



To: South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees
From: Susan DeVenny, Director
Date: August 20, 2015
RE: Director's Report August 2015

It has been a busy summer at First Steps. We have benefited greatly from hospitality of all 46 partnerships for hosting us on our statewide listening tour this summer. Please find highlights of our activities since June 18, below.

Summer Site Visits

Many thanks to our Trustees for an engaged summer of robust dialogue with our 46 local partnerships. Beginning in Edgefield and concluding in Marion, teams of state staff and volunteers met with partnership staff, board members, and community stakeholders who reported successes and challenges facing children and families. All told, 404 individuals invested between 3 and 51 hours each in a series of (46) 3-hour community listening sessions. The Site Visit Themes Report was provided to you in today's board meeting. This stream of data provides the foundation for the organization's new strategic plan.

Countdown to Kindergarten

Created by state-level partners in 2004 in response to trends of poor school transition statewide, Countdown to Kindergarten was piloted in 2004 by (31) local First Steps county partnerships. In 12 years, nearly 10,000 rising 5K students have enjoyed home visits by their kindergarten teacher (or school home visitor) during the summer before they enter 5K. Families and children are introduced to kindergarten standards, provided books and other manipulatives, and offered 6 individualized teacher interaction opportunities in preparation for school entry. This year, Lexington County First Steps and PASOS collaborated to create a toolkit for Hispanic families, and Lexington First Steps partnered with local schools with high concentrations of Latino/Hispanic families to provide a Spanish-speaking home visitor for participating families. Evaluations will be completed later this fall with the 1,200 students who participated during summer 2015.

Since 2004, our partners at EdVenture Children's Museum have offered a free night to all rising kindergartners and their families as both a culmination of the Countdown to Kindergarten program and a community-wide "Back to School" event. The Countdown to Kindergarten Celebration of 2015 held on August 7, 2015 included over 60 partners and served over 2500 visitors, including busloads from Allendale and Calhoun First Steps!

4K Expansion and Professional Development

With the addition of three new school districts in 2015-2016, South Carolina families in 64 of 81 school districts now have access to full-day 4k. The First Steps team continues to administer and support private and community-based preschools in the public-private Pre-K program, begun in August 2006 as part of the legislative response to the Abbeville vs. SC school equity Circuit Court ruling in December 2005.

Over 500 teachers and directors participated in our 4K Academy, held July 27–31 in Columbia. In addition to completing curriculum, literacy, socio-emotional learning sessions, participants were exposed to the new Pre-K assessment, Teaching Strategies GOLD (regional two-day training is being offered statewide). Though only the literacy component is required by law this school year, Teaching Strategies GOLD is an observational formative assessment which has the capacity to support teaching and developmental

assessment in all early learning domains. Students must be initially assessed within the first 45 days of school. Plans are underway to expand the 4K Academy with new partners for 2016.

BabyNet State Systemic Improvement Plan

As required by federal law, BabyNet stakeholders have been working together for over a year to define elements of the state's systemic strategic improvement plan. South Carolina has selected autism as its focus area for the Part C IDEA system, and has been meeting with groups across the state to further define needed improvements in identifying and serving infants and toddlers with autism.

The General Assembly passed a proviso providing added flexibility in order to meet all compliance requirements of the federal government. With new positions and funding, system partners are meeting in September to review local portal and referral data in order to best place resources where needs are greatest statewide.

Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership

As you know, First Steps was honored to receive four of five new EHS – CC partnership grants from the US Department of Health and Human Services to expand access to comprehensive early learning services for children pre-birth to three in South Carolina's child care settings. Following orientation by Region Four in late May, South Carolina First Steps hosted a bidders' conference for all licensed childcare providers in the 12 counties served by our grant. Applications are due August 31.

The board will receive formal training hosted by Early Head Start-Child Care partnership start up experts, Region Four and SC Head Start colleagues. We are grateful for the guidance of the Office of Head Start in this new national work, designed to strengthen childcare across the country while increasing access to comprehensive services for low income infants and toddlers and their families.

Legislative Study Committees- First Steps

First Steps has provided information and offered testimony to the House Legislative Oversight Committee under the leadership of Chairman James Smith. A draft staff report was sent to First Steps staff on August 17, 2015 for initial review and feedback by August 21, 2015. Committee staff are currently working with First Steps to schedule meetings for September-November.

The First Steps Study Committee created by Act 287 and chaired by Mike Brenan last met in March 2015, and has not published a schedule for fall 2016. The deadline for First Steps Study Committee recommendations was extended to January 2, 2016.

Abbeville v. South Carolina

Following the November 2014 Supreme Court ruling, both House and Senate legislative taskforces have been seated and have heard testimony during 2015. Both taskforces have recently seated Early Childhood Subcommittees. The House early childhood subcommittee first met on August 13, 2015 and the Senate subcommittee will meet August 24, 2015. Legislative recommendations will be offered by January 2016.

School Readiness Public Information Campaign

Per Act 287, the SC First Steps Board of Trustees and the SC Board of Education are collaborating to create a specific description of school readiness to help the public recognize characteristics of a ready learner, ready community, ready schools. To assist in the wide dissemination of this critical public information, First Steps has assembled a creative and media partners team to build a public information campaign. Look for focus group invitations this fall!