

June 26, 2014

To my fellow SCFS Board members:

I consider myself an optimist. At the risk of being seen as a pessimist, I offer the SCFS Board this “reality check” for the “good of the cause.” None of my comments should be taken personally because they are not directed at individuals, but rather toward all of us as a collective body. Thanks for allowing me to share some personal reflections, observations and opinions. Whether you agree or not I appreciate you taking the time to read what follows.

Significant legislation recently approved by the SC General Assembly, vetoed by the Governor and overridden by the House 106-0 and the Senate 38-2, regarding the 2014 reauthorization and reform of South Carolina First Steps is indeed a time for celebration. Everyone who is interested in the progress of education in general, and early childhood education in particular, should be encouraged that the reauthorization bill was so resoundingly supported by the General Assembly. However, reauthorization has been a two-year struggle that should never have been so difficult. The overwhelming numbers with which our legislation passed show solid support from both political parties for early childhood education and First Steps programs. It’s also a time for frank and honest self-reflection.

So why was this process such a struggle? The legislators’ votes for passage demonstrate clearly what they have shared with their constituents, including EDs and Boards, across the state – they generally support the work of the First Steps County Partnerships that serve the communities they represent. The struggle for the legislators is, and has been, with management and governance at both the state and some, not all, local levels. Going forward, business as usual will not ensure our survival, hence the need for reform and change.

The new SCFS legislation addresses most of the critical issues. So, we should celebrate. Let’s applaud the ongoing hard work of large numbers of individuals, staff and volunteers, statewide, who daily address the very real needs of young children and their families, helping to create conditions and knowledge to optimize their early developmental years and give them a solid foundation for educational and hopefully lifelong success. Thankfully our “glass is at least half full.” Alas, that is not good enough. Yes we can celebrate the past 15 years but then we must get back to work. The new legislation, containing many specific and urgent mandates, can be truly reforming. However it requires and demands more of us, not less, than we’ve delivered to date. So as we celebrate we must also recommit to the reforms and challenges of the future.

The remarkable efforts of 46 local county partnerships and their volunteer boards, together with efforts by the Office of First Steps staff and its Board of Trustees, made reauthorization possible. However we must never lose sight of the fact that many of the obstacles and challenges we faced over the past two years of the legislative process were predominantly our collective responsibility and not happenstance. Certainly there were the usual ingredients/externalities of politics and personalities, but to minimize, ignore or dismiss the issues raised by the LAC report, the EOC CDEPP report, previous evaluations and the poor status of our collaborative efforts with other state agencies and groups serving children is unacceptable. It’s delusional to think that given reauthorization “all is well.” The reality is that many of the challenges and obstacles of reauthorization were “self-inflicted.” Far too much effort was expended convincing the parties, “that we can either hang together or we’ll hang separately”. In the famous words of Pogo, “we have met the enemy and (s/he) is us.” This must change if we expect to move forward in a progressively challenging environment. The truth is the children need a “full glass” effort, nothing less.

continued

In order to truly fix SC First Steps, we must return to our founding principles and re-emphasize state office support for the County (Local) Partnerships where the work of First Steps is actually performed. Our legislators recognize this fact. They created, and now reformed, First Steps to be an "initiative" implemented by local counties for the benefit of local counties. That's First Steps core business. Yes, First Steps has been asked to manage BabyNet as well as the private side of 4K, both enormous challenging projects, but not to the disadvantage of County (Local) Partnerships.

At the end of the day the key to any success will always be the people, "those people" who show up every day, who put the children's needs first. Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Due to our efforts and those of others, more and more people now realize that the education Mandela speaks of starts very, very early. Likewise he reminds us, "it always seems impossible until it's done." Better governance, more thoughtful policy making, together with good leadership, sound and supportive management, effective communication and better implementation, in support of "those people" should make the pathways to our organization's success a rewarding and enjoyable experience. Remember, reauthorization comes at us again in two years and we must be prepared.

