

2026 Annual Accountability Report

First Steps to School Readiness

Agency Code: H620

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AGENCY NAME:	SC First Steps to School Readiness		
AGENCY CODE:	H620	SECTION:	1

AGENCY'S DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

South Carolina First Steps: Working Together So Every Child Reaches Their Highest Potential

In South Carolina, there are close to 300,000 children from birth through age five, and roughly 41% of them are eligible for Medicaid and First Steps services.[1] In fiscal year 2025-26 (FY26), First Steps marked its 27th year as the state's only dedicated, comprehensive early childhood initiative focused on getting children ready for success in school and life, continuing to serve as a national model for public-private partnership and leveraging federal, state, and local resources on behalf of young children, their families, and their communities.

Established in state law on June 28, 1999, First Steps operates as both a state agency and a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. First Steps local partnership boards bring together key early childhood stakeholders in every county to assess local needs and deliver services to young children and their families. First Steps 4K is a partnership between the agency and private, faith-based, and charter school providers across the state. At the state level, First Steps operates the Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC), the statutorily authorized structure for coordinating South Carolina's public investments in early childhood services.

FY26 was the first full year of implementation of the agency's new five-year strategic plan, adopted unanimously by the Board of Trustees on June 19, 2025, and effective July 1, 2025. The plan is organized around three supporting goals that build toward one overarching, five-year commitment: at least 75% of South Carolina's kindergartners will demonstrate readiness on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) by 2030. This report is a continuation of the strategic direction described in the FY25 Annual Accountability Report; the performance measures introduced last year as FY26 targets are reported below alongside actual FY26 results.

The table below summarizes FY26 results against the performance measure targets set in the FY25 Annual Accountability Report. Full performance measure detail, including data sources and calculation methods, appears in the Strategic Plan Results section of this report.

Goal	Measure	Base	Target	FY26 Actual	Result
1	Reduce chronic absenteeism in First Steps 4K classrooms	57%	47% or lower	41%	Exceeded
1	Conduct CLASS observations in First Steps 4K classrooms.	0	75	80	Exceeded
1	The utilization of all licensed, approved First Steps 4K slots by children present for at least 120 days will increase from 58% to 65%.	58%	65%	61.7%	Below target
2	Increase the percentage of eligible children served by evidence-based, high-intensity Local Partnership programs.	5%	8%	5.3%	Below target
2	Increase the number of local partnerships sharing administrative costs and cross-promoting services across contiguous counties.	0	15 counties	19 counties	Exceeded
3	Increase enrollment in publicly funded preschool by reducing the number of children on the 4K waitlist in November by at least 15%.	467	396 or fewer	341	Exceeded

Goal	Measure	Base	Target	FY26 Actual	Result
3	Increase the percent of kindergarteners, in poverty, who were served by CERDEP 4K, First Steps 4K, or Head Start.	46%	51%	51%	Met
3	Increase the number of families served by statewide home visiting programs.	5,389	5,900	5,940	Exceeded
4	Increase the percentage of children statewide demonstrating readiness on the KRA.	39%	46%	38%	Below target

In addition to these measures, First Steps launched, substantially with private funds, a three-year, multi-program Local Partnership pilot in Chesterfield, Darlington, and Marlboro Counties in FY26, designed to close early childhood service gaps and raise KRA outcomes; this pilot is described further under Goal Two below.

Kindergarten Readiness: Our North Star, and a Trend We Are Working to Reverse

The goal of the 2025-2030 First Steps strategic plan is for 75% of South Carolina children to enter kindergarten ready as measured by the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA). Internal First Steps research of more than 123,000 kindergarten students, pending publication, showed that KRA was predictive of third grade SC READY outcomes with approximately 75% of students who demonstrated readiness on the KRA going on to meet or exceed third-grade benchmarks in both math and English language arts; conversely, more than 75% of students who scored “Emerging Readiness” did not meet those benchmarks. The SC Department of Education has validated this analysis, and it is consistent with prior research from Ohio State University on the predictive validity of kindergarten readiness assessments[2].

Three consecutive years of KRA data show why the agency's new strategic plan places such urgency on quality: statewide readiness has declined from 41% in fall 2023 to 38% in fall 2025, and readiness among children who attended First Steps 4K has held flat at 28%, below the state average but above kids with no pre-school experience.

Preschool Experience	Fall 2023	Fall 2024	Fall 2025
First Steps 4K	29%	28%	28%
CERDEP 4K (within public schools)	39%	37%	36%
Head Start (federally funded)	25%	20%	23%
Other Public 4K (subsidy/local district)	33%	29%	29%
Private 4K	48%	39%	37%
Unknown / no formal preschool experience	24%	21%	21%
State Average (all kindergarteners)	**41%**	**39%**	**38%**

A Challenge We Are Confronting Directly

Against this backdrop, the agency's headline performance measure — the percentage of kindergartners statewide scoring at or above benchmark on the KRA — fell short of its FY26 target: 38% actual against a target of 46%, and below the FY25 base of 39%. First Steps is reporting this result plainly because it is the clearest evidence yet that incremental change to the existing 4K and Local Partnership models will not be sufficient to reach the 2030 goal of 75% readiness. It is also the direct rationale for the quality-focused reforms described below: a CLASS-driven Quality Improvement Plan, increased in-classroom coaching, a rebuilt training system, reducing chronic absenteeism, and a shift of compliance monitoring away from paperwork and toward classroom practice. First Steps expects these investments to show measurable effect on 4K classroom quality in FY27 and on KRA outcomes over the following two to three years, consistent with the multi-year timelines observed in comparable state initiatives (see Louisiana comparison below).

