



Strategic Planning and Evaluation Committee Meeting
Wednesday, January 22, 2025 11-12PM via Zoom ([link to join](#))

Meeting ID: 873 0000 2784 | Passcode: 064776

Staff Liaison: Dr. Chelsea Richard, Chief of Staff

Committee Members	Invited First Steps Staff	External Guests from Child Trends
<input type="checkbox"/> Dr. Amy Williams (Chair) <input type="checkbox"/> Dave Morley <input type="checkbox"/> Janie Neeley	<input type="checkbox"/> Ann Vandervliet <input type="checkbox"/> Mark Barnes <input type="checkbox"/> Derek Cromwell <input type="checkbox"/> Betty Gardiner <input type="checkbox"/> Avian Jones <input type="checkbox"/> Karen Oliver <input type="checkbox"/> Kaitlyn Richards <input type="checkbox"/> Martha Strickland <input type="checkbox"/> Beth Moore	<input type="checkbox"/> Van-Kim Lin <input type="checkbox"/> Tracy Gebhart

AGENDA

- Presentation: "Evaluation of South Carolina First Steps Local Partnerships FY 2019-2023" (Van-Kim and Tracy from Child Trends)
- Discussion and Next Steps

UPCOMING COMMITTEE MEETINGS

- March 26
- May 28
- July 23
- September 24
- November 26 (day before Thanksgiving) – discuss later potentially moving to November 19?

ATTACHMENT: Executive Summary of "Evaluation of South Carolina First Steps Local Partnerships FY 2019-2023"



Evaluation of South Carolina First Steps Local Partnerships FY 2019-2023

An evaluation led by Child Trends

Project Lead: Van-Kim Lin (vlin@childtrends.org)

Team: Tracy Gebhart, Elizabeth Villegas, Hannah Wodrich, and Shreya Mukhopadhyay

Suggested Citation: Lin, V., Gebhart, T., Villegas, E., Wodrich, H., & Mukhopadhyay, S. (2025). Evaluation of South Carolina First Steps Local Partnerships (FY 2019-2023). Child Trends.

Acknowledgments

The evaluation would not have been possible without the support from various groups who provided valuable insight, data, or support. We acknowledge each of their contributions here.

South Carolina First Steps state office staff

The First Steps state office staff were vital in our understanding of the need for the evaluation and the context and background of local partnerships during the evaluation period. We met with various First Steps state office staff who offered critical information to inform the start of the evaluation, including Derek Cromwell, Lexi Jones, Gina Beebe, Kerry Cordan, Kate Roach, Janice Kilburn, LaMyra Sanders, and Georgia Mjartan. We want to extend a special note of gratitude to Chelsea Richard, Director of Research and Strategy, who partnered with our team throughout the course of the evaluation, providing necessary insight and guidance.

South Carolina First Steps local partnerships

We are most thankful for the participation of executive directors, board members, and families who participated in our data collection activities to provide the necessary depth and context for our evaluation findings. To preserve their anonymity in responses, we do not provide their names in this report.

South Carolina Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office (RFA)

We would like to thank RFA for providing guidance on the acquisition of administrative data and analytic support for compiling the necessary data for the evaluation, especially Sarah Crawford, Megan Luck, and Chris Finney for providing guidance on the data acquisition process, creating our analytic sample, and providing us with the administrative data for the evaluation.

Child Trends

Finally, we would like to extend our gratitude to our colleagues at Child Trends who provided support across all research and reporting activities, including Jessica Conway, Kylee Novak, Claire Kelley, and our Communications team.

Glossary

Evidence-based: Pursuant to S.C. State Code 59-152-25: “‘Evidence-based program’ means a program based on a clear and consistent program model that is designated as such by the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees because the program: (1)(a) is grounded in published, peer-reviewed research that is linked to determined outcomes; (b) employs well-trained and competent staff to whom the program provides continual professional development that is relevant to the specific model being delivered; (c) demonstrates strong linkages to other community-based services; and (d) is operated to ensure program fidelity; or (2) is commonly recognized by experts in the field as such a program.”

Evidenced-informed: Pursuant to S.C. State Code 59-152-25: “‘Evidence-informed program’ means a program that does not satisfy the criteria of an evidenced-based program model but that the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees determines is supported by research indicating its potential effectiveness.”

