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June 12, 2013

The Honorable John Courson
President Pro Tempore
SC Senate
412 Gressette Building
Columbia, SC 29202-0142

The Honorable Bobby Harrell
Speaker of the House
SC House of Representatives
506 Blatt Building
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear President Courson and Speaker Harrell:

Over the past year and a half, the Legislative Audit Council has conducted a review of South Carolina First Steps and has recently published its recommendations. We always benefit from external feedback and are gratified to find that the report largely mirrors a set of structural recommendations we ourselves have already proposed to the General Assembly in the form of draft reauthorization language.

Of the report's 42 recommendations, First Steps has already taken action or completed work on 20 (48%), with 12 recommendations directly mirroring language proposed within the existing reauthorization bills. As with prior evaluations, we welcome these newest recommendations, which will almost certainly serve to improve our operations.

We must reiterate our Board's very strong belief that the South Carolina General Assembly acted with great wisdom in enacting this legislation, and that First Steps - as one component of the state's collective investment in children and families - has helped to push the preparedness of the state's youngest learners to new heights.

You may be aware that the SC General Assembly chose to eliminate our state's formal school readiness assessment in 2008. We agree with the LAC that the time has come to reinstate such a measure. In its absence, however, we take exception to the Audit Council's portrayal of one key indicator of child success.

While the number of SC children possessing school readiness risk factors, such as low birth weight and births to mothers with less than a high school diploma has not substantially decreased since the First Steps legislation was enacted, one critical, cost-saving demographic has been reduced by 48% -- the number of South Carolina children repeating first grade has been cut in half.

While 4,202 South Carolina students repeated first grade in 2000, only 2,263 repeated in 2010. Similarly positive improvements (33%) have occurred since 2005 in 5k retention reductions. Combined, public school savings (at the state's average per student cost of \$10,994) produce more than \$30 million in yearly savings to SC taxpayers.

Five hundred thirty-two thousand seven (532,007) parent education home visits by local county partnership educators and more than 35,071 hours of technical assistance to SC child care providers - *when combined with other First Steps, School District and partner agency programs* - have produced a marked difference in early school success, as evidenced by this nearly 50% drop in retention (Attachment A).

After First Steps' funding of a 2007 study to pinpoint the state's most high-risk children and their extremely high school failure rates (Attachment B), our State Board and county partnerships have focused on these at-risk kids with an eye toward driving overall retention rates down statewide. With no statewide readiness assessment after 2008, there is currently no better way to trend the effectiveness of the state's collective investment in early childhood programs.

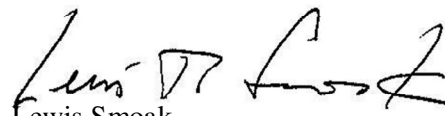
We applaud the efforts of South Carolina's child serving agencies and organizations, most of which serve on our Board, who have all contributed significantly to this systemic achievement. Preparing our children for kindergarten and first grade is a great success story which can be maintained and improved as we implement LAC's recommendations, expand CDEPP, and continue to reach at-risk children county by county across South Carolina.

While we are disappointed the LAC did not focus on accomplishments, services delivered, and overall results, we understand it was directed to look only at bureaucratic compliance. Unfortunately, this report is in no way a reflection of the success of the thousands of hours of work of dedicated volunteers, or our state and local partnership staffs. Their raising of \$97,329,428 locally to match \$213,413,977 in State funding is not mentioned by the LAC (Attachment C).

It is with a sense of pride and accomplishment that we disagree that the 2000-2010 reduction in retention is a mere coincidence with First Steps' launch and first ten years of work. When little else has changed during that period, and results are so overwhelming, success is more likely the result of South Carolina's focused efforts to support young children and families. It is not a coincidence that our local partnerships raised \$97 million to match the State's \$213 million investment, and it is not a coincidence that these funds and focused efforts have fueled huge early learning advances across South Carolina.