Goal One: Strengthen the First Steps 4K Model

First Steps 4K serves children through 315+ classrooms operated by private, non-profit, faith-based, and charter school providers statewide. Historically, the teacher-administered GOLD® assessment has been the agency's sole measure of 4K impact; GOLD data indicate that 85% of First Steps 4K students met or exceeded expectations in language, literacy, and math for both the 2024-25 and 2025-26 academic years. In FY26, First Steps supplemented GOLD with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), the most researched and validated observational measure of early childhood teaching quality, following the lead of states such as Louisiana and Virginia. Louisiana's statewide CLASS-driven quality initiative raised proficiency from 62% to 85% over four years, with the largest gains in childcare centers, which closed nearly 60% of the quality gap with Head Start over that period.[3]

FY26's results for this goal were mixed but trending toward the positive:

- Chronic absenteeism fell from 57% in spring 2025 to 41% by the end of FY26, following an attendance campaign launched in August 2025, exceeding the target. This result represents a 32% drop in the rate of chronically absent students compared to the same time in FY25.
- 80 First Steps 4K classrooms received CLASS observations in FY26 (target: 75), establishing individualized baselines that now drive coaching assignments.
- Utilization of licensed 4K slots by children enrolled at least 120 days rose to 61.7%, from a base of 58%, but did not reach the 65% target. Measured by tuition-fund utilization rather than slot count, the rate was higher, at 73%; First Steps attributes the gap between the two measures to private-pay students occupying some funded seats, and plans to invest in more strategic provider recruitment in high-need, lower-saturation areas in FY27 to grow both figures.

Upcoming Changes to the 4K Model

- Quality Improvement Plan (QIP): Beginning in fall 2026, all First Steps 4K classrooms will be observed annually by external, certified CLASS observers. Results will drive an individualized QIP for each classroom, replacing the generalized coaching checklist used in prior years.

- Tiered coaching: Coaching hours will be tiered by fall CLASS scores — up to 5 hours per month for the lowest-scoring sites, compared with 2 hours per month for the highest-scoring sites. This follows a summer 2025-time study showing coaches spent an average of 1.8 hours per month in each assigned classroom; through reduced administrative tasks, less travel time, and clearer expectations, that figure has already risen to 2.9 hours per month.
- Success Monitors: SCFS is contracting with 8-10 independent "Success Monitors" to conduct brief, unannounced site visits focused on contract compliance (teacher-child ratios, schedule adherence, curriculum use), freeing 4K coaches to focus on instructional quality rather than administrative compliance. This monitoring does not duplicate DSS licensing monitoring.
- Rebuilt training system: A Director of 4K Professional Development was hired to redesign training for the agency's 315+ 4K sites. In July 2026, First Steps returned to in-person regional trainings capped at 50 participants (down from groups as large as 1,000) and adopted a 12-month training calendar tailored to skill level, teacher turnover, and the CLASS transition. Feedback has been strong: following a month of 4K Administrator trainings, 95% of respondents rated the training "very helpful" or "helpful," and a weeklong CLASS institute for 4K coaches saw 90% of participants agree or strongly agree that the training connected clearly to their role and work.

Goal Two: Expand Access to Evidence-Based, High-Intensity Local Partnership Services

Local Partnerships in all 46 counties connect families to evidence-based home visiting, parenting education, and early care and education services. FY26 results:

- Local Partnerships in 19 counties now formally share administrative costs or cross-refer families across county lines, exceeding the goal of 15 and building on the FY25 legislatively mandated evaluation, which found that children served by Local Partnerships in FY20 achieved significantly higher KRA scores and lower chronic absenteeism than comparable non-participants.
- The percentage of eligible children served by evidence-based, high-intensity Local Partnership programs rose by 6.5% to 5.3% but short of the FY26 target of 8%. The gap reflects a deliberate programmatic shift: First Steps saw increases in two well-researched, higher-intensity programs — Parents as Teachers (PAT) and HIPPY — alongside decreases in lower-intensity programs that traditionally reach more families through less frequent contact. PAT and HIPPY carry higher unit costs and require more deliberate hiring, which can delay service delivery and reduce the number of children served in a given year even as engagement per family deepens.
- First Steps served 5,940 families through statewide home visiting programs, exceeding the 5,900 target, and increased the share of kindergartners in poverty served by CERDEP 4K, First Steps 4K, or Head Start to 51%, meeting the FY26 target.

