



# FIRST STEPS

MARION COUNTY

## STRATEGIC PLAN

2024 – 2026



## Mission

To help Marion County families and caregivers prepare their children for school success by collaborating with other entities to maximize public and private community resources to deliver, enhance, and expand high-quality early childhood services.

## Vision

Every child in Marion County will be prepared for success in school.

## Values

1. The years of early childhood are critical window of development during which much human potential is shaped.
2. Families are the single most important influence on the development of their young children.
3. School readiness is the result of a child's development in many areas, with each contributing to the child's success.

# Message from the Executive Director



**Spencer R. Scott**  
Executive Director  
Marion County First Steps

The process of navigating the changing landscapes of our educational system has not been easy. The purpose of this strategic plan is to ensure that Marion County First Steps (MCFS) continues to lead in its position when it comes to developing childhood education.

This plan outlines the needs of our community. It embodies the results of honest and bold feedback from our daycare providers, community members and parents, providing insight to help us set new priorities. Over the last three years, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on communities throughout the world. The educational sector saw setbacks that were unprecedented, yet we adapted and as a people, persevered.

As part of our strategic plan, we will be focusing on three key topics, implementing plans to ensure we are following our vision of preparing every child in Marion County for success in school. MCFS main focus of its strategic plan will be on transportation, preschool readiness and literacy in rural areas.

We are excited to share our strategic plan for 2024-2026, which builds on the strengths of our values - that the years of early childhood are the critical window of development during which much human potential is shaped.

*Spencer R. Scott*

# Message from the Board Chair



**Judge Donald Fling**  
Board Chair  
Marion County First Steps

Marion County First Steps (MCFS) has always been innovative when it comes to putting together bold and stimulating programs through its partnership with the community, educators and parents.

On behalf of the MCFS board, we are pleased and excited to have received this plan put together by the staff. It is the direct result of many months of research and extensive data collection, outlining concerns and focusing on a plan to combat the issue. In the coming years this plan will serve as an invaluable tool, helping MCFS stand out as a leader, focusing on childhood education and putting the right steps in place to ensure its implementation.

Its programs that will guarantee success and focus on progress. Promising initiatives will be rolled out to redefine current programs, while introducing new undertakings. The plan will be solid and have positive influence on all aspects of early childhood education and literacy programs.

It is my belief that the Executive Director, Spencer R. Scott and his team will make every effort to ensure the progression of its program and will be creative in bringing this strategic plan to life. The board and I pledge to work side by side with them in the ongoing effort to see it through.

*Donald Fling*

# Strategic Plan Process

## CONVENE

Marion County held two community events to discuss the importance of data collection and completing surveys.

- ❖ Nurturing Parenting (NP) held a group meeting which was attended by 40 parents and their children. Attendees were informed of the upcoming needs assessment and the strategic plan.
- ❖ Raising A Reader (RAR) held its annual Reading Kick Off attended by 87 families. Information was shared and gathered regarding the needs of the community. Attendees received instruction on how to complete the surveys and the importance of listing their greatest needs was stressed.

October 2022 – January 2023

## PRIORITIZE

Survey results, collected data and listed concerns were used to create future ideas and activities for implementation of MCFS programs.

The following needs were determined as the greatest concern to the community:

- ❖ Transportation
- ❖ Preschool readiness
- ❖ Literacy in rural areas

January 2023 – March 2023

## APPLY

Parents & participants will be provided with PDRTA schedules to make attending MCFS events easier. MCFS will attend and present at local community events collaborating and focusing on Preschool readiness. We will also partner with families, caregivers, faith-based and community sites will participate in the summer reading program at the Marion County Library.

May 2023, May 2024, May 2025

## MONITOR

Programs will be monitored by providing the following to participants:

- Sign-in-Sheets
- Evaluation Forms

Informational pamphlets and brochures will be available at each event

July 2023 – June 2026

## UNDERSTAND

Parent and community surveys were distributed throughout the county. Physical copies, QR codes, and a social media push were mediums used to gather responses. Data collected was organized and studied to determine the community's concerns. Analysis of the data clarified inconsistencies with program participation and community needs/concerns.

October 2022 – March 2023

## PLAN

Marion County First Steps will sponsor and participate in community events. MCFS programs will conduct group connection meetings and parent visitations. A lending library and book basket will be put up in areas where there are no public libraries, which will include information from the Marion County Library service and books for loan. Two sites will be invited to participate in the Raising-A-Reader Program. A kickoff will be held to ensure participants are aware of community events. A calendar of county events will also be created and made available.

March 2023 – May 2023

## IMPLEMENT

- ❖ Interested parents will be provided with information material of the Pee-Dee Regional Transportation Authority (PDRTA) Marion Express bus schedule, along with MCFS calendar of events.
- ❖ Raising A Reader books and bags will be distributed. Meeting would be scheduled with daycare directors and 4K teachers, focusing on the implementation of the program. Parents and children will be given age-appropriate books and showed the books rotation schedules. Calendar of community events will be distributed to all participants.
- ❖ MCFS will create community awareness of programs, including lending library, through letters, flyers, and school media. A sign up form will be created for book distribution. MCFS will collaborate with the Marion County Library system to create awareness of summer reading program.

July 2023 – June 2026



# Priority Needs: Summary

Through a series of community convenings, a needs assessment and asset mapping process, the following needs were prioritized for Marion County. See our full needs assessment here: <[MCFS Needs Assessment](#)>.