The 1,939 South Carolina children, who would have repeated First Grade in 2010 but did not, thank the legislature for the difference between an educational success and failure in grade one, and for all that initial success means to their lives going forward.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lewis Smoak", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Lewis Smoak

Vice-Chair

SC First Steps Board of Trustees

LTS:cag
Enclosures

First Steps Documents Attached:

- A. County by County Retention Reduction and Savings
- B. SC Data Warehouse Analysis of SC Children Experiencing Early School Failure
- C. Local Partnership Leverage Report – 2001-2012
- D. Parent Home Visitation
- E. Child Care Quality Enhancement and Training
- F. South Carolina Child Development Education Pilot Program (CDEPP)
- G. Countdown to Kindergarten
- H. Quick Facts – First Steps



County Name	Number Repeating 1st Grade 2001-2002	Percentage Repeating 1st Grade 2001-2002	Number Repeating 1st Grade 2009-2010	Percentage Repeating 1st Grade 2009-2010	Reduction in 1st Grade Retention Expressed as Percentage
Abbeville County	32	10.4%	13	4.9%	52.9%
Aiken County	161	8.1%	81	4.2%	48.1%
Allendale County	25	14.1%	18	12.0%	14.8%
Anderson County	169	7.7%	84	3.5%	54.5%
Bamberg County	29	12.4%	15	8.5%	31.4%
Barnwell County	140	35.2%	29	8.3%	76.4%
Beaufort County	50	4.0%	46	3.0%	25.0%
Berkeley County	208	10.0%	226	9.4%	6.0%
Calhoun County	20	10.9%	10	7.2%	33.9%
Charleston County	300	8.2%	93	2.7%	67.0%
Cherokee County	27	3.7%	18	2.5%	32.4%
Chester County	85	14.0%	45	9.5%	32.1%
Chesterfield County	38	5.9%	10	1.8%	69.4%
Clarendon County	32	7.2%	34	7.6%	+ 5.5%
Colleton County	57	9.9%	50	10.0%	+ 1%
Darlington County	86	8.8%	67	7.5%	14.8%
Dillon County	46	9.7%	32	6.4%	34.0%
Dorchester County	47	3.5%	57	3.2%	8.0%
Edgefield County	25	7.2%	18	5.9%	18.0%
Fairfield County	18	5.5%	3	1.2%	78.1%
Florence County	142	8.5%	82	4.6%	45.8%
Georgetown County	69	8.7%	27	3.6%	58.6%
Greenville County	450	8.9%	274	4.8%	46.0%
Greenwood County	108	11.1%	23	2.6%	76.5%
Hampton County	48	14.9%	16	5.4%	63.7%
Horry County	132	5.9%	59	2.0%	66.1%
Jasper County	23	8.9%	4	1.4%	84.2%
Kershaw County	53	6.8%	32	3.9%	42.6%
Lancaster County	64	7.6%	47	5.1%	32.8%
Laurens County	54	7.0%	29	4.4%	37.1%
Lee County	40	16.7%	12	5.7%	65.8%
Lexington County	163	4.5%	53	1.3%	71.1%
Marion County	54	10.2%	28	6.6%	35.2%
Marlboro County	56	11.9%	30	9.0%	24.3%
McCormick County	6	6.8%	8	11.6%	+ 70%
Newberry County	38	7.8%	27	5.9%	24.3%
Oconee County	70	7.8%	27	3.3%	57.6%
Orangeburg County	156	12.7%	56	5.4%	57.4%
Pickens County	82	6.2%	38	3.0%	51.6%
Richland County	227	6.5%	122	3.3%	49.2%
Saluda County	7	4.3%	17	8.6%	+ 100%
Spartanburg County	131	3.8%	89	2.5%	34.2%
Sumter County	134	8.7%	80	6.1%	29.8%
Union County	55	12.9%	10	2.9%	77.5%
Williamsburg County	157	24.8%	45	9.9%	60.0%
York County	88	3.8%	72	2.3%	39.4%
TOTALS:	4202	7.9%	2263	4.1%	48.1%

1939 fewer children @
\$10,974* =

\$21,278,586

*SC Budget and Control Board Revenue Per Pupil
Report by School District for FY 2012-13
<http://ors.sc.gov/economics/revperpupil.html>

SC Children Experiencing Early School Failure:

Characteristics of Young Children Subsequently Retained or Scoring "Below Basic" by 3rd Grade

Percentage of Children Possessing <i>This Risk Factor</i> "Not Succeeding by 3 rd Grade"	<u>Readiness Risk Factors</u>	Percentage (and Estimate) of 0-6 Child Population Possessing <i>This Risk Factor</i>
53%	Abused, Neglected, or in Foster Care	3% (10,173)
52%	Extremely Low Birth Weight (under 3.3 lbs./1500 g.)	2.11% (7170)
48%	Low Maternal Education (Less than High School)	24.13% (81,852)
45%	Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) (50% of Federal Poverty)	8.4% (28,690)
43%	Very Low Birth Weight (3.3-4.4 lbs/1500 - 2000 g.)	2.77% (9,390)
43%	Teen Mother (Under 18)	4.6% (15,618)
42%	Food Stamps (130% of Federal Poverty)	20% (67,897)
37%	Mother (age 18 - 20)	8.83% (29,946)
36%	Low Birth Weight (4.4-5.5lbs./2000 - 2500 grams)	5.53% (18,780)

SC Data Warehouse, adapted and updated from the January 2007 PACT/Retention analysis of Dr. Baron Holmes.