Upcoming Changes to Local Partnerships

In FY26, First Steps launched a three-year, multi-program pilot in Chesterfield, Darlington, and Marlboro Counties — which are among the state's high-need, low-KRA counties, respectively 28.5%, 25.4%, and 23% of students demonstrating readiness during the 2025-26 KRA. The pilot is designed to

provide a continuum of Birth to five services, strengthen existing programs, and increase utilization rather than duplicate services already present in the pilot footprint. Core strategies include:

- Pediatric health: CareSouth, a federally qualified health center serving Darlington and Marlboro, will offer HealthySteps, an evidence-based, clinic-embedded pediatric approach providing universal screening and referral follow-through for children birth to age three; First Steps is assessing a second pediatric partner for Chesterfield County.
- Parents as Teachers (PAT) expansion: External evaluation shows PAT, delivered with fidelity and at the recommended dosage for over a year, increases demonstrated KRA readiness 1.59x and decreased chronic absenteeism by 45% compared to their non-PAT peers[4]. Internal research, pending publication, suggests that students who underwent First Steps PAT and First Steps 4K had a 4-9x increased likelihood that their peers to score at the demonstrating readiness level on the KRA. For FY27, First Steps is promoting the expansion of PAT programs from 28 to 30 counties and another home visiting program, HIPPY, from 16 to 23 counties.
- Publicly funded preschool quality: CLASS coaching, using the same model being deployed statewide in First Steps 4K, is being extended to Head Start and other publicly funded preschool classrooms within the pilot footprint.
- Connectivity and awareness: First Steps is piloting new promotion strategies for its First5SC.org portal, including in-person ambassador training, to increase utilization of all early childhood services within the pilot footprint.

Goal Three: Strengthen Statewide Collaboration and Alignment

First Steps continues to serve as the statutorily authorized coordinating structure for South Carolina's early childhood investments through the Early Childhood Advisory Council. FY26 results for this goal:

- The FY26 public school 4K waitlist fell to 341 children, down from a base of 467 and surpassing the target of 396 set in the FY25 Annual Accountability Report.
- 51% of kindergartners in poverty were served by CERDEP 4K, First Steps 4K, or Head Start in FY26, meeting the year's target and continuing steady progress toward the strategic plan's enrollment goals.

Leadership and Organizational Capacity

Ann Vandervliet, who joined First Steps as permanent Executive Director in October 2024 with more than 20 years of nonprofit and public-sector early childhood leadership experience, led the agency through its first full year of the new strategic plan. To build the executive capacity needed to execute that plan, First Steps added two senior leadership positions in FY26:

- **Chief of Strategy** leads execution of the five-year strategic plan and coordinates the South Carolina Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) data governance work group and the staff of the Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC). This role builds the agency's needs assessments, strategic plans, and impact-measurement frameworks; reports research findings

and strategic insights to the Board of Trustees and General Assembly; leads ECIDS data governance, partnerships, and sustainability planning; and oversees the operational management and continuous improvement of the First5SC.org portal. The position supervises the Director of Research & Evaluation and their staff, the Data Systems Manager, the First Five Program manager and staff, and the Director of Innovation.

- **Chief of Early Learning:** a strategic leader responsible for measurable improvement in school readiness assessment scores and continuous quality improvement across all publicly funded four-year-old classrooms in South Carolina's mixed-delivery system, ensuring close collaboration between First Steps and the SC Department of Education. The Chief leads the strategy, performance, and accountability of First Steps 4K, driving data-informed decision-making through rigorous performance standards, comprehensive program audits, and evidence-based program design, implementation, and continuous improvement. The role manages resource allocation and provider performance to expand access and improve program quality, advances workforce development through strategic partnerships, and leads evaluations that translate data into actionable policy and advocacy insights.

These two roles give First Steps dedicated executive ownership of strategic execution/data infrastructure and of 4K quality/workforce, respectively — both direct outgrowths of the priorities set in the new strategic plan and the KRA challenge described above.

FY26 Initiatives and Infrastructure Investments

Several developments this year reflect the agency's broader commitment, first articulated in the FY25 Annual Accountability Report, to strengthen First Steps as a fiscal steward alongside its programmatic mission: “we are refining fiscal and operational policies, program guidelines, and documenting our robust processes and procedures related to data management.” The 4K transitions described under Goal One (CLASS observation, tiered coaching, Success Monitors, and the rebuilt training system) are the clearest example of this commitment applied to program quality; the developments below show it applied to the agency's partnerships, policies, technology, and local partnership operations.

Deepening the Partnership with the SC Department of Education

On February 3, 2026, First Steps, in partnership with the SC Department of Education and the SC Department of Employment and Workforce, hosted “Early Advantage: Foundations for South Carolina’s Economic Vitality” at the Pastides Alumni Center in Columbia. Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond President and CEO Tom Barkin headlined a discussion, moderated alongside State Superintendent of Education Ellen Weaver, research economist Dr. Joseph Von Nessen, and Contec, Inc. founder and CEO Jack McBride, on the connection between early childhood strategy, K-12 outcomes, and workforce readiness. Attendees included members of the SC General Assembly, the Governor’s Office, BMW, SEW-EURODRIVE, Milliken, and the SC Departments of Employment and Workforce and Education. This event, together with the FY26 addition of the Chief of Early Learning role (see Leadership and Organizational Capacity above), reflects First Steps’ continued investment in close collaboration with SCDE on First Steps 4K strategy, performance, and accountability.