School readiness: Pursuant to S.C. State Code 59-152-25 (G): “‘School readiness’ means the level of child development necessary to ensure early school success as measured in the following domains: physical health and motor skills; emotional and social competence; language and literacy development; and mathematical thinking and cognitive skills. School readiness is supported by the knowledge and practices of families, caregivers, healthcare providers, educators, and communities.”

High intensity: High intensity is defined for each program by First Steps staff based on the intervention relative to a child. The more direct an intervention reaches a child, the higher the intensity.

Core functions: Pursuant to S.C. State Code 59-152-70, First Steps local partnerships have the following core functions: “(a) service as a local portal connecting families of preschool children to community-based services they may need or desire to ensure the school readiness of their children; (b) service as a community convener around the needs of preschool children and their families; and (c) support of state-level school readiness priorities as determined by the State Board”.

- **Service as a Local Portal:** Connecting families of preschool children to community-based services they may need to ensure the school readiness of their children
- **Community Convener:** The role of bringing together various stakeholders in the community to address the needs of preschool children and their families
- **Mobilizing Local Communities:** Engaging and organizing community efforts to focus on providing enhanced services to support families and young children
- **State-Level Priorities:** Aligning local efforts with the broader goals and priorities set by the state for early childhood education and school readiness

Board of Trustees: The governing body responsible for overseeing the operations, strategic direction, and financial stability of the South Carolina First Steps initiative.

First Steps Data Collection System (FSDC): A system for housing demographic and program participation data for families and children involved in First Steps local partnership programs.

Chronic Absenteeism: When a student misses ten percent or more of the school year, for any reason including excused, unexcused, and suspensions.

Executive Summary

Introduction to First Steps local partnerships

Experiences in a child's early years impact every aspect of how they function, including their health, behaviors, thoughts, relationships, ability to perform in school, and (subsequently) their capacity to thrive into adulthood. In 1999, South Carolina's First Steps agency was established to offer localized support to families with young children who have identified risk factors shown to be associated with school readiness.

As both a state agency and a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, First Steps is overseen by its Board of Trustees, a collaborative group representing South Carolina's early childhood system, including state agency directors, elected officials, early childhood leaders, business and medical professionals, parents, and educators. A team of state office staff organized by program areas supports local partnerships. At the county level, each local partnership is led by an executive director who oversees a staff team. Each partnership engages a local partnership board to support leadership, operations, budget planning, and compliance with regulations.

First Steps provides statewide infrastructure and support, and 46 county-level local partnerships receive funding to offer tailored services aimed at ensuring that South Carolina's youngest children are healthy and safe; actively supported by their families and communities; and arrive at school ready to reach their highest potential. Programs and services offered by local partnerships are categorized by four program areas: health, parenting, early care and education, and school transition.¹ Services funded by First Steps are further designated as evidence-based or evidence-informed and categorized as high-intensity or low-intensity.

Overview of the evaluation

This evaluation examined how South Carolina First Steps local partnerships have met their legislative goals, purposes, and functions, as well as what impacts their services had on young children and families in South Carolina during the evaluation period. We answered the following questions through three evaluations:

- How have First Steps local partnerships met their intended legislative objectives? (i.e., objectives evaluation)
 - Sub-question 1a: How have local partnerships progressed toward their legislative goals and purpose?
 - Sub-question 1b: How have local partnerships fulfilled their roles as local early childhood advisory councils or resource hubs?
- What are First Steps local partnerships' model fidelity? (i.e., process evaluation)
 - Sub-question 2a: By program, how do First Steps model fidelity criteria align with national model fidelity criteria, where applicable?

Evaluation Period

This evaluation examined whether legislative objectives were met, whether programs funded by First Steps were implemented as intended, and what outcomes resulted during a five-year period covering fiscal years (FY) 2019-2023 (or from July 1, 2018 through June 30, 2023).

At the time of the evaluation, First Steps had implemented several continuous quality improvement updates. The evaluation focused on what occurred during the evaluation period, not changes that may be in place now.

¹ South Carolina First Steps. (n.d.). First Steps legislation. Retrieved from <https://www.scfirststeps.org/news-resources/first-steps-legislation/>

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- What was the impact of First Steps local partnerships on expected outcomes? (i.e., outcomes evaluation)
 - Sub-question 3a: What reach and impact did First Steps local partnership programs have from fiscal years (FY) 2019 to 2023 across outcomes while children were enrolled, after they were served, and after they completed the program?