Many challenges remain. I have begun a very rough "to do" list for our consideration on the following page. It is good to celebrate but most important is the need to reflect on the total experience before turning the page to begin the next chapter. With similar enthusiasm, working equally hard, and committing ourselves to achieving a higher level of excellence and effectiveness than currently exists, our journey shall continue. As we celebrate, let that journey begin in earnest and with reform. Safe travels to all.

One final thought

Consider this: What if the SCFS BOT and leadership team, all of us, had spent as much time over the past decade working on the issues exposed in the LAC report, evaluations and other challenges too numerous to articulate, as has been spent in the last 2 years, and especially the last 6 months and the last 2 weeks working on reauthorization.

What would First Steps look like today?

Respectfully offered,

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POSITIVE QUOTE OF THE DAY

The aim of an argument or discussion should not be victory, but progress.

-- Joseph Joubert (1754-1824); French Philosopher

Back to Basics

“Back to basics” is a cliché for good reason – it works. In the nonprofit world, it means **seriously** and **objectively addressing** issues of governance and management, always in service of the organization’s mission. In our case, the law provides clear requirements of how we define our mission of school readiness and how we allocate our resources to achieve it. The law is also clear on another point: we cannot do this alone. Just as an individual child’s success or failure is the result of the many hands that guide her as she grows, so too is the success of SC First Steps dependent on an array of influences and institutions.

To help get SCFS back to its basics, I offer as a starting point the following proposed “To Do” list. How we accomplish these tasks as an organization (retreats, strategic planning, forming work groups/task forces) is up to us to be determined.

1) Governance

- Bring BOT into compliance with the new law
 1. Review new legislation and develop a work plan for compliance
 2. Advocate for completion of appointments to BOT
 3. Revise bylaws, especially in regard to executive committee powers
- Increase frequency of Board meetings to every other month (6 meetings per year)
 1. Issues requiring significant discussion:
 - a. “Lessons learned” during reauthorization process
 - b. EOC CDEPP report
 - c. Previous evaluations and any other external/independent reports
 - d. SCFS financial situation including possible improvements to financial reporting to BOT and LPs
 2. Review origins of “quest” for state agency status and impact on 501(c)3 status if SCFS becomes state agency (Study Committee will address)
- Increase transparency, setting an example for other boards.
 1. Committee meetings open to all Board members
 2. Adequate notification/attendance report/minutes
- Review priorities of SCFS given its evolution from original purposes at creation in 1999 ([see Section 3 – School Readiness and Program Priorities](#))
- Address unresolved “minor” policy issues, such as restrictions on use of private funds (e.g., alcohol at special events) and other financial matters.
- Evaluation of management structure and effectiveness/any issues needing attention
- Develop strategies for C/LPs input into governance

2) Management

- Complete reorganization chart and hiring of personnel
- Continue implementation of communications plans
 1. External branding/website/social media
 2. Improve distribution to BOT of all significant reports/documents
 3. Internal review of management plans for communications with C/LPs
- Continuous improvement in technical assistance resources for C/LPs
- Create an effective mechanism for C/LP (Board and ED) input to FS staff and BOT
- Review need for/effectiveness of regional partnership structure
- Increase commitment to professional development/training for C/LP Board development/ED skills development

- Generate and distribute Director’s monthly report/analysis of major activities/issues including legislative and providing update status from previous reports
- Staff internal review of LAC recommendations and progress toward remedies
- Adopt an organization-wide 360° evaluation process for personnel to include LP input

3) School Readiness and Program Priorities

- Adopt description of school readiness and determine which First Steps programs are most effective at helping to achieve it. [\[see Section 59-152-32\]](#)
- Advocate for adoption of a developmentally appropriate and effective tool to assess children’s school readiness [\[see Section 59-152-33\]](#)
- Ensure the First Steps system of C/LPs knows what works in school readiness and provide the training and technical assistance it needs to implement it at the local level

4) Other items to be addressed

- Supporting C/LPs quarterly statewide meetings focusing on current/evolving issues
- Generating private funds to support C/LP expansion of effective programs.
- Revisiting funding formula (LAC)