Building Foundational Fiscal and Program Policies

Consistent with the commitment set out in the FY25 Annual Accountability Report, First Steps used FY26 to convert that commitment into concrete policy and infrastructure. Chief among these is the Local Partnership Fiscal and Operational Guidelines, established to consolidate the agency's existing policies into a single framework, adopt non-profit and government grants management best practices, and protect public funding by closing gaps that had previously allowed inconsistent local practices. The Guidelines were developed with direct input from Local Partnership Executive Directors through a feedback survey, and they now govern areas including local grant applications, evidence-based program funding requirements, and executive compensation.

On executive compensation specifically, the Guidelines implement the requirements of Act 81, standardizing how Local Partnership Executive Director compensation is set and reviewed across all 46 counties. The intent is to ensure publicly funded salaries reflect fair market value for the level of responsibility, market size, and credentials involved, without exceeding comparable state salaries. Local Partnerships submit compensation requests for new Executive Directors as they arise and for increases on a biannual cycle; when a Local Partnership's executive committee acts on compensation on behalf of its full board, meeting minutes are distributed within 48 hours to support transparency. This policy build-out, together with the SAGE and CaseWorthy technology transitions described below, represents the practical foundation the agency committed to establishing for fiscal stewardship and program accountability.

This fiscal stewardship extends agency-wide: as reported in First Steps' most recent IRS Form 990, administrative costs represent 3.6% of total budget, well below the national nonprofit sector average.

Modernizing Technology: Financial Management and Data Systems

First Steps completed two major technology transitions in FY26, each procured on an emergency basis to move critical infrastructure into place quickly, and each representing a substantial undertaking for the agency and its 46 Local Partnerships. Together, they establish the technology foundation for more effective operations and service delivery going forward.

- **SAGE (financial management):** First Steps replaced Blackbaud with SAGE to streamline financial transactions and improve user experience, budgeting, and reporting capabilities for Local Partnerships. The transition began in July 2025, with the system configured and rolled out to Local Partnership Executive Directors, finance staff, and boards through FY26 via online live-instructor sessions, an in-person ADP Workforce Now payroll and timekeeping demonstration, and hands-on practice labs and virtual studio sessions running through April 2026, all archived on the agency's Learning Management System. First Steps delivered 16 hours of in-person SAGE training around the state plus 17 hours virtually, with 75% of survey respondents indicating the training “met” or “strongly met” their learning needs; feedback requesting more hands-on practice directly informed the design of the subsequent CaseWorthy training schedule.
- **CaseWorthy (data management):** after months of research and input from stakeholders, First Steps selected CaseWorthy as its new, consolidated data management system, replacing two separate legacy systems that had tracked Local Partnership and First Steps 4K data independently. CaseWorthy will enroll and track service data for both Local Partnership and 4K

recipients, validate and clean data for entry into the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS), and enable real-time tracking of program retention — an important capability given the connection between program dosage and outcomes. The agency's prior data system will be decommissioned by the Office of Revenue and Fiscal Affairs in September 2026. User training for CaseWorthy totaled 21 hours of regional in-person training and saw over 90% of respondents indicate the training met their needs. Participants in CaseWorthy training also received individual logins to a training environment to continue practicing after each session. By end of August, both 4K and LP programs have been successfully launched, and users are now actively using CaseWorthy.

Investing in Innovation and Expanding Multi-County Partnership

First Steps hired a Director of Innovation in FY26 to ensure timely implementation of the agency's comprehensive pilot studies portfolio with the goal of increasing utilization rates for all early childhood services. This investment is paired with continued READY grant funding (Resources for Early Acceleration and Development in Youth) that supports innovation piloting across multiple counties, including $686,200 committed over two years to fund program innovations in Lee, Pickens, and York counties through the Carolina Collaborative for Early Childhood Innovation. First Steps also received a $2.25 million grant from the Leon Levine Foundation to launch the First Five Pee Dee pilot, the relationship-based, birth-to-five continuum of services described under Goal Two, spanning Chesterfield, Darlington, and Marlboro Counties.

Multi-county collaboration also grew directly among Local Partnerships: the number of counties in which Local Partnerships formally share administrative costs or cross-refer families rose from a base of 0 to 19 in FY26, exceeding the target of 15 (see FY26 Performance Measure Summary above). READY funds themselves span dozens of counties each year across four grant categories — childcare technical assistance, sustaining effective programs, infrastructure and capacity building, and innovation piloting — reinforcing the strategic plan's emphasis on regional collaboration and administrative efficiency.

Fiscal and Operational Challenges at the Local Level

Operating fiscal and program functions consistently across 46 independently governed Local Partnerships has long been a structural challenge for the agency, and it is the direct rationale behind the fiscal and operational policy work described above. The SAGE and CaseWorthy transitions are First Steps' primary structural response, designed to replace fragmented, partnership-specific processes with a single, agency-wide standard for financial reporting, invoicing, and data management.

Beyond these structural gaps, the agency's existing oversight architecture — which includes independent annual financial statement audits of all 46 Local Partnerships, contract compliance monitoring, and the new Local Partnership Fiscal and Operational Guidelines — identified fiscal and compliance concerns at a small number of Local Partnerships in FY26. These matters are being actively addressed through the agency's established corrective action and monitoring processes.

