



Evaluation of South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness

Local Partnerships From 2013-2014 to 2017-2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Institute for Families in Society

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*Improving Policy. Advancing Practice.
Strengthening Communities and Family Well-Being.*

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An evaluation project of the UofSC Institute for Families in Society (IFS)
with the Core for Applied Research and Evaluation (CARE)
at the UofSC School of Public Health.

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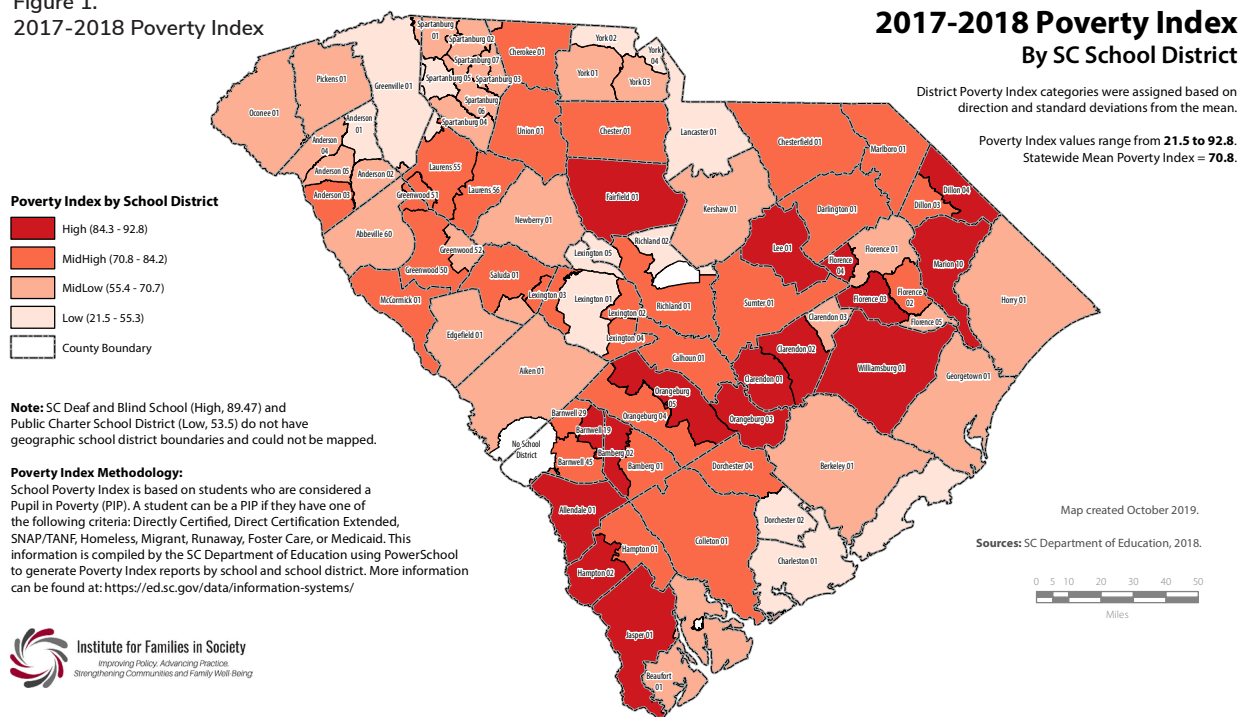
The Institute for Families in Society at the University of South Carolina (UofSC), in collaboration with the Core for Applied Research and Evaluation (also at UofSC), has partnered with South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness (First Steps) to conduct the current evaluation to satisfy the legislative requirement (SECTION 59 152 160) that “an evaluation of the progress on the initiative’s goals and purpose must be completed by November 1, 2014, and every five years thereafter by an independent, external evaluator under contract with the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees.” According to the enabling legislation, “the purpose of the evaluation is to assess progress toward achieving the First Steps goals and to determine the impact of the initiative on children and families at the state and local levels.” This evaluation covers five years, from 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 and focuses on the overall impact of First Steps programs and services.

INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

“...the purpose of the evaluation is to assess progress toward achieving the First Steps goals and to determine the impact of the initiative on children and families at the state and local levels.”

