, and child care included the following:

- During the first two years of First Steps program implementation 2000–2002, First Steps children were not identified in Department of Education (DOE) or First Steps databases, or data that was collected was incomplete.
- Due to rules and regulations regarding privacy and proprietary issues within the Office of Research and Statistics (ORS), High/Scope was not able to verify the methods used to create the databases provided to it nor were we able to verify the accuracy of these databases.
- First Steps databases, collected by the ORS, have serious missing data problems. Counties have only been required to provide complete records on 50% of their clients. This policy, combined with methods used by the ORS to create unique identification numbers, resulted in uncertainty regarding the exact number of First Steps clients. This raises serious concerns regarding whether databases provided are representative of all First Steps clients and whether results can be generalized. Analysis specific to First Steps clients must be interpreted with caution.

The participant-level questions in early education and parenting and family strengthening were developed with the understanding that pre-existing data as well as new data collection would contribute to the answers. Existing data sources were to include the First Steps data systems, the South Carolina data warehouse, the Program Evaluation Reports (PERS) provided by participating counties, the State DOE databases (which were to include the PRECODE, Early Education ATOM, and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS)), as well as the South Carolina Readiness Assessment (SCRA) and Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) databases. The SCRA database was to

include evaluations in kindergarten and first grade. The second-grade ITBS scores, 4K Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning, Third Edition (DIAL-3) evaluations, and PACT scores in third grade were also to be provided.

Some of the problems specific to the early education evaluation included:

- Individuals within the DOE were initially reluctant to share data. This resulted in time delays that impacted High/Scope's ability to analyze and clarify data and to potentially look for alternative methods of answering research questions.
- Resistance arose from school districts that were reluctant to allow researchers into classrooms to conduct observations. In some instances, teachers were allowed to opt out of the evaluation by their principals or districts; in other situations, evaluators were turned away upon arrival. By the time permission was obtained to conduct Preschool Quality Assessment (PQA) and Creative Curriculum Implementation Checklist (CCIC) data collection, it was late in the school year and a sufficient number of observations that would allow for extensive analysis could not be completed.
- DIAL-3 data collected by the DOE does not contain the date of evaluation. Without this information it is impossible to properly calculate child age at date of testing and their scores, and to report results. As a result, this data could not be used.
- ITBS data was missing significant amounts of data, making it unreliable. For the two years of data available, 46% and 55% of the language totals and 62% and 78% of the math totals were missing. This data was not used.

Some of the problems specific to the evaluation of the parenting and family strengthening programs included:

- Data was unavailable on some of the programs that First Steps funds in parenting and family strengthening.

- The number and variety of programs funded by First Steps makes evaluation difficult. Small numbers of participants in many programs results in insufficient sample sizes for comprehensive data analysis.
- Due to the still relatively new nature of the First Steps initiative many of the children whose parents participated in the parenting and family strengthening programs are not yet old enough to be included in cohort data.
- Twenty-two percent of the children whose parents participated in parenting and family strengthening programs were able to be identified as age-eligible in the data provided but not every eligible client had cohort data; therefore, the sample used represents 18% of the total identified age identified clients. Each cohort is a data set of all children who attended kindergarten during that school year. Additionally, not included were about 7,000 adult clients (based on the data provided by ORS), who cannot be identified either because they did not have identification numbers (ID) or their ID cannot be matched with any child clients.

Some of the problems specific to the child care evaluation included:

- Navigating multiple bureaucracies to get access to data resulted in time delays which impacted High/Scope's ability to analyze and clarify data and potentially look for alternative methods of answering research questions.
- First Steps has either not been collecting program information about their participants or data collected is not useful for evaluation. For example, when asked to provide a listing of all child care centers who had participated in quality enhancement during the past year First Steps was unable to do so. First Steps state staff contacted individual counties asking for this information which was used for survey distribution.
- First Steps was unable to complete data collection they were responsible for. First Steps was to provide trained evaluators to complete ECERS, ITERS, and FDCRS visits in randomly selected child and family/group child care centers. They were unable to complete a sufficient number of ECERS and ITERS and unable to

complete any FDCRS. This resulted in an inability to analyze child care quality in a meaningful manner.