Within the context of our evaluation, we acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic greatly altered early childhood services and programs across the nation, and its effects are still unfolding. During FY 2020 and FY 2021, programs funded by First Steps were scaled back or modified due to health mandates. Thus, we encourage caution when interpreting evaluation findings considering the pandemic's effects.

Chapter 1: Objectives evaluation summary

The goal of the objectives evaluation is to **understand how First Steps local partnerships have met their intended legislative objectives**. For this evaluation, we collected data from a survey of local partnership staff and boards, four focus groups with local partnership staff and boards, and nine interviews with families. Below, we summarize findings, takeaways, and recommendations.

Findings

Legislative goals

- Survey findings showed that most local partnership staff and board members agreed that local partnerships are meeting their legislative goals (over 80% across all statements).
- Focus group findings indicate that local partnerships connect with community organizations across various venues to provide parents with support, use multiple methods to connect with families, focus on two-generation services to promote optimal child development, and are equipped to provide necessary referrals for services families need.
- Family interview findings showed that families described forming lasting friendships and supportive connections through local partnership services and confirmed receiving comprehensive services that have supported their children's physical, developmental, and learning needs.
- Challenges included limited staff capacity, desire for peer support or mentorship, insufficient funding, and eligibility limitations.

Legislative purposes

- Survey findings showed that local partnerships are meeting their legislative purposes, typically using similar outreach methods to reach families and service providers; coordinating well with other community-based organizations; and minimizing duplication of efforts in supporting families. However, some felt disconnected from statewide decision making.
- Board survey findings showed that board members understand their roles and expectations well and are typically involved in activities around strategy, vision, and finances; and that they meet regularly as a board and with the executive director. However, they do not participate in fundraising or partnership-building activities.
- Challenges included difficulties serving families with varied needs, concerns about families receiving high-quality services or care after leaving First Steps, the need for collaborating with service providers, the need for guidance on best practices with board member engagement, limited influence, and outdated websites.

Legislative core functions

- Survey findings showed that most local partnerships see themselves as critical resources in their communities, effective at fulfilling their core functions, and able to leverage partnerships to meet their core functions.
- Challenges include sustainability to meet core functions, especially with small staff.

Takeaways

- Strengths of local partnerships include the following:
 - Local partnership staff, board members, and families overwhelmingly agree that local partnerships are meeting their legislative goals, purposes, and core functions.
 - Local partnerships pride themselves on providing whole family, whole community services that meet families' needs.
- Areas for improvement include the following:
 - Improving services for children and families with unique needs, such as developmental delays or disabilities
 - Continuing to limit duplicative paperwork for families
 - Developing stronger peer networks of service providers within their communities and at the state level
 - Engaging local partnership staff, board, and family voices in statewide decision making

Recommendations

1. Reconsider the level of administrative support needed to run a local partnership and identify ways to provide the necessary support.
2. Offer regular opportunities for local partnerships to share their wealth of knowledge with one another to improve statewide supports.
3. Reexamine policies and processes with the input of local partnership staff, board members, and families.
4. Provide tailored support for smaller local partnerships.

Chapter 2: Process evaluation summary

The goal of the process evaluation was to **understand whether First Steps local partnerships and the programs they offer are implemented as intended**. Understanding the degree to which programs are being implemented with fidelity underscores the quality of the programs being received by children and families and offers the appropriate context to understand impact findings.

For this evaluation, we used Large Language Model (LLM) processing to analyze program guidelines in each fiscal year of the evaluation period and compared it with national model expectations from 2024 to understand whether and how programs were meeting national model fidelity requirements. We analyzed various components of program guidelines (i.e., target population, eligibility criteria, monitoring tools, service delivery, staff qualifications and training, and data reported). We summarize highlight of findings, takeaways, and recommendations.

Findings

- Two programs were implemented as intended at some point during the five years of study (Parents as Teachers and LENA Home). Another 14 programs were “in progress” to being implemented with fidelity to the national model, and seven programs were not implemented with fidelity.
- Monitoring requirements were most often aligned with national models, and eligibility requirements were most often not aligned. However, this may be because requirements were more restrictive than national models. The greatest opportunity for alignment is around data reporting.
- Programs had the greatest fidelity to the national model in FY 2020.

Takeaways

- First Steps has strong monitoring standards but could improve in data reporting.
- Limited fidelity to national models does not necessarily indicate lower-quality implementation.