To set the context for the current evaluation of First Steps, we must first consider overall child well-being in the State of South Carolina. According to the 2019 KIDS COUNT Profile (https://www.aecf.org/m/databook/2019KC_profile_SC.pdf), South Carolina ranks 39th overall for child well-being. While current figures reflect some improvement across several indicators of child well-being, this latest profile reveals the continued presence of risk factors that predict poor developmental, health, mental health, and academic outcomes for children and youth. Risk factors can occur at the individual, family, and community levels of the social ecology; risk for poor outcomes for children increases as the number of risk factors increases. At the individual level, 9.7% of infants were born at low birth weight, and 53% of young children (ages 3-4) were not attending school. At the family level, 23% of children are living in poverty, 40% are living in single-parent families, and 11% are living in homes where the head of the household does not have a high school diploma. Community factors include 30% of children living in a home where parents lack secure employment and 12% living in High poverty areas. Within South Carolina, a number of counties experience rates of persistent poverty defined by having poverty rates of 20% or more for the past 30 years, as measured by the 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial censuses. For children under the age of 5, these counties with persistent poverty account for 26.6% of children in the population, 89% of all children residing in rural areas, and 34.8% of the minority child population (i.e., having a concentration of minority children where more than 10% are from one minority group).

Figure 1.
2017-2018 Poverty Index



In addition to understanding poverty at a county level, we also must consider the poverty level classification of the student population across school districts. The SC Department of Education (SCDE) designates a poverty index for each school and school district in the state of South Carolina. The poverty index is a value from 0-100 where a larger value indicates a higher level of poverty in the school district. The average poverty index for school districts in South Carolina is 70.8. Figure 1 illustrates school districts as characterized by their poverty index values. Those school districts with poverty levels higher than the state average are categorized as Mid-High and High levels. Forty-eight percent of school districts (39 of 81) classified as Mid-High and High levels of poverty are located in child persistent poverty counties. The 17-county area known as “South Carolina’s I-95 corridor” stretches from Jasper County at the state’s southernmost point to Marlboro County on the North Carolina border. Those counties through which I-95 crosses represent 10 of the 24 child persistent poverty counties and are home to 15 of the Mid-High and High poverty level school districts.

First Steps, per the enabling legislation, is “a comprehensive, results-oriented initiative for improving early childhood development” whose purpose is to “...develop, promote, and assist efforts of agencies, private providers, and public and private organizations and entities, at the state level and the community level, to collaborate and cooperate in order to focus and intensify services, assure the most efficient use of all available resources, and eliminate duplication of efforts to serve the needs of young children and their families. First Steps funds must not be used to supplant or replace any other funds being spent on services but must be used to expand, extend, improve, or increase access to services or to enable a community to begin to offer new or previously unavailable services in their community” (SC CODE OF LAWS SECTION 59-152-20).

The legislation (SC CODE OF LAWS SECTION 59-152-30) establishes five goals for the First Steps initiative:

1. Provide parents with access to the support they might seek to strengthen their families and to promote the optimal development of their preschool children;
2. Increase comprehensive services, so children have reduced risk for major physical, developmental, and learning problems;
3. Promote high-quality preschool programs that provide a healthy environment that will promote normal growth and development;
4. Provide services, so all children receive the protection, nutrition, and health care needed to thrive in the early years of life, so they arrive at school ready to learn; and
5. Mobilize communities to focus efforts on providing enhanced services to support families and their young children to enable every child to reach school healthy and ready to learn.

During the 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 time frame of this review, First Steps has worked to reach these legislative goals through activities in specific service domains. These service domains included Family Strengthening, Health, Early Intervention, Quality Child Care, Early Education, and School Transition. Of note, on July 1, 2017, Early Intervention (IDEA Part C) services transitioned to the SC Department of Health and Human Services and are not included in this evaluation. In addition, the limited number of programs in the Health Services area are now incorporated into the First Steps Family Strengthening Program area.

The mechanism for impact rests on the organization of First Steps: a state-level office and semi-autonomous county-level partnerships in each county in South Carolina. Direct program support and service delivery occur primarily at the county level through the First Steps local partnerships; each county offers a unique range of services and supports falling within the service domains noted above. These First Steps local partnership services are the focus of the current evaluation (i.e. other statewide programs administered by First Steps, including but not limited to 4K, are not included in this evaluation).

To frame the evaluation, we first examined the reach and population served by First Steps local partnership services. We then structured the evaluation around four key questions:



1. What is the impact of First Steps local partnership programs and services on school readiness for children entering 5K? (*Quantitative approach*)
2. What is the impact of First Steps local partnership programs and services on parenting competence and confidence? (*Mixed Methods: Quantitative and Qualitative approach*)
3. What is the impact of First Steps local partnership services on child care quality? (*Mixed Methods approach*)
4. To what degree does First Steps at the state and local level serve as a hub for early childhood services? (*Mixed Methods approach*)

THE REACH OF FIRST STEPS

Who are the children and families served by First Steps local partnerships?

First Steps local partnership participants during the timeframe of the evaluation from 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 included 15,662 families and 18,631 children. IFS evaluated the reach of engagement of First Steps children and families by state and by county using poverty (from census data) as a proxy measure of the eligible population.



KEY FINDING:

Over the evaluation period, the engagement of families out of the number of families eligible increased 24% statewide and engagement of children out of the number of children eligible has increased 18% statewide.