Early Education

Increased access to high-quality early education is at the heart of the First Steps initiative. In Section 59-152-30, the First Steps to School Readiness Act stated as one of its goals to “promote high quality preschool programs that provide a healthy environment that will promote normal growth and development” with particular emphasis on “school readiness” and “quality cognitive learning.”

Throughout its existence, on average 29% of First Steps spending has been on supporting and expanding early education. During its six years of operation, First Steps has invested over \$27 million dollars enhancing early education. Strategies used include expanding four-year-old kindergarten (4K) from half day to full day, adding new classrooms, expanding Head Start, and developing summer readiness programs. The evaluation questions related to the First Steps early education programmatic components are as follows:

1. What are the descriptive characteristics of teachers who teach in First Steps-funded 4K classrooms?
2. What are the curricular models implemented in First Steps-funded 4K programs, and what is their level of fidelity of curricular implementation?
3. What is the quality of First Steps-funded 4K programs?

The evaluation questions related to the participants in early education programs are as follows:

4. What are the descriptive characteristics of children who participate in First Steps 4K-funded classrooms?
5. What are the short- and long-term outcomes for children who participate in First Steps 4K-funded programs?
6. Is there a significant difference in outcomes for First Steps children who participate in half- versus full-day 4K?

Methods

Program level questions were addressed using several methods. Teacher qualifications for both teachers and assistant teachers employed in First Steps-funded classrooms were ascertained using the teacher certification database provided by the South Carolina Department of Education (DOE), the South Carolina data warehouse, and the Program Effectiveness Reports (PERS) provided by First Steps. Information about curricular models, implementation fidelity, and classroom quality were gathered in several ways. Using available information we identified which programs were using which curricular models. It was determined that two curricula most often used in 4K classrooms are High/Scope and Creative Curriculum. Classrooms identified as High/Scope were randomly selected to be evaluated for curricular fidelity using the High/Scope Program Quality Assessment (PQA) and classrooms identified as using the Creative Curriculum were randomly selected to be evaluated using the Creative Curriculum Implementation Checklist (CCIC). Classroom quality in First Steps funded 4Ks was evaluated using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS).

The participant-level questions were addressed using First Steps data systems, the South Carolina data warehouse, the State DOE databases (which include the PRECODE and the Early Education ATOM), as well as the SCRA and PACT databases. The SCRA database included evaluations in kindergarten and first grade. Additional outcome data was made available to High/Scope by the University of South Carolina (USC). Specifically, the state of South Carolina (partially funded by First Steps) participated during the fall of 2004 in a multi-state evaluation of state-funded preschool conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers. USC researchers collaborated with NIEER to collect fall 2004 data for that project (see Lamy et al, 2005). That data was shared with High/Scope by USC. For this evaluation, the NIEER preschool children were assessed a second time in the spring of 2005 to examine short-term positive effects on child outcomes of preschool participation.

Findings

A general lack of sufficient sample sizes hindered the ability to fully describe the programmatic components of 4K and First Steps-funded classrooms and also limits generalizations that can be made. What can be said is that the majority of teachers who teach in 4K are certified in early childhood (65%) and have a master's degree (51%). Rates of early childhood certification and a bachelor's or higher degree earned tend to be higher in First Steps-funded classrooms than in other 4K classrooms. Curricular fidelity and the quality of classrooms indicate that, on average, classrooms are of adequate quality but are not implementing the High/Scope curriculum with a high degree of fidelity.

The analysis of cohort data clearly indicates that children who receive First Steps funds experience more risk factors for school failure than those who do not. They are more likely to be poor and are more often minorities compared to those who do not attend 4K at all. Among First Steps-funded with 4K children, those enrolled in full-day 4K are the most disadvantaged. Overall, however, First Steps-funded children who do not attend 4K are the poorest and most at-risk.

There is evidence that all children who attend 4K increase their language, math, and learning approaches over the course of one preschool year. There is also evidence that 4K produces better long-term outcomes for all children who attend. There is a trend among First Steps children who attend 4K of improvement in their odds of grade retention and they generally scored higher on SCRA compared to non-4K First Steps children. Children who participated in First Steps-funded programs without 4K are most at risk for special needs placement and lower academic achievement compared to both their First Steps-funded with 4K and non-First Steps 4K peers.

