

# Continuing Steps to School Readiness: The Compass Report on the Evaluation of South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness

**Compass Evaluation and Research** of Durham, NC was contracted by the SC First Steps Board of Trustees pursuant to South Carolina Section 59-125-160 to “assess the extent to which First Steps has been successful in meeting its five legislative goals and articulate the relative ‘value add’ (or lack thereof) of SC’s maintenance of a statewide early childhood coordination and service delivery structure.” The evaluation team finds that:

1. **First Steps’ public-private structure and model of shared governance generate a high degree of value-added at both the state and local levels.**

**Compass cites** multiple examples of value-added by the First Steps initiative, including:

- Systems efficiencies such as non-duplication of services,
- Leveraging of available resources to support community needs, and
- Benefits that **accrue** to multiple family members.

2. **First Steps is finding and serving the state’s most high-need clients.**

Echoing previous evaluations, Compass notes First Steps’ **considerable success “in finding and serving the state’s most high-risk children and families**, with evidence suggesting a large percentage of current clients possess two or more readiness risk factors.”

3. **First Steps is meeting legislated goals.**

First Steps is investing “in multiple **efficient and evidence-based strategies** for ensuring children have reduced risk for major physical, developmental, and learning problems and can enter school healthy and ready to succeed. For example, children’s pre-literacy skills are being addressed through family strengthening programs and available **data suggest progress in child and family outcomes.**”

4. **First Steps has a statewide fiscal and programmatic accountability structure in place to guide and provide oversight to local partnerships. This structure supports the translation of state-level priorities into practice.**

Evaluators note that “First Steps has developed and implements processes to track expenditures and to regularly communicate with local partnerships regarding their expenditures, to ensure fiscal accountability, full expenditure of funds, and important internal control measures.” In regards to program implementation, “the team **commends First Steps on the development and use of Program Accountability Standards,**” which they find to be “comprehensive and aligned with best practices.”

5. **At the state and local levels, First Steps serves as the “battery” powering many of the state’s key early childhood conversations and practices.**

Discussing the initiative’s collaborative, state and local, public and private structure, Compass notes that “First Steps often and in many ways reaches beyond a circle of agencies and administrators to **engage local community stakeholders such as parents, educators, and the Community of Faith in investing in early childhood**, with investments occurring on the family, caregiver, and neighborhood level. It is these investments that often make the difference for at-risk and high-need children, as these children often require attention and support from multiple sources.”

**The evaluators recommend that First Steps:**

1. **Review and refine its evaluation design to align with new evaluative and accountability requirements.**

Given updated statutory requirements, “the nature of this recommendation is to ensure a comprehensive system of evaluation exists, with associated opportunities for technical assistance, training, and data quality reviews. These opportunities also can be used to expand or enhance existing monitoring efforts, to **ensure high quality and verified data are available for evaluation and accountability purposes.**”

2. **Consider discussions and strategies for ongoing systems development.** “The data collected in this evaluation might allow state and local partnerships to engage in deeper conversation regarding what it means to have an early childhood system, how such a system might be conceptualized, and the different benefits that may result from continuing strengthening and development of the system.”