Recommendations

1. Continue standardizing organization for program guidelines, which was initiated across the evaluation period.
2. Implement ongoing fidelity training and support.
3. Identify areas where state and national requirements must differ and how to support local partnerships to reconcile differing expectations.

Chapter 3: Outcomes evaluation summary

The goal of the outcomes evaluation was to **understand the impact of First Steps local partnerships on the intended outcomes—that South Carolina’s youngest children are healthy and safe, actively supported by their families and communities, and arrive at school ready to reach their highest potential.** For this evaluation, we compared pre- and post-scores across three measures for children and families participating in First Steps to understand whether programming supported growth in outcomes. Additionally, we analyzed administrative data from the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) to compare children receiving programs funded by First Steps with those who did not. We highlight findings, takeaways (including a discussion comparing past evaluation findings with current evaluation findings), and recommendations.

Findings

Reach of local partnerships

- **Programs:** Local partnerships fluctuated across the evaluation in the number of programs they offered; however, more than half (n=29) of local partnerships decreased their program offerings in FY 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Families:** The number of families served by a program funded by First Steps also declined in FY 2021 but has since increased, exceeding pre-pandemic levels.
- **Children:** Similarly, the number of children served by a program funded by First Steps decreased in FY 2021, but has since increased, exceeding pre-pandemic levels.

Healthy and safety outcomes

- Regardless of the time between assessments, families who participated in a program funded by First Steps who also completed at least two Keys to Interactive Parenting (KIPS) assessments showed significant improvement in their parenting quality scores, with most scores categorized as being of moderate quality.
- Parents participating in at least one Healthy Families and Parenting Inventory (HFPI) assessment from FYs 2021 to 2023 also showed general improvement, with the most notable improvement occurring when assessments were 5-8 months or 13-20 months apart.

Actively supported by families outcomes

- Children enrolling in programs and services funded by First Steps during FY 2020 were significantly less likely to be chronically absent in their kindergarten year than their propensity-score-matched peers. This protective effect faded for children enrolling in post-pandemic years.

Arrive at school ready to reach their highest potential outcomes

- Adults and children who participated in at least two Adult-Child Interactive Reading Inventory (ACIRI) assessments during the evaluation period experienced a medium to large significant improvement, regardless of the time between assessments.
- Children enrolling in programs and services funded by First Steps in FY 2020 were significantly more likely than their peers to achieve higher kindergarten readiness assessment (KRA) scores; however, these effects were not seen in other years.

Limitations

- **Chronic absenteeism:** It is possible that children who did not enroll in a program funded by First Steps during the evaluation period benefited from services funded by First Steps prior to the evaluation period. In addition, First Steps modified programming guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **ACIRI:** Improvements should consider natural improvements in language acquisition as children age and develop.
- **KRA:** Children who did not enroll in a program funded by First Steps during the evaluation period benefitted from services funded by First Steps prior to the evaluation period. Further, the changes to programming and broader systemic changes during the pandemic could have influenced KRA scores.

Considerations when comparing past evaluations

- **Chronic absenteeism:** Analytic models differed from past evaluations in two ways: 1) The matching process created different analytic samples across evaluations, and 2) data were defined differently across evaluations. The current findings suggest that First Steps' impact on absenteeism may depend on contextual factors, notably poverty and COVID-related restrictions.
- **KRA:** The current evaluation models included more years of KRA data, allowing for a larger sample than in previous evaluations. Thus, while First Steps enrollment may provide certain benefits, its impact on KRA readiness scores is complex and may be influenced by external factors such as district-level poverty that should be further explored.

Takeaways

- First Steps programming improves two-generation outcomes, as seen in improved parenting quality and interaction scores over time.
- Other community-level factors may explain outcome changes beyond children and families' participation in programs funded by First Steps, such as community demographics or investments in early childhood at the community or state level.
- The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the reach of local partnership programming and may have influenced changes in outcomes.

Recommendations

1. Continue to monitor outcomes for children participating in programs funded by First Steps to clarify the post-pandemic impact of First Steps-funded programs, and as system-wide improvements are made.
2. Broaden the measures that capture the impact of local partnerships to measure outcomes that are reasonably expected to change with how programs funded by First Steps are offered to children and families.
3. Work with local partnerships to identify what barriers, if any, may be impacting children's school readiness and make informed decisions about how to improve these outcomes.
4. Continue to improve data quality and systems through improved data systems that capture high-quality data that can measure implementation and outcome improvements.