There appears to be consistent evidence that enrollment in full-day 4K has positive effects on child outcomes particularly during the kindergarten year. It is clear from these analyses that while, in general, 4K experiences reduce the odds of being retained, full-day 4K has a greater impact in reducing the odds of being retained. A consistent finding within the SCRA and PACT scores is that 4K effects are stronger for minority children than for White children.

Quality Enhancement Programs and Child Care Expansion

Because of the strong relationship between child care quality and children's development and readiness for school, First Steps has focused a significant portion of its efforts on improving child care experiences for children in South Carolina. During its six years of operation First Steps has spent over \$8 million increasing access to and enhancing the quality of child care in South Carolina. The goals of First Steps to School Readiness in the area of child care are to

- Increase the availability of quality childcare choices for parents as measured by increasing numbers of child care providers operating at higher levels of quality.
- Increase the number of child care vouchers available to SC families for quality child care.
- Increase the school readiness focus in child care settings.
- Increase the leverage of federal and private resources to serve the state's most at-risk children.
- Increase the number of child care workers achieving progress toward early education certification and continued professional development.
- Improve the quality of physical and learning environment in child care settings of all type.
- Expand public and private partnerships in 4K education.

The three primary areas in child care that First Steps focuses on are child care quality enhancement, child care worker professional development, and expanded access to quality child care. Strategies adopted by First Steps include the following:

- Quality enhancement: First Steps provides funds to help child care providers improve their quality by upgrading their child care licensing or ABC-enhanced requirements and by offering technical assistance and mentoring.

- Staff training and development: First Steps provides and funds staff training, development and mentoring to improve quality in child care settings.
- Increased availability of child vouchers: First Steps provides funds to increase the number of child care subsidies to eligible families.

Research questions were developed by focusing on these strategies. The first four research questions are as follows:

1. What types of child care programs receive First Steps funding?
2. What types of technical assistance are available to child care centers as a result of First Step funding?
3. What types or forms of teacher training (enhancements) are provided to programs/staffs?
4. Is there evidence of program quality improvement as a result of the training provided by First Steps funding?

The pivotal question in the child care area is about the types of preschool experiences that children receive in the programs they attend using vouchers. The logic model, while indirect, is research-based, that is, higher quality preschool experiences lead to better child outcomes. The focus here is on the impact of investments in teachers and classrooms.

One of the strategies of First Steps in the area of child care is to increase the number of child care vouchers available to SC families. Thus the remaining research questions are related to that strategy:

5. What are the descriptive characteristics of families receiving First Steps and ABC child care funding (First Steps scholarships, ABC vouchers)?
6. How long does the average recipient receive funding?

Methods

High/Scope developed a questionnaire that was distributed to all child care centers that, according to county First Steps offices, had participated in quality enhancements and training during the previous year. First Steps office staff provided a listing of the child care centers surveyed. Surveys were mailed directly to each child care center and family/group day care on the list. Responders were provided with self-addressed stamped envelopes to allow the questionnaires to be returned directly to the High/Scope Foundation. Two versions of the child care survey were created, one for child care centers and a separate one for family/group day cares. Questions on both surveys included inquiries regarding background information for the centers (e.g., enrollment, staff qualifications and experiences) and information regarding the center's experiences with First Step quality enhancements and training. Both surveys included questions that addressed the quality of the child care environments.

The Office of First Steps and the South Carolina Office of Research and Statistics data warehouse were utilized to describe the characteristics of families receiving First Steps child care funds. Data Warehouse files were utilized to answer questions regarding client participants. First Steps participants who received ABC vouchers were compared with non-First Steps recipients of ABC vouchers to describe the characteristics of recipients.

Findings

The evidence presented in this section describes the relationship between quality enhancements, program quality, and the data on child characteristics. There is a link between the provision of quality services provided in child care and the most disadvantaged South Carolinians. Evidence showed that recipients of First Steps child care scholarships and ABC vouchers were disproportionately poor and minority. It highlighted that the First Steps goal of reaching the most at-risk children and families was being achieved.

There was limited, self-reported evidence that the programs those children might attend were improving in quality and that those improvements could be linked to

participation in quality enhancement activities. The strongest evidence came from Richland County, providing specific data that showed improved quality in pre/post training assessments. Results suggested the ability of First Steps quality enhancement to improve child care quality particularly in areas related to cognitive outcomes for children – specifically listening, talking, and learning activities.