“Section 59-152-32. (A) In Section 63-11-1720, the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees may carry out its assigned functions by developing a comprehensive long-range initiative for improving early childhood development, increasing school readiness and literacy, establishing results oriented measures and objectives, and assessing whether services provided by First Steps Partnerships to children and families are meeting the goals and achieving the results established in this chapter. **The board shall do the following to fulfill these duties before July 1, 2015:**

(1) in consultation with the State Board of Education, and with the advice and consent of that board, adopt a description of school readiness that includes specific:

- characteristics and development levels of a ready child that must include, but are not limited to, emerging literacy, numeracy, and physical, social, and emotional competencies;
- characteristics of school, educators, and caregivers that the board considers necessary to create an optimal learning environment for the early years of students’ lives; and
- characteristics of the optimal environment which would lead to the readiness of students and their continued success;

(2) establish specific benchmarks and objectives for use by the board of trustees, local partnership boards, and any agency that administers a program to benefit preschool children;

(3) determine whether state and local programs and activities are effective and contribute to achieving the goals established in Section 59-152-30; and

(4) publish and distribute a list of approved evidence-based and evidence-informed programs.

(B) The board of trustees shall review the school readiness description, benchmarks, and objectives and adopt any revisions it considers appropriate **before December 31, 2014, again before December 31, 2019, and every five years afterward.**”

“Section 59-152-33. (A) **Before July 1, 2015,** the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee shall recommend an **assessment to evaluate and measure the school readiness of students prior to their entrance into a pre-kindergarten or kindergarten program** per the goals pursuant to Section 59-152-30 to the State Board of Education. Prior to submitting the recommendation to the State Board, the Education Oversight Committee shall seek input from the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees and other early childhood advocates. In making the recommendation, the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee shall consider

assessments that are research-based, reliable, and appropriate for measuring readiness. The assessment chosen must evaluate each child's early language and literacy development, numeracy skills, physical well-being, social and emotional development, and approaches to learning. The assessment of academic readiness must be aligned with first and second grade standards for English language arts and mathematics. **The purpose of the assessment** is to provide teachers, administrators, and parents or guardians with information to address the readiness needs of each student, especially by identifying language, cognitive, social, emotional, and health needs, and providing appropriate instruction and support for each child. The results of the screenings and the developmental intervention strategies recommended to address the child's identified needs must be provided, in writing, to the parent or guardian. Reading instructional strategies and developmental activities for children whose oral language and emergent literacy skills are assessed to be below the national standards must be aligned with the district's reading proficiency plan for addressing the readiness needs of each student. The school readiness assessment adopted by the State Board of Education may not be used to deny a student admission or progress to kindergarten or first grade. Every student entering the public schools for the first time in prekindergarten and kindergarten must be administered a readiness screening by the forty fifth day of the school year.

(B) **The results of individual students in a school readiness assessment may not be publicly reported.**

(C) Following adoption of a school readiness assessment, the State Board of Education shall adopt a system for reporting population-level results that provides baseline data for measuring overall change and improvement in the skills and knowledge of students over time. The Department of Education shall house and monitor the system.

(D) The South Carolina First Steps of School Readiness Board of Trustees shall support the implementation of the school readiness assessment and must provide professional development to support the readiness assessment for teachers and parents of programs supported with First Steps funds. The board shall utilize the annual aggregate literacy and other readiness assessment information in establishing standards and practices to support all early childhood providers served by First Steps."

"Section 59-152-30. **The goals for South Carolina First Steps** to School Readiness are to:

(1) **provide parents** with access to the support they might seek and want 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~~ succeed; and

(5) **mobilize communities to focus efforts** on providing enhanced services to support families and their young children so as to enable every child to reach school healthy and ready to ~~learn~~ succeed."

POSITIVE QUOTE OF THE DAY

Hard things are put in our way, not to stop us, but to call out our courage and strength.

-- Anonymous

SECTION 9. Section 59-152-40 of the 1976 Code is amended to read:

"Section 59-152-40. The South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees established in Section 63-11-1720 shall oversee **and be accountable for** the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness initiative."