Looking Ahead to FY27

First Steps enters FY27 with a clear, data-driven case for the reforms now underway. The FY26 KRA result underscores that broader access to 4K and Local Partnership services, on its own, has not been sufficient to move statewide readiness — which is why FY27 priorities center on classroom quality (full statewide CLASS observation and QIP implementation), attendance, and the tri-county pilot's early evidence on what a fully coordinated local system can achieve. The newly finalized FY26 results for high-intensity Local Partnership reach and the 4K waitlist will also inform FY27 planning, including continued PAT and HIPPY staffing investment and continued 4K provider recruitment in high-need, low-saturation areas. First Steps will report full FY27 results in next year's Annual Accountability Report.

Risk Assessment and Mitigation Strategies

A. Continue to standardize fiscal and operational accountability across 46 independently governed Local Partnerships

- **Potential Most Negative Impact if this goal is not accomplished:** Without consistent fiscal and operational standards applied across all 46 Local Partnerships, public funds are at greater risk of inconsistent or ineffective use at the local level, exposing the state to compliance and reputational risk and undermining public trust in the First Steps model statewide.
- **Outside Help and Options for the General Assembly:** (1) Continued support for the technology infrastructure (SAGE and CaseWorthy) that centralizes financial and program reporting across all 46 Local Partnerships; (2) sustained funding for the agency's monitoring and technical assistance capacity, including Success Monitors and regional program officers, that supports Local Partnership compliance; (3) legislative clarity, as needed, on enforcement mechanisms available to the agency when a Local Partnership's corrective action plan does not resolve an identified concern.

B. Sustain services amid continued federal funding volatility

- **Potential Most Negative Impact if this goal is not accomplished:** First Steps has now experienced two consecutive years of significant, sometimes abrupt, federal funding disruption: the FY24 AAR flagged the looming loss of ESSER III (via SCDE) and Preschool Development Grant Birth-Five (via DSS) funding, both of which ended in late 2024, and in April 2025 AmeriCorps Service grant funding ended immediately, disrupting the HIPPY home-visiting program mid-year. Lastly the FY19 Statewide Longitudinal Data System grant supporting ECIDS work expired in spring of 2026. Continued volatility in federal early childhood funding would reduce discretionary grant funding available to Local Partnerships, risking the loss of program staff and a reduction in the number of children and families served statewide.
- **Outside Help and Options for the General Assembly:** (1) Continued recurring and non-recurring state appropriations to help bridge gaps left by lost or discontinued federal funding, as provided for FY26; (2) support for First Steps' continued use of its public-private nonprofit status to secure philanthropic bridge funding (e.g., the Leon Levine Foundation's $2.25 million commitment to the First Five Pee Dee pilot) when federal sources are disrupted; (3) advance

notice or transition support, where possible, when federal grant programs supporting SC early childhood services are canceled, to reduce disruption to children and families already enrolled in services.

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[1] Data from American Community Survey 5-year Estimates. Eligible for First Steps services defined as children under age 6 living in households below 185% of the federal poverty level.

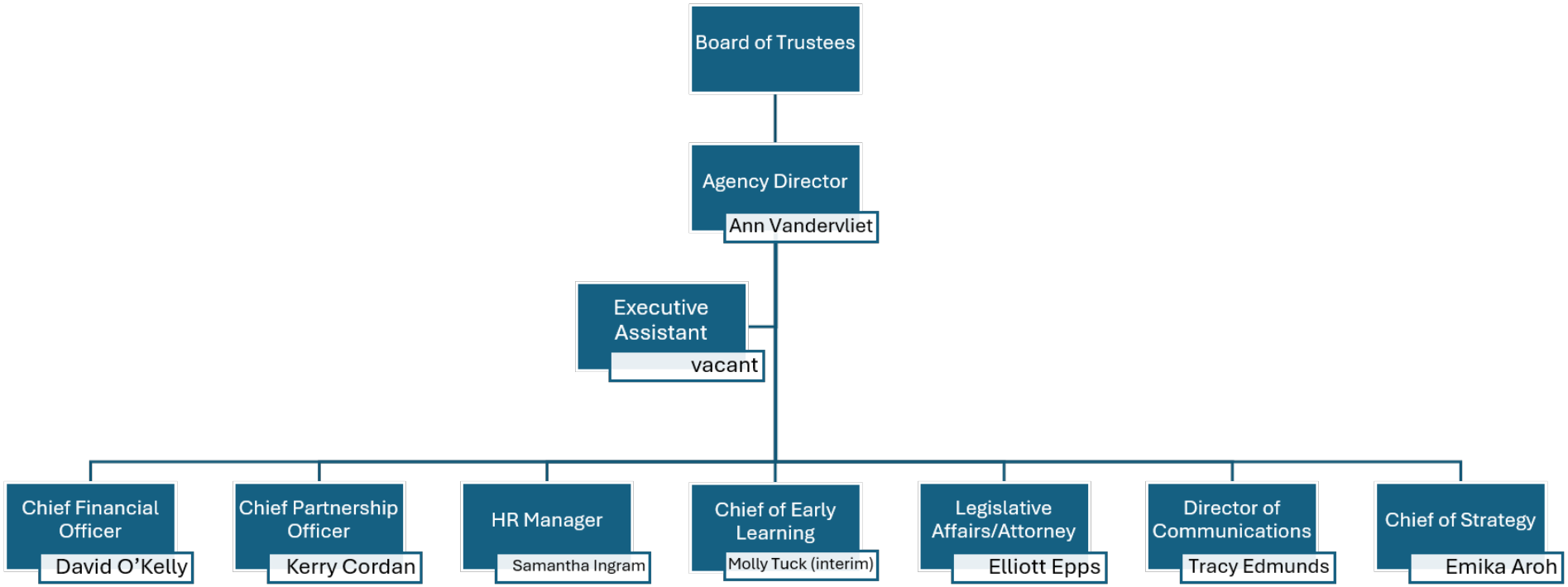
[2] Justice, L., Koury, A., & Logan, J. (2019). Ohio's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment: Does it forecast third grade reading success? (White Paper). Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy, The Ohio State University. https://crane.osu.edu/files/2020/01/Kindergarten-Readiness-Whitepaper_051619_SINGLES_WEB.pdf