First Steps local partnerships serve those children (and families) in poverty who also are experiencing a range of additional risk factors for poor school performance including but not limited to having a history of child maltreatment, having a caregiver experiencing mental illness or substance abuse, or having a caregiver who has been incarcerated. For this evaluation, First Steps local partnerships data was summarized to describe the number of risk factors evidenced by children and families during the evaluation period. The evaluation results found that in every year, more than 80% of children have two or more risk factors, and nearly 25% of children have four or more risk factors.



KEY FINDING:

From 2013-2014 to 2017-2018, the engagement of families out of the number of families eligible has increased 56% statewide. Additionally, the engagement of children out of the number of children eligible has increased 47% statewide from 2013-2014 to 2017-2018.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



“What is the impact of First Steps local partnership programs and services on school readiness for children entering 5K? Is it influenced by school district?”

For this evaluation, school readiness was assessed for one cohort of children who entered 5K in the Fall of 2017 using scores on the South Carolina Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (SCKRA).

To address the impact on school readiness, we used the quantitative approach of propensity score analysis, a strong quasi-experimental approach using statistical models to compare the impact of an intervention (i.e., First Steps services) on those receiving the intervention as compared to a matched comparison group of similar individuals who did not receive the intervention.



KEY FINDING:

Children in special education receiving First Steps services were **78% more likely to score Demonstrating Readiness** than Emerging Readiness when compared to children not receiving First Steps services. Children in special education receiving First Steps services were **42% less likely to be chronically absent** than children in special education not receiving First Steps services.

Children not in special education categories and receiving First Steps services were **74% more likely to score Demonstrating Readiness and 62% more likely to score Approaching** than Emerging Readiness when compared to children not receiving First Steps services. When testing whether there is a difference in attendance, we found that children receiving First Steps services were **34% less likely to be chronically absent** than children not receiving First Steps services.

When testing by school district poverty level:

- In High poverty index school districts, children in First Steps local partnerships are **5.6 times more likely to score Demonstrating** versus Emerging Readiness compared to children not in First Steps; they are also **2.2 times more likely to score Approaching** versus Emerging Readiness compared to children not in First Steps.
- In Mid-High poverty index school districts, children in First Steps local partnerships are **2.5 times more likely to score Demonstrating** versus Emerging Readiness compared to children not in First Steps; they are also **1.7 times more likely to score Approaching** versus Emerging Readiness compared to children not in First Steps.
- In Mid-Low poverty index school districts, children in First Steps local partnerships are **2.0 times more likely to score Demonstrating** versus Emerging Readiness compared to children not in First Steps; they are also **1.8 times more likely to score Approaching** versus Emerging Readiness compared to children not in First Steps.
- In Low poverty index school districts, no differences in SCKRA scores were detected between groups due to the availability of greater resources available to children in these geographical areas.



KEY FINDING:

For chronic absence:

- In Mid-High poverty level school districts, non-special education children receiving First Steps services are **62% less likely to be chronically absent** than children not receiving First Steps services.
- In Mid-Low poverty level school districts, non-special education children receiving First Steps local partnership services are **23% less likely to be chronically absent** than children not receiving First Steps services.

Isolating First Steps Local Partnerships

As with children in special education, we found a large overlap between non-special education children receiving First Steps services from local partnerships and those children who receive other services. Isolating just the children receiving services from First Steps alone resulted in 538 children who were propensity score matched to children in the Non-First Steps group. No statistically significant differences were detected on the SCKRA between these groups on any outcome. These results are difficult to interpret without further analysis.



KEY FINDING:

Lastly, among First Steps local partnerships children only, children at High poverty and Mid-Low poverty school districts are 68% and 51% more likely to score **Demonstrating than Emerging** readiness when compared to Low poverty level school districts. First Steps children in High poverty school districts are 60% more likely to score **Demonstrating than Emerging** readiness when compared to Mid-High poverty school districts. Further, children receiving services from First Steps show no other significant differences on SCKRA scores at other school district poverty levels.



KEY FINDING:

Chronic Absence: Among only children receiving First Steps services, children in Mid-High poverty level school districts are **28% less likely to be chronically absent** than those in Mid-Low poverty level school districts.



First Steps is decreasing the gap in school readiness among children at higher school district poverty levels. First Steps also is decreasing the gap in chronic absence in school between children living in Mid-High and Mid-Low school district poverty levels.

QUESTION

2

“What is the impact of First Steps local partnerships on parenting competence and confidence?”

Family Strengthening represents the largest program investment and includes intensive home visitation programs as well as parenting and family support and family literacy interventions that foster healthy child development. The most frequently used interventions in this category during the evaluation period include Parents as Teachers and Nurse Family Partnership.

