

MEMO

To: South Carolina First Steps Board of Trustees
From: Susan DeVenny, Director, First Steps
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Date: March 10, 2015
Subject: Overview of First Steps Strategic Planning Process

Over the last several months First Steps has been preparing for an extensive strategic planning process in compliance with Act 287. In this memo we provide background and rationale for undertaking the plan and an explanation of the upcoming process.

BENEFITS OF STRATEGIC PLANNING

An effective strategic planning process can generate valuable assets for First Steps and its partners. First Steps intends to take advantage of these benefits. Among them are:

- **Shared meaning** - By deciding together what is really important, Boards, staff, and the entire organization build a unified, philosophical foundation. A common understanding of the organization's priorities, mission, beliefs, boundaries, program distinction, and future direction is clearly articulated across diverse interests. A collective conscious is created throughout the organization. Growth and high performance are enabled within a dynamic and changing environment.
- **Focus and momentum** - A plan pulls resources and energy into a unified, targeted force that is applied to important priorities. Resources are applied strategically and judiciously. Momentum is capitalized and used to foster results.
- **Collaborative relationships** – Engagement in planning fosters deep, broad connections between the organization, local communities, and external partners that can lead to leveraging of unexpected resources. Relationships grow from participation in planning and can lead to shared implementation of the Plan's priorities.
- **Return on Investment (ROI)** - A deposit of time, funds, and energy up-front pays off in quicker decisions, cost savings, and more efficient operations later.
- **Resource and energy conservation**- Well-executed planning activities preserve assets, sustain personnel, reduce waste, and match priorities with organizational capacity. Resources saved or not wasted are resources gained.
- **Accountability** - Clearly articulating how success will be measured, delineating duties, and establishing monitoring and reporting functions places responsibility with the appropriate parties.
- **Innovation and flexibility** - With fundamentals established by the Plan, the organization is open to trying new ideas within parameters. Intentional strategic planning can enhance organizational innovations.
- **Results orientation** – Publicly stating the organization's desired results informs constituents about goals, priorities and milestones. With documentation of results toward strategic goals, organizations can measure and celebrate accomplishments.

PLANNING PROCESS BEST PRACTICES

The planning process proposed for First Steps and its partners will use the best thinking and practices to create a highly effective plan and subsequent implementation success.

The process proposed to discover, debate, and agree upon First Steps' primary approach and direction over the next five years will have these **qualities** and **elements**:

- **Leadership** - the First Steps Board of Trustees is responsible for setting the future direction of First Steps; finding resources to achieve the organization's priorities; protecting its assets, reputation and goodwill; and bringing the vision and mission into fruition. Therefore, it is the Board's responsibility to lead and be actively engaged in the Plan's creation, development, decision-making, implementation, and monitoring. The Board and staff will engage other leaders in the process.
- **Strategic focus** – the plan will be current, relevant, impact-focused, adaptive, and responsive to research findings within First Step's dynamic climate and context. It will not be a comprehensive plan or inclusive of all activities.
- **High-quality process and product**
 - The process – will include certain elements for the Plan to have efficacy and future impact: research and data analysis; learning from multiple sources; engaging stakeholders in informing the plan and taking responsibility for First Steps' future; agreeing on strategic direction, priorities, success definitions/measures; and serious, ongoing implementation. All are highly important for the Plan's efficacy and future impact.
 - The product – the Plan – will be based on a set of top priorities; adaptable to local use and diverse stakeholders; informed by data; statewide; and based on achieving important, relevant results. A set of assumptions about context, programmatic priorities and certain First Steps guidance and mandates will undergird the Plan.
- **Focus on three key areas** - First Steps' internal/organizational development, First Steps' mission-related program priorities, and improvements in the school readiness and early childhood system of South Carolina.
- **Stakeholder engagement**- intentional integration of diverse stakeholders, perspectives, and constituents into the plan and process.
- **Mutual goals** - shared vision, resources, information and accountability within First Steps at state and local levels and among collaborative partners.
- **Focus on impact and priorities for children**- concentration on achieving priorities and generating deep impact and results in the most critical arenas for young children and their families.
- *Likely an experience that is non-linear, unpredictable, organic, complex, thoughtful, and worthy of investment by adults on behalf of the state's children now and in the future.*

PROPOSED PLANNING PROCESS

On the next page is the six phase sequence described in general terms.

PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS
Led by the SC First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees
 Planning horizon: March 2015 – December 2020

Phase I (Launch March 2015) Data Gathering and Research <i>Purpose:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather data from primary and secondary sources. • Engage stakeholders. • Compile current /relevant data to educate and inform planning process decision-makers. 	Phase II Data Analysis, Synthesis and Initial Findings <i>Purpose:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compile material in useful, accessible form. • Consider findings from Phase I. • Synthesize material into overall, aggregated analysis for use in the strategic planning process. • Determine any gaps in research.
Phase III Plan Development: Initial <i>Purpose:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board engagement/plan development session(s). • Agree on mission, vision, strategic priorities, goals, desired results. • Consider external trends, opportunities and investments. • Ensure research /findings are integrated in plan content. • Consider feedback/vetting by stakeholders. 	Phase IV Plan Development: Build Out <i>Purpose:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop measures/benchmarks/metrics (internal and external) for each desired result. • Develop strategies, tactics, and actions (internal and external). • Consider feedback/vetting by stakeholders.
Phase V Readiness for Plan Success <i>Purpose:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan and implement rollout, including (proposed) Governor's Summit. • Plan and implement assessment, monitoring and evaluation system of Strategic Plan. • Develop collaborative opportunities and system reforms, thinkers and leaders. • Make initial adjustments in organization and system culture to support the plan's implementation. • Seek to integrate the First Steps Strategic Plan into plans of collaborative partners. 	Phase VI Plan Implementation <i>Purpose:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement Strategic Plan priorities. • Plan and implement assessment, monitoring and evaluation system of strategic plan. • Continue adjustments in organization and system culture to support plan implementation. • Continue development of collaborative opportunities and system refinements, thinkers and leaders. • Continue to integrate the Strategic Plan into plans of collaborative partners. • Monitor progress at all levels. • Adjust Strategic Plan as conditions change.
Ongoing Through All Phases Governance Development and Engagement – South Carolina First Steps Board and Local Partnership Boards <i>Purpose:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage state and local leaders in using the strategic planning process to enhance their analysis and decision-making. • Support the First Steps Board in their responsibility for organizational governance, future planning, and sustainability. • Promote familiarity of data, stakeholders, issues, opportunities, and priorities among volunteer leaders. • Use the process to enhance governance and leadership at state and local levels. 	