[3] Bassok, Magouirk & Markowitz (2021), AERA, "Systemwide Quality Improvement in Early Childhood Education: Evidence from Louisiana"; Vitiello, Bassok, Hamre, Player & Williford (2018), Early Childhood Research Quarterly.

[4] Crowne, S., Gebhart, T., & Villegas, E. (2026). Evaluation of South Carolina First Steps Parents as Teachers FY 2020-2024. Child Trends. https://www.scfirststeps.org/media/g2iexp5r/sc-first-steps-local-partnership-evaluation-report.pdf

AGENCY NAME:	SC First Steps to School Readiness		
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AGENCY ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



2026

Reorganization and Compliance

as submitted for the Accountability Report by:

H620 - SC FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS

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First Name	Last Name	Role/Title	Email Address	Phone
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Agency Mission	Adopted in:	2019

South Carolina First Steps works collaboratively to ensure that all children start school ready to reach their highest potential with engaged support from their parents, caregivers, and communities.

Agency Vision	Adopted in:	2019

We will be successful when all children reach their highest potential.

Recommendations for reorganization requiring legislative change:

None

Agency intentions for other major reorganization to divisions, departments, or programs to allow the agency to operate more effectively and efficiently in the succeeding fiscal year:

To strengthen strategic impact across the organization, a new executive level leadership was created to head a new "Strategic Impact" team. This new team is responsible for research and evaluation work, tracking progress of the agency's strategic plan, developing and implementing pilot studies to improve program effectiveness, implementing and administrating a modern case management system to replace two legacy systems, and coordinating the work of the ECIDS data governance workgroup. The agency also created another executive l This approach has led to an alignment of effort, increased utilization of specific skillsets, and expert-level leadership.

Significant events related to the agency that occurred in FY2026				
Description of Event	**Start**	**End**	**Agency Measures Impacted**	**Other Impacts**
No significant events affected performance measures.				

Is the agency in compliance with S.C. Code Ann. § 2-1-220, which requires submission of certain reports to the Legislative Services Agency for publication online and the State Library? (See also S.C. Code Ann. § 60-2-20).	Yes
Reason agency is out of compliance: (if applicable)	
Is the agency in compliance with various requirements to transfer its records, including electronic ones, to the Department of Archives and History? See the Public Records Act (S.C. Code Ann. § 30-1-10 through 30-1-180) and the South Carolina Uniform Electronic Transactions Act (S.C. Code Ann. § 26-6-10 through 26-10-210).	Yes
Does the law allow the agency to promulgate regulations?	Yes
Law number(s) which gives the agency the authority to promulgate regulations:	**Section 59-152-90**
Has the agency promulgated any regulations?	No
Is the agency in compliance with S.C. Code Ann. § 1-23-120 (J), which requires an agency to conduct a formal review of its regulations every five years?	Yes

(End of Reorganization and Compliance Section)

FY2026

Strategic Plan Results

as submitted for the Accountability Report by:

H620 - SC FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS

Goal 1 Strengthen the First Steps 4K model

Goal 2 Increase access and utilization of programs that are both evidence-based and high-intensity through First Steps Local Partnerships

Goal 3 Strengthen collaboration and alignment between all organizations serving children birth to age five

Goal 4 At least 75% of South Carolina's children are ready for kindergarten by 2030.