Self-reported quality ratings were significantly correlated to the teachers' levels of education, the amount of training received in the last twelve months, and the focus on training in staff meetings. Specifically,

- The higher teachers' level of education the more likely they were to report providing more developmentally appropriate learning experiences and appropriate staff/child interactions.
- The greater the amount of training the classroom teacher had received in the last twelve months the more likely they were to report engaging in more developmentally appropriate activities and/or reported higher quality ratings on daily learning experiences in language, communication, fine motor development, and art.
- The teachers who worked in centers that placed greater importance on staff training or worked in centers that had more resources for staff training reported providing more developmentally appropriate activities and/or reported higher quality ratings on daily learning experiences in language, communication, fine motor development, and art.

Participants in First Steps quality-enhancement initiatives overwhelmingly reported high levels of satisfaction with the quality-enhancement programs that First Steps subsidizes.

Children and families in 2003–2004 who were recipients of First Steps child care expansion initiatives were overwhelmingly minorities, and were recipients of food stamps, Medicaid, and TANF at higher rates than their non-First Steps counterparts. They were significantly more likely to have received free and reduced lunch and to have had more handicapping conditions. Their mothers had significantly lower education levels. It

is clear that First Steps child care expansion recipients were significantly more likely than their non-First Steps peers to be Black or Hispanic, have more health problems and handicapping conditions, and be the poorest of the poor.

While information presented provided support for the argument that quality enhancements improved program quality, this evidence also did not support statements of causality. Data did not allow for definitive statements or broad generalizations to outcomes benefiting the First Steps population of programs and children. It was extraordinarily clear however, that in the areas of child care expansion, First Steps is clearly serving the poorest and neediest families.

Parenting and Family Strengthening

First Steps has focused a significant portion of its efforts on improving parenting and family strengthening initiatives in South Carolina. During its six years of operation First Steps has spent over \$36 million strengthening parents and families. The goals of First Steps to School Readiness in the area of parenting and family strengthening are to

- Increase family literacy and parent education levels.
- Improve parental employability and employment.
- Increase the effectiveness of parenting related to child nurturance, learning, and interaction, language, health and safety.
- Increase successful parenting and family literacy programs targeting, service integration, and results documentation.
- Increase parent involvement in 4K–12 education settings.

Strategies adopted by First Steps to promote parent and family strengthening have included:

- Parent Education: First Steps funds programs which increase parents ability to stimulate children’s intellectual, social, and physical development with parent programs.
- Early Literacy: First Steps funds programs that enhance the abilities of families to read with their children.
- Countdown to Kindergarten: First Steps funds programs aimed at enhancing early parental involvement for children who are screened as at risk for school failure prior to kindergarten entry.

When this evaluation was planned, the intent was to follow a similar pattern in parenting and family strengthening programs that was used in the early education and child care investigations. Specifically, the intent was to ask a set of questions about

program characteristics, including quality, and a set of program participant questions (characteristics and outcomes). A convergence of data problems and the high level of investment in parenting and family strengthening programs within the First Steps initiative dictated a slightly different evaluation agenda. The focus the evaluation in this area is almost exclusively on child outcomes.

Methods

The First Steps data system as well as the South Carolina data warehouse was used to conduct a secondary analysis of parent and child outcomes as well as to describe participants of the parenting and family literacy programs. Two specific analyses were conducted with parenting and family strengthening data. The first looked at the relationship between parenting and family strengthening involvement and child outcomes (grade retention, special needs placement, and SCRA scores). The second is a case study looking at short- and long-term child outcomes as well as adult parenting outcomes using data provided by the Lexington School District 3. Analysis was conducted on several data sets provided by the Office of Research and Statistics as well the state Office of First Steps and several county First Steps programs. Only the results from the most complete data set are reported. The decision to only include one was made because, while other districts and programs generously provided data, results were consistent between them and the smaller data sets provided no new insights into the results.

