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Date: 10/26/2015 9:33:48 AM
Subject: FW: Response to First Steps Study Committee

FYI

From: Garry R. Smith [mailto:GarrySmith@schouse.gov]
Sent: Saturday, October 24, 2015 6:16 PM
To: Sally Cauthen
Cc: Mike Brenan; Mike Fair; Nikki G. Setzler; Senator Ross Turner; Ross Turner; Greg Hembree; Merita A. "Rita" Allison; Rita Allison; Raye Felder; John Richard C. King; Shannon Erickson; Rep. - personal email Shannon Erickson; Joe Waters; David Whittemore; Pierce McNair; Deanne Gray; Veldran, Katherine; Patel, Swati
Subject: Re: Response to First Steps Study Committee

Mr. Chairman,

After reviewing this mailing and its attachments I have to express some very serious concerns with both the process leading to this draft and its content.

From a process standpoint, I am very disappointed to learn that the staff's draft report was posted online in advance of committee review and discussion of its content – with which I certainly cannot agree – nor any review or invited testimony by First Steps itself. After reading the draft, I reached out to agency leaders for a response and learned that they have not been contacted by study committee staff at any point in the drafting process to verify what I've come to conclude are some boldly inaccurate claims.

Agency review of this kind is standard operating procedure for both the LAC and House Oversight Committee, not only to protect the agency under review from inaccurate reporting, but to protect the integrity of the reviewers and their processes. The Current draft selectively disregards significant evidence and testimony as to First Steps' existing strengths, includes recommendations never considered or discussed by the full committee, and – most egregiously – concludes that First Steps is *"not addressing the urgent need for meaningful early childhood services through its governing board"* and headed toward *"an inevitable crisis in administration"* on the basis of a staff constructed list of deliverables that the report implies incorrectly are unfinished or overdue.

At my request, First Steps has provided 136 pages of documentation related to these 19 items. On the basis of my own review, 11 appear to be complete, 3 relate to proviso-driven deadlines with future deadlines and 5 are new requests of the study committee, never even provided to First Steps.

Mr. Chairman, is this the basis on which the staff have concluded that there is a crisis in management at First Steps? Have we truly concluded – in public view but without a minute of committee deliberation - that a leadership change may be in order as the result of a list that staff failed to even review with the agency for accuracy? I'm very disappointed.

I would ask, prior to Monday's meeting, that staff provide me copies of all of their communications with First Steps' staff since the study committee's last meeting in March. Specifically I am interested in the process used to vet the accuracy of this staff report with the agency before its distribution and online posting. For the committee to have

distributed such a strongly worded draft based on content it has not appropriately fact checked is a failure in process that casts serious doubts about the credibility of this committee's work.

As you will recall this is not a new concern. Early in the committee's deliberations, a questionably constructed survey (containing questions seemingly designed to elicit negative responses) was distributed without the committee's review to local First Steps directors – one of whom subsequently managed to provide his peers the results prior to the committee's own discussion/review. Rep. Erickson spoke publicly about her concerns with the survey at the Committee's meeting on March 26 – asking specifically that it not be included in the committee's deliberations due to the instrument's questionable content, process and construction. At the same meeting it was requested that both First Steps' Board Chair Ken Wingate and Director Susan DeVenny be permitted an opportunity to address the committee.

Now seven months later we are reconvening to review a draft report without the benefit of this important testimony and with the results of this questionable survey published right alongside it.

Mr. Chairman, the integrity of the Committee's work is very much in question at this point. I will not sign off on a report that questions the leadership and governance of an agency that appears (in the face of many obstacles, including significant requests from this committee) to be successfully meeting its legislative mandates – a fact confirmed by the agency's most recent external evaluation, also disregarded in the draft report.

I look forward to discussing this in greater detail on Monday and would appreciate it if staff can provide the communications requested above.

Respectfully submitted,

Garry R. Smith
South Carolina House of Representatives
District 27

Sent from my iPhone

On Oct 23, 2015, at 1:00 PM, Sally Cauthen <SallyCauthen@scsenate.gov> wrote:

Attached please find additional information Mike Brennan requested be shared with Study Committee members. Thank you.

Sally Cauthen

<Response to First Steps Study Committee 19 Item List 10.20.15.pdf>