**LOCAL PARTNERSHIP LEVERAGE REPORT
2001-2012**

County Name	Total Amount by State	Total Local Leverage	Percent Leveraged
1. Abbeville	\$2,673,582	\$751,829	28%
2. Aiken	\$6,377,352	\$1,643,697	26%
3. Allendale	\$2,457,501	\$718,362	29%
4. Anderson	\$7,145,172	\$2,770,625	39%
5. Bamberg	\$2,194,859	\$1,344,597	61%
6. Barnwell	\$3,215,720	\$1,192,831	37%
7. Beaufort	\$5,469,338	\$1,254,885	23%
8. Berkeley	\$7,427,589	\$1,151,846	16%
9. Calhoun	\$2,010,177	\$485,766	24%
10. Charleston	\$11,647,322	\$4,049,443	35%
11. Cherokee	\$3,292,212	\$859,058	26%
12. Chester	\$2,404,898	\$905,513	38%
13. Chesterfield	\$2,609,301	\$1,364,766	52%
14. Clarendon	\$2,747,172	\$805,586	29%
15. Colleton	\$2,616,868	\$1,213,460	46%
16. Darlington	\$3,672,502	\$1,510,550	41%
17. Dillon	\$3,844,329	\$641,312	17%
18. Dorchester	\$3,781,124	\$673,660	18%
19. Edgefield	\$2,073,429	\$1,002,353	48%
20. Fairfield	\$2,195,860	\$840,642	38%
21. Florence	\$7,989,706	\$1,407,103	18%
22. Georgetown	\$4,307,841	\$2,678,299	62%
23. Greenville	\$16,531,301	\$6,452,100	39%
24. Greenwood	\$3,376,159	\$650,107	19%
25. Hampton	\$2,724,960	\$523,198	19%
26. Horry	\$6,782,059	\$3,285,151	48%
27. Jasper	\$2,422,001	\$593,237	24%
28. Kershaw	\$2,863,807	\$956,298	33%
29. Lancaster	\$3,598,411	\$3,102,911	86%
30. Laurens	\$4,101,316	\$1,841,197	45%
31. Lee	\$3,596,310	\$1,998,891	56%
32. Lexington	\$9,277,080	\$4,927,511	53%
33. Marion	\$3,593,814	\$437,993	12%
34. Marlboro	\$2,463,825	\$614,762	25%
35. McCormick	\$2,148,466	\$1,378,956	64%
36. Newberry	\$3,477,480	\$642,020	26%
37. Oconee	\$2,736,799	\$2,922,264	107%
38. Orangeburg	\$5,090,938	\$887,065	17%
39. Pickens	\$4,851,998	\$1,326,588	27%
40. Richland	\$12,147,682	\$8,406,798	69%
41. Saluda	\$2,552,284	\$881,177	35%
42. Spartanburg	\$10,915,465	\$19,508,628	179%
43. Sumter	\$5,068,548	\$1,191,889	24%
44. Union	\$2,266,094	\$706,079	31%
45. Williamsburg	\$4,402,381	\$1,520,254	35%
46. York	\$5,288,932	\$3,308,162	63%
TOTAL	\$213,431,977	\$97,329,428	46%

Parent Home Visitation

“Under First Steps’ leadership, Parents as Teachers in South Carolina has set the national example in fidelity and accountability. We hold you up to other states doing home visitation as an example of how it can be done right.”

- Scott Hippert, CEO, Parents as Teachers National Office

First Steps’ Home Visitation Impact:

- ✓ 58,770 families served since 2001
- ✓ 532,007 home visits since 2001

High/Scope Evaluation:

“Parents in First Steps’ home visitation programs saw **significant increases in their pre- and post-assessments**. Overall, **54%** of participants who scored at a low quality of parenting improved to a moderate quality of parenting, **44%** who had moderate parenting skills moved to high quality, and **11.9%** who had low quality parenting at pre-test increased their skills to high quality.”