Findings

It was anticipated that it would be difficult to find a link between parenting and family strengthening programs and academic child outcomes. A serious problem exists in evaluating parent programs and their impact on those types of child outcomes because the link between parenting and family programs and child outcomes is indirect. That is, programs can impact parents' beliefs, knowledge, and practices in ways that are likely to lead to positive child outcomes; however the difficulty is that many factors can affect the size, duration, and nature of the outcomes. These could include the age of a child when his or her parent is involved in the program; the amount, frequency, and length of involvement; and the intensity and comprehensive nature of the program, as well its

quality. One would not expect dramatic short-term changes in child outcomes as a result of parenting and family literacy programs. Instead, over time hopefully child outcomes should be affected by both short- and long-term changes in parent outcomes. In this instance there was little evidence of a relationship between programs and outcomes.

Due to the still relatively new nature of the First Steps initiative many of the children whose parents participated in the parenting and family strengthening programs are not yet old enough to be included in cohort data. Sixty-six percent of the children whose parents participated are not yet old enough to have attended kindergarten. Twelve percent are either too old or are missing age data. Twenty-two percent were able to be identified as age-eligible in the data provided. Although 22% of identified clients are age eligible, not every eligible client had cohort data; therefore data used only represents 18% of the total identified clients. Not included in this table are about 7,000 adult clients (based on the data provided by ORS), who could not be identified either because they did not have ID or their ID cannot be matched with any child clients.

Data that was available indicated that these programs are clearly targeting the most vulnerable families. In every category First Steps participants were poorer and more at risk than their nonparticipating counterparts. The evidence presented here does not consistently indicate significant enhancements for most children of the participants. In fact, some of the evidence suggests a negative relationship between program participation and child outcomes. The reason for this may lie in the fact that many of these programs are working with families and children who, because of their difficult situations, experience more negative outcomes.

The two programs that consistently demonstrated positive outcomes for children were the family literacy programs English as a Second Language (205) and Family Literacy Model Programs (211). Reasons for this may be in the comprehensive nature of family literacy model programs which require activities in four key components: child care, adult education, parenting, and parenting and child interaction. It should be kept in mind, however, that sample sizes were small and not very reliable.

The Added Value of First Steps

One of the most important components of the First Steps initiative is that the results are achieved through partnerships. Partnerships at the state and local levels and among public and private entities are the cornerstone of the First Steps initiative. Explicit in the original legislative statement is a public policy focus on efficiency and effectiveness. Implicit is an assumption those goals are best achieved by giving local communities the discretion to determine their greatest needs and how funds will be used. The structure of First Steps relies on what is called by policy analysts “bottom-up” (as opposed to top-down) decision making. Advocates of this approach argue that it leads to greater efficiency and effectiveness. It is also argued that it supports innovative problem solving. Contrastingly, a “top-down” perspective argues that initiatives like First Steps can lead to inconsistent services and waste. Both sides agree that as policies go from ideas to actions, the decisions made on the ground mean the success or failure of a program (e.g. see Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Lipsky, 1980; Peterson, Rabe, and Wong, 1986; Wilson, 1989). The essential difference is that one side sees the key to success in local control and discretion while the other values a centralized decision-making structure.

For First Steps, the question becomes, has a structure of local decision making and interagency cooperation lead to efficiency, effectiveness, and innovation in the provision of early childhood care and education services across the state? Deeply connected to this question is the fact that First Steps is a funding stream. What is, in fact, the added value of channeling funding first through the state and local First Steps offices instead of investing directly in the agencies implementing the programs that First Steps funds support?

The importance of this “value-add” question became increasingly clear over time as High/Scope gained a nuanced understanding of the political context of the initiative. It also became clear that this evaluation would be incomplete without a focus on the unique relationships that have developed over the course of the life of First Steps, particularly

during the last three years. As a result, evaluation questions and methods were developed to address this area.

Research questions were developed that addressed the unique issues related to county partnerships. They are:

1. How do county First Steps boards of trustees operate? What is their size and methods of communication? What types of assistance do they provide to Executive Directors (EDs)?
2. What is the nature of the relationships between county First Steps offices and the state First Steps office?
3. Does First Steps operate differently than other state departments or programs?
4. How does the existence of First Steps influence how other state departments or programs operate?

Methods

Phone interviews were developed which were used to elicit information from two of the First Steps stakeholders— First Steps Executive Directors (EDs) and local county Board Chairs (BCs). A Web-based survey was used to reach non-First Steps respondents. Interviews addressed issues such as size, methods of operation and communication at the county level as well as relationships between county First Steps offices and the state First Steps office. Other issues addressed whether or not the day-to-day operations of First Steps state and local staff and board members have created a well-run bureaucracy. They were also designed to determine if the structure of the initiative has led to new, better ways of providing services to South Carolinians.