## 1. TRANSPORTATION

Our goal is to ensure children ages three and up have the necessary means to attend quality childcare facilities. Marion County needs transportation running in the rural areas, where accessibility to services are obsolete. MCFS along with Marion County Schools superintendent, Dr. Kandace Bethea, and Marion County School bus supervisor, Franklin Washington, look to ensure reliable transportation for children.

## 2. PRESCHOOL READINESS

Based on statistics and data, preschool readiness is a concern in the county, especially within the rural communities. Our goal is to educate parents and guardians on steps to take to ensure their children are prepared for school. Directors, principals, along with 4K and 5K staff from the public and private sectors will be included in bridging the gap between childcare and public schools.

## 3. LITERACY IN RURAL AREAS

Due to a lack of access to literacy materials, exposure to books at an early age is not the norm. Within the county, libraries are not always within proximity to the homes in rural communities. In an effort to increase access to literacy in the rural areas, our plan is to create lending libraries making age-appropriate books more accessible. Lending libraries would be placed at sites across the communities.

# Objectives

## **PREPARING CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL.**

### **1. TRANSPORTATION**

Ensure that parents are given information about the free transportation (PDRTA) in Marion County including a list of childcare centers that offer transportation to their childcare sites.

### **2. PRESCHOOL READINESS**

Meeting with childcare directors, 4K teachers, and other staff from both the public schools and childcare centers to collaborate on setting goals and getting children ready for school.

### **3. LITERACY IN RURAL AREAS**

Increase literacy opportunities in the rural areas by providing book baskets.

# Objective One: TRANSPORTATION

## STRATEGY 1.1

### Childcare Transportation

#### SMART GOAL

1. Provide at least 5% of eligible households with information about childcare sites that provide transportation by the end of 2026.

#### COMMUNITY COLLABORATOR

- Working directly with local daycares and educational facilities, including Happy Hearts Learning Ladder, Troy Johnson Learning Korner, McGill's Bundles of Joy, Sugar Bears, Little Promises, Kiddie University and Pleasant Grove Academy.

## STRATEGY 1.2

### PEE-DEE Regional Transportation Authority

#### SMART GOAL

**By the year 2026, MCFS will:**

1. Provide a detailed PDRTA schedule to 100% of parents enrolled in programs, outlining routes specific to their needs in order to provide reliable transportation that would make it easier for them to attend community events. MCFS would also provide a secure location for these events, while promoting local childcare and community events in advance, to maximize attendance.

#### COMMUNITY COLLABORATOR(S)

- PEE-DEE Regional Transportation Authority (PDRTA)
- Marion County Library System



# Objective Two: PRESCHOOL READINESS

## STRATEGY 2.1

### Raising-A-Reader

#### SMART GOAL

1. Increase the number of participation sites by 5% by the end of FY26.

#### COMMUNITY COLLABORATOR(S)

- Department of Education
- Local Daycare and educational providers, including Kiddie University and Happy Hearts Learning Ladder.

## STRATEGY 2.2

### Community Education

#### SMART GOAL

1. By the end of the year 2026, MCFS will create a schedule allowing them to attend and present at 75% of local community events, focusing on reading and using age specific books to focus on the importance of Preschool readiness.

#### COMMUNITY COLLABORATOR(S)

- Educational facilities that offer Head Start programs
- Academy of Early Learning
- Daycare Providers and Educators
- Marion County Library System

# Objective Three: RURAL LITERACY

## STRATEGY 3.1

### Community Book Baskets

#### SMART GOAL

1. At the end of FY26, community baskets and lending libraries will be set up and running in at least 5% of designated sites enrolled in the lending library program.

#### COMMUNITY COLLABORATOR

- Marion County Library System
- Faith-Based locations
- Local Community sites
- Participating Business Community

## STRATEGY 3.2

### Marion County Library Summer Reading Program

#### SMART GOAL

1. 5% of families, caregivers, faith-base and community sites will be participating in the annual summer reading program at the Marion County Library by FY26.

#### COMMUNITY COLLABORATOR

- Marion County Library System
- Early education daycares & facilities

# Overarching Measure of Success

## **INCREASE THE AVAILABILITY OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY FIRST STEPS.**

By FY26, the Marion County First Steps (MCFS) program will increase the percentage of children under age 6 who benefit from its educational opportunities from 11% to 14%.

Opportunities will be provided by increasing accessibility to the Parenting Meetings, its Nurturing Parenting, Raising-A-Reader, and Literacy programs; as well as collaborating with local childcare staff in both the public and private sector.

MCFS will provide brochures and flyers with at home activities outlining the importance of education within the household. Additional families will be recruited into the programs offered by expanding community outreach, parental visits and with the assistance of educators.

MCFS will collaborate with Marion County Library System and community partners to ensure additional literacy opportunities are available.

# Acknowledgments

Through partnerships and collaborations, as well as financial support from grants and contributions, Marion County First Steps leverages state dollars to enhance and expand services to children and families.

## **FUNDING SUPPORT**

State of South Carolina: \$200,000  
(through South Carolina First Steps)

ESSER: \$97,776

AmeriCorps: \$45,918

## **IN-KIND SUPPORT**

SC Department of Social Services

Pleasant Grove Academy

McGill's Bundles of Joy

Academy of Early Learning

Little Promises Learning Academy

Troy Johnson Learning Korner

Sugar Bears DC/CD Center

Florence County First Steps

Marion County First Steps Board of Directors

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