Perf. Measure Number	Description	Base	Target	Actual	Value Type	Desired Outcome	Time Applicable	Calculation Method	Data Source	Data Location	Stakeholder Need Satisfied	Primary Stakeholder	State Funded Program Number Responsible	Notes
1.1	**Reduce chronic absenteeism.**									**State Objective:**	**Education, Training, and Human Development**			
1.1.1	Reduce the average rate of chronic absenteeism in First Steps 4K classrooms from 57% to 47%.	57%	47%	41%	Percent	Equal to or less than	Other	Numerator: The percent of First Steps 4K students that are absent for greater than or equal to 10% of their time enrolled in 4K. Denominator: The total number of First Steps 4K students.	ChildPlus	ChildPlus is licensed by First Steps - all data are owned by First Steps	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend First Steps 4K.	Children eligible for First Steps 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	achieved and exceeded target
1.2	**Strengthen the consistency of high-quality teacher-child interactions, classroom environment and instructional support.**									**State Objective:**	**Education, Training, and Human Development**			
1.2.1	Conduct 75 CLASS observations in 75 First Steps 4K classrooms.	0	75	80	Count	Equal to or greater than	Other	Number of classrooms that record at least one pre- and post- score on the CLASS assessment during the academic year.	ChildPlus	ChildPlus is licensed by First Steps - all data are owned by First Steps	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend First Steps 4K.	Children eligible for First Steps 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	achieved and exceeded target
1.3	**Increase utilization of First Steps 4K.**									**State Objective:**	**Education, Training, and Human Development**			
1.3.1	The utilization of all licensed, approved First Steps 4K slots by children present for at least 120 days will increase from 58% to 65%.	58%	65%	61.70%	Percent	Equal to or greater than	Other	Numerator: The number of students present for at least 120 days. Denominator: The total number of slots funded.	ChildPlus	ChildPlus is licensed by First Steps - all data are owned by First Steps	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend First Steps 4K.	Children eligible for First Steps 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	While we saw a slight increase in overall utilization of 4K slots, in monitoring this metric, we also recognized the need to take into account utilization of tuition funds when forecasting slot utilization. When we look at financial utilization of tuition funding, we achieved 73% utilization. The difference between these two statistics exists because many of the 4K classrooms have some private pay students utilizing seats. In the upcoming fiscal year, we plan to invest in a more strategic recruitment of providers in high-need areas with lower 4K saturation to grow both slot and tuition utilization.
2.1	**Strengthen local and regional collaboration to achieve administrative efficiencies and collectively serve more children and families.**									**State Objective:**	**Healthy and Safe Families**			

Perf. Measure Number	Description	Base	Target	Actual	Value Type	Desired Outcome	Time Applicable	Calculation Method	Data Source	Data Location	Stakeholder Need Satisfied	Primary Stakeholder	State Funded Program Number Responsible	Notes
2.1.1	Increase the percentage of eligible children served by evidence-based, high-intensity Local Partnership programs by at least 3% to 20% in 2030.	5.00%	8%	5.30%	Percent	Equal to or greater than	State Fiscal Year	Numerator: Estimated number of children served directly by evidence-based, high-intensity Local Partnership programs; Denominator: Children under age 5 living at or below the federal poverty level from the American Community Survey.	First Steps Data Collection System	First Steps Data Collection System is owned by First Steps and housed/maintained by the Office of Revenue and Fiscal Affairs	Child outcomes will improve by being directly served by First Steps Local Partnerships.	Children served by high intensity programs through First Steps Local Partnerships.	0100.000000.000; 0502.051000X000; 0502.150100.000; 0501.050500X000; 0502.050100.000; 9500.050000.000	Slight increase in children served in Evidence-Based and High Intensity programs. We saw increases in both PAT and HIPPY, two well-researched, impactful programs, but saw decreases in other less intense programs that traditionally serve more children through less frequent interactions across the year. This shift in programmatic focus moves us towards more engagement over longer periods of time with families that yield more long term impact. PAT and HIPPY, specifically, have higher unit costs and require careful consideration when hiring that may delay service delivery at the start of the program year, which results in less children being served in one year.
2.1.2	Increase the number of local partnerships sharing administrative costs and cross promoting services across contiguous counties to at least 15 counties.	0	15	18	Count	Equal to or greater than	State Fiscal Year	The number of Local Partnership counties that formally entered a collaborative partnership that resulted in shared administrative costs and/or referrals to neighboring services.	First Steps Data Collection System	First Steps Data Collection System is owned by First Steps and housed/maintained by the Office of Revenue and Fiscal Affairs	Child outcomes will improve by being directly served by state-funded programs.	Children served by high intensity programs through First Steps 4K and Local Partnerships.	0100.000000.000; 0502.051000X000; 0502.150100.000; 0501.050500X000; 0502.050100.000; 9500.050000.000	achieved and exceeded target
3.1	**Increase enrollment in publicly funded preschool.**										**State Objective:**	**Government and Citizens**		
3.1.1	Reduce the number of children on the 4K waitlist in November by at least 15%.	467	396	341	Count	Equal to or less than	Other	Provided by the Education Oversight Committee KRA Report	Education Oversight Committee's State-Funded Full-Day 4K Report	Education Oversight Committee's State-Funded Full-Day 4K Report	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend 4K.	Children eligible for 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	achieved and exceeded target
3.1.2	Increase the percent of kindergarteners, in poverty, who were served by CERDEP 4K, First Steps 4K, or Head Start by 5%	46%	51%	51%	Percent	Equal to or greater than	Other	Provided by the Education Oversight Committee KRA Report	Education Oversight Committee's State-Funded Full-Day 4K Report	Education Oversight Committee's State-Funded Full-Day 4K Report	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend 4K.	Children eligible for 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	achieved target
3.2	**Increase availability for and utilization of home visiting programs for families with children age 5 and under.**										**State Objective:**	**Government and Citizens**		
3.2.1	Increase the number of families served by statewide home visiting programs to 5,900.	5,389	5,900	5,940	Count	Equal to or greater than	Other	Provided by the National Home Visiting Resource Center's 2024 Yearbook	National Home Visiting Resource Center's 2024 Yearbook	https://nhvrc.org/state_profile/south-carolina-2025/	Child outcomes will improve by being directly served by state-funded programs.	All children in South Carolina.	0100.000000.000; 0502.051000X000; 0502.150100.000; 0501.050500X000; 0502.050100.000; 9500.050000.000	achieved and exceeded target
4.1	**Increase the percentage of children demonstrating readiness on the KRA by 47% over the next five years.**										**State Objective:**	**Education, Training, and Human Development**		
4.1.1	The percentage of students in kindergarten who score at or above benchmarked on the KRA will increase by 7%.	39%	46%	38%	Percent	Equal to or greater than	Other	Provided by the Education Oversight Committee KRA Report	Education Oversight Committee KRA Report	Education Oversight Committee KRA Report	All children should arrive at kindergarten ready to learn.	All children in South Carolina.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.051000X000; 0502.150100.000; 0501.050500X000; 0502.050100.000; 9500.050000.000	