Findings

Has the existence of First Steps with its structure of local decision making and interagency cooperation led to efficiency, effectiveness, and innovation in the provision of early childhood care and education services across the state? This question was at the heart of the addition of “value-add” research questions to the evaluation. Interviews with

local executive directors and board chairs as well as surveys solicited from non-First Steps departments and organizations, indicated mixed answers.

Respondents had many good things to say about First Steps but also had criticisms about how the program is run. Executive Directors had generally less optimistic views than local First Steps county Board Chairs regarding relationships between the state Office of First Steps and the local offices. Affiliated and non-First Steps-affiliated respondents tended to see few differences in how the state First Steps office operates compared to other state departments and programs. This suggested that the decentralized model has not resulted in new bureaucratic efficiencies. It seemed that the layered approach of a state office and then local offices and boards of trustees undermined some of the county-level discretion that resulted in bureaucratic business as usual. Even so, there was evidence that the availability of First Steps funds had allowed some room for innovative approaches both within First Steps and among collaborating partners.

Recommendations

This executive summary began by reminding readers of the goals and results of the 2003 evaluation; it concludes by revisiting recommendations made in 2003. It is important to highlight those recommendations because many of the issues brought to the forefront in the past continue to be challenges for First Steps in the present. The Child Trends report highlighted four categories for improvement: a focus on the quality of programs; data collection; strengthening procedures and administrative structures in the initiative; and spending. Specific recommendations that are still relevant include:

- First Steps should increase the focus on program quality across the state. Suggested areas for improvement included further training for teacher's aides in 4K classrooms and special focus on child care initiatives to improve quality in centers.
- First Steps should continue to provide training for executive directors and county board partnerships in all areas but with a special focus on fiscal areas, Program Effectiveness Reports (PERs), and the challenges counties faced while implementing First Steps. Many similar challenges were encountered across counties such as a lack of transportation and qualified staff. The report indicated the need to develop mechanisms that would allow counties to share experiences.
- There should be improvements in the standardization and clarity of administrative procedures between the state and the counties.
- First Steps needs to strengthen the evaluation processes. The report identified a need to create a method for tracking family and child receipt of services that ensured consistency in the data collected by the counties and unduplicated counts. It also described the need to appropriately select and develop guidelines for child assessments across programs.
- There needs to be adequate resources to sustain First Steps efforts so as to continue the strengthening of the quality of the programs, data collection, and administration.

Looking to the Future

The work done by High/Scope for First Steps includes two phases: an evaluation phase and a consultative phase. The questions asked and answered here are a part of the evaluation phase. During the second phase of this project, High/Scope will assist the First Steps office and board of trustees with preparation for the 2009 evaluation. Recommendations for change resulting from this evaluation are focused on three areas: program investment; data management; and organization, bureaucracy and collaboration. In some of these areas, First Steps has already documented the recognition of a need for change. For others future initiatives should be considered.

Program Investments

Over the past several years, First Steps has invested the majority of its resources into supporting and expanding 4K, improving access to and the quality of child care, and developing parenting and family literacy programs. This last category has been growing and is currently First Steps largest investment.

First Steps is meeting its legislative mandate to reach the neediest South Carolinians. However, the currently changing context of state-funded preschool initiatives could mean that a priority for serving children at risk of school failure is supplanted by a desire to provide access to quality early childhood education programs to all children and families. Universal preschool in and of itself is an excellent idea. The question for all states, and First Steps in particular, is how to invest limited funds in ways that are likely to produce the greatest gains. There is a delicate balance that must be struck between the cost of creating more programs and insuring that any program that exists is of high quality. Additionally, there is the challenge of deciding on a preschool-focused strategy or a comprehensive services strategy like First Steps (Christina & Nicholson-Goodman, 2005).

It is recommended that First Steps continue to invest its limited resources in providing quality services that have evidence of effectiveness to the neediest children. The strongest evidence of child outcomes in this evaluation comes from the early education analyses. There was a positive, significant impact on child outcomes that can be attributed to 4K attendance. Further, the evidence shows that children benefit more

from a full-day 4K experience than a half-day experience. The positive effects of full-day are magnified for minority children.