First Steps Evaluation
High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2009



Child Care Quality Enhancement and Training

High/Scope Evaluation

Universally, child care centers and providers who participated in First Steps Quality Enhancement strategies showed significant increases in pre/post scores of assessed child care quality.

First Steps Evaluation
High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2009

2001 to 2012		Average per year
Providers served	3,856	350
Children enrolled in centers served by First Steps	167,198	15,200
Staff attending First Steps child care training	58,088	5,281
FY 2008 to FY 2012		Average per year
Child care quality assessments administered	1,488	298
Assessment improvement pre- to post (7 point scale)	-	10 % (.68)
Technical assistance visits to providers by First Steps	17,066	3,401
Technical assistance hours	35,071	7,014

Through this project, we have been able to provide more information to the parents. I have also seen my staff interact more with parents, helping them to understand their child's development. The ability to reward staff has been wonderful, and helps us to let them know how much they are appreciated.

Judy Layman, Director
Creative Learning Center
Edgefield, SC

South Carolina Child Development Education Pilot Program (CDEPP)

“Despite negative economic conditions, the General Assembly should continue funding CDEPP and similar pre-kindergarten programs and when funds are available, expand the program in both public schools and private centers statewide. The across year modest yet meaningful gains made by students in CDEPP provide evidence of the program’s success in better preparing young children who are at-risk for school failure for kindergarten.”

Education Oversight Committee
 Child Development Education Pilot Program (CDEPP):
 2009-10 Student and Classroom Assessment Report

First Steps’ CDEPP Impact:

- 3,441 children served in private CDEPP settings since 2006-07.
- Parental choice amongst approved providers
- 20% lower cost than public school 4K (\$4,690 vs. \$5,812 per child)
- Announced and unannounced monitoring

High Scope Evaluation:

“With only one year of data, [private] CDEPP children were not significantly different... on every SCRA scale compared to [public school] full-day 4K and non-4K children. They also had significantly lower speech impairment and learning disability diagnoses. This may demonstrate the potential for implementing public programs in private settings in a less expensive manner with similar results.” pp. 148-149

Further Steps to School Readiness: 2009 Evaluation of the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness Initiatives, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.

Countdown to Kindergarten

“Countdown is the greatest thing that’s ever happened to children in South Carolina. The relationships built over the summer between the teacher and families created a trust and support that has helped the children blossom in kindergarten. The only way to break the cycle is to model for parents how effectively they can work with their own children through reading and playing and learning with hands on materials.”

Gayle Troutman, Kindergarten Teacher, Burnside Elementary School

First Steps’ School Transition Impact:

✓ 7,600 families served since 2004

✓ 45,600 teacher visits since 2004

During the summer of 2012, Countdown to Kindergarten served 756 children at an estimated cost of \$311 per child.

High Scope Evaluation:

“Over 75% of home visitors reported making some or a great deal of change in their instruction, experiences, practices, activities on the first day of school and the methods by which they communicate with parents as a direct result of their CTK experience.” (p.93)

“All participants, whether home visitor or parents, report the significant impact this strategy has on professional practice, parent-teacher relationships, and parent participation in and child attitudes toward kindergarten.” (p.148)

2009 First Steps Evaluation
High/Scope Educational Research Foundation

QUICK FACTS – FIRST STEPS

4

Independent Audits of Performance – 2003, 2006, 2009 (LAC – 2012 pending).

14

Years in existence – 1999-2012

\$6.05 million

Federal BabyNet dollars administered annually through First Steps.

\$17.9 million

Current state appropriation.

\$21 million

Saved each year by reduced Grade 1 retention.

48%

Reduction in first grade retention – 2001-2010.

65.9%

Percentage of parents with low parenting skills who improved to moderate or high levels of skill after parent education home visits.

\$311

Costs per child for 6 summer home visits from kindergarten teachers.

1,939

Reduction in number of children repeating first grade – 2001 vs. 2010.

\$10,974

Average costs for one student to repeat first grade.

\$97 million

Private, philanthropic and other funds leveraged by First Steps partnerships since inception

75%

Percentage of teachers changing their instruction and method of communication with parents after Countdown to Kindergarten home visits.

35,071

Hours of technical assistance delivered to child care centers.

45,600

Visits by Countdown to Kindergarten teachers to students' homes.

58,088

Child care training attendees.

532,007

Parent home visits completed