Quantitative measurement of parenting skills and the parent-child relationship was made possible by data currently being collected from parents/caregivers and families who are involved in Family Strengthening services. Three separate measures were used: an observational measure of the quality of the parent-child relationship (Keys to Interactive Parenting Scale), an inventory completed by providers as part of the Parents As Teachers Program called the Life Skills Progression Inventory, and an assessment of parent-child interactive reading skills called the Adult-Child Interactive Reading Inventory. Analyses were restricted to individuals with at least two tests within an analysis year (i.e., a pretest and a posttest).



KEY FINDING:

Over the 5-year evaluation period, statistically significant improvements were detected across all three measures of parenting confidence:

- Keys to Interactive Parenting Scale;
- Life Skills Progression Inventory; and
- Adult-Child Interactive Reading Inventory;

with the strength of the effect ranging from moderate to very large.

Intensive family services result in improvements in parenting and in parent-child relationships.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with in-depth interviews of eight current and former randomly selected parents or caregivers across SC who received services from First Steps in the prior 2-3 years. Most parents interviewed received home visiting services from SC First Steps. Parents reported the services they received from First Steps helped their ability to parent and boosted their confidence, especially for handling different situations with their child(ren). Parents agreed that the services they received helped them understand how their child grows and develops; how to talk and read with their child; how to respond when the child does something that upsets them; how to help the child get along with other children; and how to get the child ready for school. Parents shared that First Steps services made parenting easier. Parents who received home visiting services reported their home visitors were extremely supportive, engaged all family members in activities, and gave them more ways to interact with their child. Several parents discussed that the most valuable teachings they learned from their time with the home visitors were how to be patient and how to appropriately handle the child when they misbehave.



KEY FINDING:

Key Parent Themes—

First Steps improved their ability to parent and boosted their confidence.

Parents know how to interact and play with their child.

Parents better understand how to handle different situations with their children.

First Steps home visitors supported the whole family.



“What is the impact of SCFS on child care quality?”

QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT

First Steps supports young children and families by providing quality enhancement programs in select child care centers. The selection criteria include the percentage of children in poverty served or the location of the center in an elementary school attendance zone rated “below average” or “at-risk” in the prior 3-year period. Quality enhancement programs activities include the provision of technical assistance to the Center by First Steps staff and preschool scholarships in private child care settings.

Over the 5 evaluation years, from 2013-2014 to 2017-2018, the First Steps Child Care Quality Enhancement program has supported an average of 139 child care providers with an average of 33 hours of administrative mentoring, 1,670 hours of administrative technical assistance, and 260 hours of Non-Intensive Technical

Assistance. Additionally, the program has been at an average of 215 classrooms with 2,281 children, spending an average of 49 hours of classroom mentoring and 3,783 hours of classroom technical assistance.

Child care quality was assessed using two observational instruments completed by First Steps staff: the Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS) and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS).



KEY FINDING:

Across most evaluation years:

Statistically significant gains in quality of the child care environment on the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) were noted in most years.

Statistically significant gains in quality of the child care environment on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) were seen in 3 of 5 years.

QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT

Qualitative assessment of the impact of activities designed to strengthen the quality of child care center services was accomplished using interviews with a randomly selected sample of 13 child care program directors. The program directors interviewed have extensive careers in early childhood education (many are also the owners of the child care programs). Most directors had a long history of engaging with First Steps with a little over 40% stating that they have received services from their local First Steps office for 10 or more years and approximately three-quarters receiving services 5 or more years.

Overall, child care program directors are very satisfied with the quality of the services they receive from First Steps and their relationship with First Steps coaches. Directors described the First Steps coaches and Technical Assistance providers as knowledgeable and informative and described the support and coaching provided by First Steps as worthwhile and an important resource in building the skills and capacity of their teachers in early childhood competencies. Many directors described their relationship with First Steps as a *strong partnership*. First Steps staff were in tune with the program's needs and responsive to their requests. Directors noted a key benefit of working with First Steps is that they can rely on receiving high quality and ongoing training and coaching for free for their teachers. The classroom materials and supplies provided by First Steps at initial program set up were described as *age appropriate* and beneficial for the children; they were also valued because they reduced the financial burden on programs to purchase.



KEY FINDING:

Directors of Child Care Programs Themes—

First Steps enhanced the quality of their programs.

Programs receive TA and coaching that meets their needs, is ongoing, and is free.

Teachers receive high quality TA and coaching that builds their skills in early childhood competencies.



Based on the quantitative and qualitative data collected, First Steps activities to support child care quality are having a positive impact.



“To what degree does First Steps at the state and local level serve as a hub for early childhood services?”

First Steps legislation mandates that the agency mobilize communities to address and support families of children 0-5 to enable them to reach school ready to learn. As such, it is critical to understand the role of First Steps at both the state and county level to act as a hub for early childhood services and supports.