Considered together, the early education and parenting child outcomes findings raise issues for future First Steps investments. Consideration needs to be given to what types of programs First Steps will continue to fund in the future. While many programs have great value to children and families, not all of them (particularly parenting and family strengthening) have a clear, direct, and measurable link to the school readiness outcomes measured in this evaluation. If the only concern of First Steps is measurable increases in school readiness, spending should focus less on parenting and family strengthening programs and more on providing quality preschool and child care experiences for children at risk for school failure.

On the other hand, if the goal of First Steps is to continue to provide comprehensive services and programs that support families in an effort to increase school readiness, then the focus of evaluation needs to be measured by the impact that individual programs have directly on parents and families. Parents' knowledge or skills need to be measured directly to document gains for the adult participants. Additionally, the focus of child outcomes should be on child well-being and child/parent relationships that are more directly linked to the content of the parenting and family literacy programs (e.g. decreased incidents of abuse or neglect, increased levels of parent-child communication/positive interactions, more time spent reading to one's children). These measurements of parent and family outcomes need to be collected pre- and post-implementation, using a common set of tools across programs, that are made available directly to First Steps for evaluation purposes to justify expenditures in any particular program.

It is also recommended that First Steps consider limiting the scope and number of parenting and family literacy programs in favor of supporting a smaller number of programs. Investments should be in those programs that have a documented history of providing specific gains for parents and families. With limited funds available, First Steps cannot continue to offer such a wide berth of potential programs. Programs with very low numbers of participants or programs that do not have easily measurable outcomes that

can be tied to family improvement should be eliminated from, or have low priority, in a First Steps investment strategy.

Data Management

As is painstakingly noted throughout the full report, there were answers that could not be given and data analytic techniques that could not be pursued due to a lack of available data. In 2003, Child Trends recommended that First Steps prepare for the 2006 evaluation by putting in place systems to track clients and services, that there be a standardization of data collection tools, and that serious consideration be given to whether the Program Effectiveness Reports (PERs) should continue to be collected. Over the course of this evaluation, it became clear that there is still need for significant improvement in these areas. Recently, First Steps has revised the PERs to address the variable quality and comprehensiveness of information provided by the counties. This is a positive development. However, it is recommended that further consideration be given to whether a better system could be devised.

The issue of missing data must be addressed. Systems currently in place are inadequate to collect, manage, and track First Steps participants longitudinally. That counties have only been required to provide complete records on 50% of their clients makes evaluation almost impossible. This policy combined with methods used by the ORS to create unique identification numbers results in uncertainty regarding the exact number of First Steps clients. Large numbers of adult clients cannot be identified or matched with any child clients in the data. Not included in this analysis were approximately 7,000 of these adult clients. This raises serious concerns regarding the validity of any data that is collected. Counties must be required to complete information on their clients.

Since the 2003 evaluation, there still remains a need for a system that standardizes and validates county and vendor participation data. The need for a standardized set of instrumentation, which can be used to compile program and vendor participation information, must be reiterated here. Additionally, High/Scope recommends a standardization of outcome measures for all participating programs and vendors that will

allow for easier evaluation in 2009. The inconsistent manner in which participants and services are tracked must be improved.

Bureaucracy and Collaboration

The lack of available data was not entirely due to First Steps' inconsistent collection of program and client information. This evaluation was challenged by the Department of Education's reluctance to provide information. In some instances there was an outright refusal to participate. In others there was a slow response time to requests that made completing the work difficult and in some instances impossible. In other cases, department personnel did not actively thwart the work, but neither did they support it when they could have.

While First Steps seems to shine in breaking down borders at the local level, there is work to be done at the state level. It is obvious that there are political rivalries between First Steps and the Department of Education. Assuming the best intentions of all parties, this battle over turf and access to information is based in each agency's commitment to providing high-quality services within the context of a limited amount of resources. It is recommended that as First Steps either maintains or increases its investments in 4K that it works with the Department of Education to build on the strengths of each agency. One strategy may be to look to counties where partnership has been particularly successful and build upon the relationships and lessons learned there.