To accomplish this goal for this evaluation, information was gathered from First Steps local partnerships, local community organizations, the First Steps state board, and state-level partners using Social Networks Analysis to understand the degree and strength of connection between First Steps and partner organizations at both the state and county level. Assessment of local and state First Steps Partnership Boards' effectiveness based on members' level of collaboration was conducted using the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory.

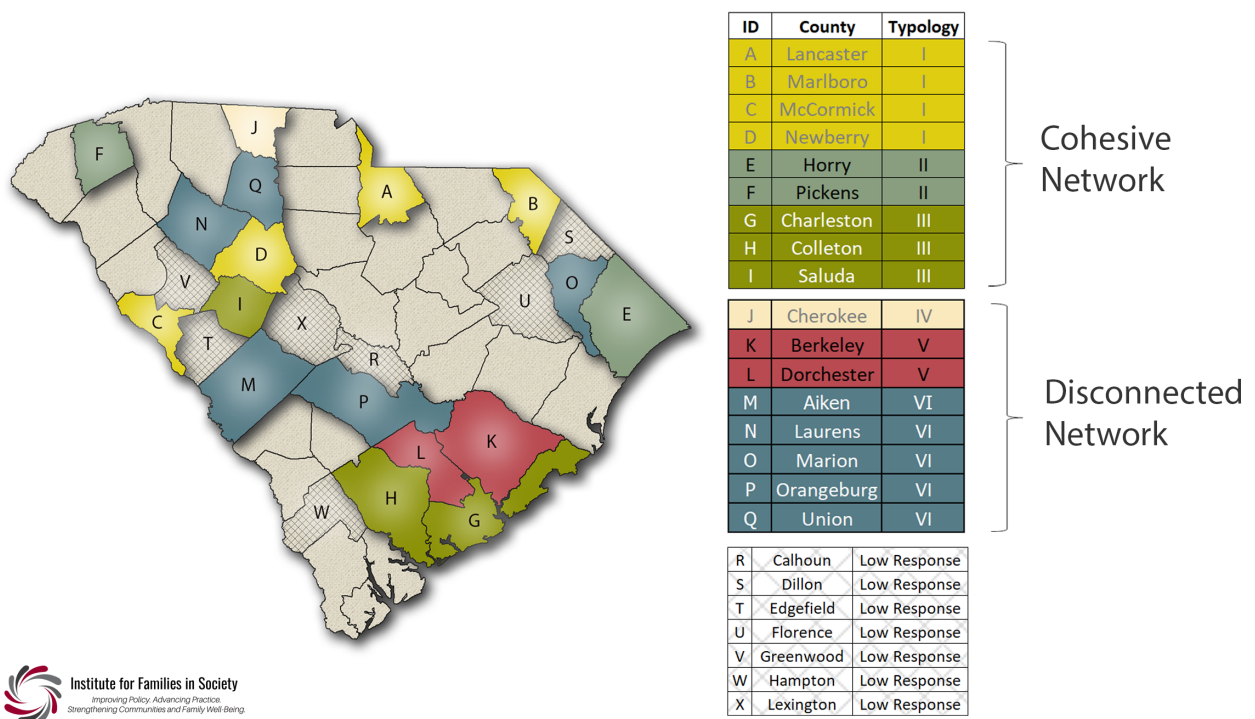
DESCRIPTION OF THE SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

Social network analysis (SNA) is a method by which to map formally the relationships existing among members of a social network. For this evaluation, we mapped the collaborative relationships among First Steps and other members of the First Steps' county networks for 24 randomly selected counties and for the statewide network.

NETWORK FINDINGS

First Steps County Partnership Networks: The overall response rate to the network mapping survey was 29.9%. We excluded those counties with response rates less than 20% from any further network analysis. The social network data collected from these surveys were then used to calculate a network-level measure of density (High or Low) for each county and three organizational-level measures of centrality (High, Medium, Low) for each First Steps partnership. There were six partnerships in the low-centrality group, six partnerships in the medium-centrality group, and five partnerships in the high-centrality group. Using the county density categories and agency centrality values, we created a network typology of six different hub/environments. This typology was used to characterize the degree to which the local First Steps partnership may be acting as a hub and the network environment in which they were located. Figure 2 indicates the Network/Hub Type for each First Steps local partnership. For specific diagrams of the six partnership types, please see pages 52-53 of the full report.

Figure 2: Network/Hub Types of First Steps Agencies



The SC Statewide Network: There were a total of 66 agencies and organizations identified as belonging to the statewide network. The statewide network survey had a response rate of 21.6%. This low response rate limits the conclusions that may be drawn from these data.

NETWORK RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the network/hub typologies:

TYPE	RECOMMENDATIONS
I	Sustain current partnership and network activities.
II	The local First Steps partnership might: i) Expand collaborations that it undertakes with other network members. ii) Deepen collaborations that it undertakes with current network ties.
III	The local First Steps partnership might: i) Build and develop its collaborations with other network members.
IV	The local First Steps partnership might: i) Foster trust and collaborations among network members in general.
V	The local First Steps partnership might: i) Expand collaborations that it undertakes with other network members. ii) Deepen collaborations that it undertakes with current network ties. iii) Foster trust and collaborations among network members in general.
VI	The local First Steps partnership might: i) Build and develop its collaborations with other network members. ii) Foster trust and collaborations among network members in general.

WILDER COLLABORATION FACTORS INVENTORY

In addition to the Social Network Analysis, we performed an assessment of local and state First Steps Partnership Boards' effectiveness based on members' level of collaboration using the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory. The Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory (WCFI) is a research-based survey tool constructed to assess 22 factors that influence the success of collaboration. For a comprehensive list of the 22 factors and their respective items, please see the appendices in the full report.

Two versions of an online survey were created—one version for the boards of First Steps local partnerships and one for the South Carolina First Steps Board of Trustees. A total of 610 respondents completed the survey.

To interpret the results of the WCFI scores, the following general rules apply:

1. **Factor Score Range of 4.0 to 5.0 – Partnership Strength;** Does not need special attention
2. **Factor Score Range of 3.0 to 3.9 – Borderline;** Area that may need further discussion or attention
3. **Factor Score Range 1.0 to 2.9 – Area for improvement;** Concerns that should be addressed

LOCAL FIRST STEPS PARTNERSHIP RESULTS

A total of 594 survey respondents from the 46 First Steps local partnerships completed the survey. For 21 of the 22 factors, the average score ranged between 4.0 and 5.0, showing that local partnerships, overall, have strong collaborations across the specific domains.



KEY FINDING:

The factor with the highest average score was **Skilled leadership**; its combined average score was 4.5 out of 5. Thus, on average, boards of First Steps local partnerships rated leadership as a strength. The factor with the lowest average score was Factor 20, **Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time**. The combined average score across all local partnerships was 3.2; thus, this factor is identified as an area that may need further discussion.

Overall, 42 of the 46 local First Step partnerships had an average factor score between 4.0 and 5.0. Based on WCFI's general rules these counties have a very strong foundation for collaboration. Four First Steps local partnerships (Barnwell, Dorchester, Horry, and Sumter) had average scores for factors that fell within the 3.0-3.9 range; WCFI general rules identifies this as an area that may deserve discussion.



KEY FINDING:

For 43 First Steps local partnerships (93.5%), Factor 21, **Skilled leadership**, was the highest or next to highest scoring factor. Additional factors with high scores include **Concrete, attainable goals**; **Unique purpose**; and **Members see collaboration as in their self-interest**. The lowest scoring factor for 42 counties was **Sufficient funds, staff, materials and time**.

These scores ranged between 1.0 and 2.9 and represent an area for further discussion and action. Please see the main report for additional details.

FIRST STEPS (STATE OFFICE) RESULTS

A total of 16 respondents completed the state-level First Steps survey. The factors with the highest average score (4.4) are Factor 3, *Favorable political and social climate*, and Factor 19, *Unique purpose*. Of the 22 factors, 15 factors had scores that ranged between 3.0 and 3.9. Based on this range, the state-level collaboration may have some areas that require further attention. The factors with the lowest scores were Factor 1, *History of collaboration or cooperation in the community* (2.7) and, similar to the local partnerships, Factor 20, *Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time* (2.0). These two scores represent areas in state collaborative function that need to be addressed.

In sum, with regard to collaboration, reported collaborations at the local partnership boards appear strong with *Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time* appearing as the primary area needing further attention. At the state level, reported levels of collaboration are somewhat lower across a number of domains. Activities to increase collaboration at the state level are recommended.



KEY FINDING:

First Steps State Office has a unique purpose and exists in a favorable social and political climate.

First Steps is led by Skilled Leadership.

First Steps does not have Sufficient funds, staff, materials and time.

Lowest Score—History of collaboration or cooperation in the community

OTHER POTENTIAL MEASURES OF REACH/IMPACT

In order to support further growth and development of First Steps services, the research team has identified a number of potential objectives and benchmarks First Steps could consider to enhance their current evaluation of the organization's impact on child and family outcomes. Three potential outcome measures include Developmental Delay Services, Immunization Status, and Low Birth-Weight Rates as these factors are directly linked to child outcomes including readiness for kindergarten, and are currently being collected by other early childhood programs or statewide initiatives.

A second set of potential measures are focused on additional caregiver/family outcomes—specifically, Parent Literacy and Self-Efficacy, Parental Mental Health and Well-Being, Interpersonal Violence, Food Insecurity, and Housing Stability. These factors have a significant and enduring influence on child developmental outcomes and have been identified as important to collect by other early childhood initiatives.