The state Office of First Steps also needs to reconsider its relationships with county offices. Executive directors offered clear feedback that they are struggling with what they perceive to be a state bureaucracy not in sync with their local needs. It is recommended that the state office provide clearer communication of expectations and guidance on how to meet them. This does not mean creating more layers of reporting. Instead it means simplifying regulations when possible, doing away with rules that are no longer necessary, and installing new expectations of accountability with regards to data collection.

First Steps' Self-Improvement Strategies

The Office of First Steps and its board of trustees are not unaware of the challenges they face. In recent months they have begun to address problem areas in their policies and practice. Two important documents highlight changes that the state office and the state board of trustees have approved for implementation: the *Blue Print for South Carolina's Children's Update* and the *First Steps 4K Continuous Improvement Plan*.

The *Blue Print for South Carolina's Children's Update*, adopted in January of 2005, listed as problems

- A lack of consistent, statewide priorities that was leading to a diffuse message of First Steps' value to SC.
- An undue emphasis on process and administration leading to a perception of excessive bureaucracy.
- Significant operational "silos" operating within the school readiness community that was limiting collaboration and the most effective use of resources for South Carolina's children.

In adopting this document the First Steps board acknowledged the need for the realignment of the administrative structure of First Steps' statewide organization to reflect state readiness priorities, ensure efficient use of expertise among all school readiness partners, eliminate unnecessary administrative expense, and provide leadership in serving children under 6. The document listed as First Step objectives:

- Evaluate all early childhood education programs, looking for research-based accountability, with the goal of eliminating or redirecting those programs with minimal results.
- Identify and develop collaboration agreements with other public or private entities that can add or strengthen school readiness services within their scope.

- Develop and implement the state’s long-term strategy and action plan for increasing school readiness.
- Ensure that all school readiness initiatives effectively and efficiently utilize public and private resources to increase and improve the readiness of South Carolina’s children.

The second document, *Publicly Funded Prekindergarten in South Carolina: Coordinating Resources for Greater Impact* contains an analysis of, and a series of recommendations for, South Carolina’s publicly funded prekindergarten programs. The document, adopted in December 2005 by the First Steps State Board of Trustees, recommended the following:

- Establish an evidence-based legal definition of “at risk,” to include the requirement that state dollars be used—first and foremost—to serve children whose demographic and/or developmental characteristics fall within its parameters.
- Conduct a demographic audit and matched cohort analysis comparing the attributes of and outcomes derived by students participating in half-day and full-day 4K programs.
- Establish an initial goal of “universal public access” for high-risk four-year-olds (across funding streams and service delivery models).
- Resist the temptation to base important public policy decisions upon over-generalizations of early childhood research findings.
- Utilize the existing legal structure of First Steps—at both the state and county levels—to convene the state’s prekindergarten providers and assist in coordinating their efforts across public funding streams.
- Use state funds to enhance Head Start, not supplant it.
- Redouble efforts to establish common ground with the state’s private providers and develop quality-enhancement initiatives and/or incentives built around areas of broad consensus.

- Examine teacher licensure requirements in an effort to reduce and/or eliminate barriers to the employment of certified early childhood teachers within non-traditional settings.
- Explore the provision of funding incentives to school districts opting to provide prekindergarten programming in private and community-based settings.
- Continue refining the First Steps Public-Private Partnership Model.
- Explore flexible approaches to expansion (as necessary) to avoid both “one size fits all” solutions and minimize the risk to private providers.
- Give careful consideration to providing expanded services to high-risk students before devoting public dollars to universal access for all four-year-old students.
- Explore the provision of income tax deductions to assist families who choose and can afford to pursue prekindergarten programming for their children through non-public means.

Together, both of these documents demonstrate that First Steps has already recognized the potential for changes that will allow it to become a more effective organization. Many of the recommendations in this evaluation have already been identified as problem areas in internal First Steps documents. This bodes well for the future of First Steps. It is an organization that is both dedicated to serving South Carolina’s neediest children and families as well as to continually assessing whether or not they are doing so efficiently and effectively. A comprehensive early childhood initiative like First Steps will always face implementation challenges. In order to fulfill its mission, First Steps must continually assess its policies, practices, and relationships. First Steps is doing just that—and as a result is moving from implementation to impact.

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600 North River Street, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198-2898
734/485-2000 • Fax 734/485-0704 • www.highscope.org