SUMMARY



STRENGTHS

The current evaluation of First Steps local partnership programs and services from 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 reveals a number of areas of strength.

First Steps has demonstrated positive impact and reach into the target population of children being raised in poverty during the evaluation period. Importantly, First Steps local partnership services are closing the gap for children in poverty. Positive impact on readiness for kindergarten as assessed using the SCKRA was found for children who received local First Steps partnership programs and services. First Steps services to enhance Child Care Quality also appear to result in improvements based on measures of the child care environment within child care settings. Strong leadership and collaborations at the local partnership level are evident that support the delivery of these effective services.

More specifically, children receiving local First Steps partnership programs or services are more likely to be ready for 5K by scoring in the Demonstrating Readiness range (vs. the Approaching or Emerging Readiness ranges) on the SCKRA as compared to similar children in the state who have not received First Steps services. This impact was seen for children regardless of special education status. The impact of local First Steps partnership programs and services on school readiness as assessed by the SCKRA increases with the poverty index of the school districts in which these children are nested. These findings suggest that First Steps services are most important and have the most impact for children being raised in poverty or are being served in a school district with a High poverty index rating. This is of key importance as poverty is a risk factor for poor outcomes that impacts more than half a million children ages 0-5 in South Carolina.

In addition to positive impact of First Steps services on 5K performance, children receiving local First Steps partnership services also attend school at higher rates as compared to similar peers. Specifically, children receiving First Steps services are less likely to be chronically absent; chronic absenteeism has a negative impact on children's academic performance.

Children involved in intensive home visitation services supported or provided by First Steps made significant gains on three separate measures of the parent/care-giver-child relationship. Specifically, gains are seen in the quality of the parent/caregiver-child relationship as assessed by two separate measures, and in the quality of interactions during joint book reading, a critical activity supporting school readiness for children.

With regard to child care quality, child care providers enrolled in the quality enhancement services provided by First Steps saw statistically significant gains in measures of their child care environments in most years during the evaluation period.

Achieving these important results is a function of the strong collaborations evidenced by the social networks and collaboration evaluation of the local First Steps local partnerships.

AREAS FOR GROWTH/IMPROVEMENT

Several areas for growth or improvement were identified in this evaluation.

One significant area for growth is in distribution of scholarships and child care quality support services provided by First Steps partnerships. Both resources are found in regions of the state with relatively lower rates of poverty. Examination of resource allocation is especially important given the findings of increased positive impact of First Steps local partnership services on SCKRA performance as the poverty index of the school district increases.

With regard to child care scholarships, no differences were found in SCKRA scores between children receiving First Steps scholarships alone compared to children receiving First Steps scholarships plus intensive home visitation services. Thus, it may be important to further examine the impact of scholarships on children's readiness for 5K.

Another area for improvement identified are the connections and collaborations with other organizations at the level of the State First Steps office. While the history of relationships between organizations cannot be changed, efforts to enhance engagement with other state-level organizations that serve infants, young children, and families should continue to occur. Importantly, such collaborations are now occurring. One prominent example is the fruitful collaboration between First Steps and the South Carolina Department of Social Services on the federal Pre-school Development Grant. This activity has the potential to strengthen relationships with multiple early childhood stakeholders.

Cooperation between state-level agencies with regard to data sharing is necessary. The research team requested but was not granted access to 2018-2019 SCKRA data from the South Carolina Department of Education. (This data would have supported evaluation of impact on SCKRA performance for a second birth cohort of children who entered 5K in the Fall of 2018). Data availability may in part have been due to the time frame used for data collection and data adjustments that are common when extracting or exchanging large databases. Given the focus of First Steps on school readiness, routine access to this data on an annual basis can support use of this type of data for analysis and decision-making.

LIMITATIONS

All evaluations have limitations that must be considered to fully understand findings. In this evaluation, several key limitations must be noted.

- With regard to the propensity score analysis used to assess SCKRA performance, data from only one cohort (children entering 5K in 2017-2018 school year) was made available to the research team. This data should be interpreted with caution; it would be preferable to repeat these analyses with additional cohorts in order to increase confidence that the predictors of school performance are stable over time and not subject to a cohort effect.
- The evaluation of both parenting interventions and child care quality enhancement activities was limited to outcome variables contained in the First Steps database. In addition, the design of these evaluations as a pretest-posttest study with no comparison group does limit the strength of our conclusions. It may be beneficial to further assess these intervention programs using a prospective design in which a larger range of outcome variables is assessed and to include a comparison group.
- With regard to the social networks analysis (targeting 24 counties), the analysis could not be completed for six counties due to low response rates to the online survey. The surveys, conducted to assess the strength of the 1) local First Steps boards and 2) local early childhood networks, were developed so that submitted responses would be anonymous. Thus, there was no way to identify who had or had not completed the survey. Response rates may have increased if there was a mechanism to identify who completed the surveys. Subsequent emails could have been sent beyond the initial email with the online survey link to encourage survey completion.
- There are limitations to the qualitative data collection (interviews with both parents and child care providers) due to lower numbers of participants being reached as compared to the number initially targeted. Research shows that 16 interviews are sufficient for qualitative data collection and reporting and 24 interviews are ideal to validate findings; we were not able to achieve these goals. This may in part be due to the sampling frame. Specifically, a universe of parents and child care providers who received services from First Steps in 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 was extracted from the First Steps database administered by the SC Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office; both parents and child care providers were randomly sampled from this larger group for qualitative interviews. Unfortunately, almost half of the parents that received services from First Steps in the past 2 fiscal years had disconnected phone numbers. In addition, several of the child care providers who were contacted for interviews had disconnected phone numbers. Completion rates of interviews may increase if a more recent time period is used to extract the universe.

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. The local First Steps partnerships are a primary provider of parent support services in South Carolina, and Family Strengthening programs touch more young children and families than other types of First Steps supported services at the local level. Given the positive impact seen on school readiness for children who have received local First Steps services, it is likely that parent support programs are an important part of this impact. This impact appears greatest for children in areas of highest poverty; thus, allocation of these family strengthening resources to areas in highest poverty are recommended.
2. Given the positive but relatively small impact of child care quality enhancement services seen on the quality of child care classrooms, it is important to consider how these services may be deepened or strengthened. Many rural and High poverty areas do not have these child care supports. Allocation of child care quality support resources to rural and High poverty areas are recommended.
3. Consideration should be given to further evaluation of the impact of scholarships on school readiness, as well as evaluation of outcomes of school transition programs provided by First Steps (i.e., the popular Countdown to Kindergarten program).
4. There are several early childhood initiatives in the state that are focused on improving the outcomes of children ages 0-5. There are similar measures collected by those initiatives; however, the operational definitions vary. To assess the collective impact of early childhood initiatives, it is recommended to develop a core set of standardized metrics in which each initiative collects and reports on an annual basis.
5. The highest rated collaborations factor across First Steps local partnerships was *Skilled leadership*. First Steps boards recognized the strength of their partnerships' leadership in working with other people and organizations. The lowest rated factor across almost all local First Steps local partnerships was *Sufficient funds, staff, materials and time*. Board mem-

bers and FS staff reported the funds and “people power” to accomplish its goals were inadequate. It is recommended that First Steps continue to identify additional funding opportunities to enhance its current financial support. This includes collaborating with other early childhood initiatives to pool resources and advocating for additional funding from the state legislature.

6. In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on formative evaluation and quality improvement, defined as the use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and review during implementation to modify processes to increase efficiency and effectiveness. Such methods incorporate rapid problem-solving intended for decision-making and improvement. Currently, First Steps conducts a robust program evaluation every 5 years. It is recommended that First Steps collect both qualitative and quantitative data (including SCKRA) on an annual or biennial basis that includes satisfaction assessments in order to monitor and improve performance on an ongoing basis (i.e., conduct a modified or more limited evaluation on a more regular basis).
7. Initial social network evaluation information suggests that there is an opportunity to enhance and strengthen collaborations between organizations supporting children 0-5 and their families at the local level in some counties. (Completion of this type of evaluation in the remaining counties is needed and is underway.)
8. The state-level office of First Steps underwent organizational change during the evaluation period, coming under new leadership in December of 2017, less than 2 years ago. New leadership represents an important opportunity for First Steps at the state level to renew and/or strengthen collaboration with other child-serving agencies and organizations; this appears necessary given perceptions of a history of poor collaboration. Positive movement in this arena is evidenced by the visible presence of First Steps in the federal Preschool Development Grant planning grant, a collaborative undertaking with multiple early childhood stakeholders, that is currently underway. Opportunities for states to advance collaborations supporting child well-being are now occurring with the passage of federal Families First legislation, especially around delivery of evidence-based family support programs. Given that this is an area of strength for First Steps, we encourage leadership to pursue opportunities that may arise as a result of this legislation.
9. Given complexities of data sharing and to avoid challenges related to reporting deadlines, it is recommended that First Steps partner with SCDE to obtain SCKRA data on an annual basis to allow for ongoing assessment of First Steps local partnership impact.
10. Given that the analyses in this report focused on overall impact of First Steps local partnership services, it is recommended that further analyses be conducted on First Steps local partnership programs to determine which programs may be the primary drivers of improvement and where they are located. Such nuanced analyses can be important for program planning and implementation.