Strategic Plan Development

as submitted for the Accountability Report by:

FY2027

H620 - SC FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS

Goal 1 Strengthen the First Steps 4K model

Goal 2 Increase access and utilization of programs that are both evidence-based and high-intensity through First Steps Local Partnerships

Goal 3 Strengthen collaboration and alignment between all organizations serving children birth to age five

Goal 4 At least 75% of South Carolina's children are ready for kindergarten by 2030.

Perf. Measure Number	Description	Base	Target	Value Type	Desired Outcome	Time Applicable	Calculation Method	Data Source	Data Location	Stakeholder Need Satisfied	Primary Stakeholder	State Funded Program Number Responsible	Notes
1.1	**Reduce chronic absenteeism.**									**State Objective: Education, Training, and Human Development**			
1.1.1	Reduce the average rate of chronic absenteeism in First Steps 4K classrooms by at least 18%	41%	34%	Percent	Equal to or less than	Other	Numerator: The percent of First Steps 4K students that are absent for greater than or equal to 10% of their time enrolled in 4K. Denominator: The total number of First Steps 4K students.	CaseWorthy	CaseWorthy is licensed by First Steps - all data are owned by First Steps	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend First Steps 4K.	Children eligible for First Steps 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	
1.2	**Strengthen the consistency of high-quality teacher-child interactions, classroom environment and instructional support.**									**State Objective: Education, Training, and Human Development**			
1.2.1	Conduct CLASS observations in most First Steps 4K classrooms.	80	300	Count	Equal to or greater than	Other	Number of classrooms that record at least one pre- and post- score on the CLASS assessment during the academic year.	CaseWorthy	CaseWorthy is licensed by First Steps - all data are owned by First Steps	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend First Steps 4K.	Children eligible for First Steps 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	
1.3	**Increase utilization of First Steps 4K.**									**State Objective: Education, Training, and Human Development**			
1.3.1	The utilization of all licensed, approved First Steps 4K slots by children present for at least 120 days will increase to 65%.	61%	65%	Percent	Equal to or greater than	Other	Numerator: The number of students present for at least 120 days. Denominator: The total number of slots funded.	CaseWorthy	CaseWorthy is licensed by First Steps - all data are owned by First Steps	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend First Steps 4K.	Children eligible for First Steps 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	

Perf. Measure Number	Description	Base	Target	Value Type	Desired Outcome	Time Applicable	Calculation Method	Data Source	Data Location	Stakeholder Need Satisfied	Primary Stakeholder	State Funded Program Number Responsible	Notes
1.3.2	Increase student enrollment in First Steps 4K.	71%	73%	Percent	Equal to or greater than	State Fiscal Year	Numerator: allocated tuition funds spent across all 4K types; Denominator: Total allocation for 4K tuition from General Assembly	SAGE	SAGE is licensed by First Steps - all data are owned by First Steps	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend First Steps 4K.	Children eligible for First Steps 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	
2.1	**Strengthen local and regional collaboration to achieve administrative efficiencies and collectively serve more children and families.**								**State Objective:**	**Healthy and Safe Families**			
2.1.1	Increase the percentage of eligible children served by evidence-based, high-intensity Local Partnership programs each year.	5.20%	6%	Percent	Equal to or greater than	State Fiscal Year	Numerator: Estimated number of children served directly by evidence-based, high-intensity Local Partnership programs; Denominator: Children under age 5 living at or below 185% of the federal poverty level from the American Community Survey.	CaseWorthy	CaseWorthy is licensed by First Steps - all data are owned by First Steps	Child outcomes will improve by being directly served by First Steps Local Partnerships.	Children served by high intensity programs through First Steps Local Partnerships.	0100.000000.000; 0502.051000X000; 0502.150100.000; 0501.050500X000; 0502.050100.000; 9500.050000.000	
2.1.2	Increase the number of local partnerships sharing administrative costs and cross promoting services across contiguous counties.	18	20	Count	Equal to or greater than	State Fiscal Year	The number of Local Partnership counties that formally entered a collaborative partnership that resulted in shared administrative costs and/or referrals to neighboring services.	CaseWorthy	CaseWorthy is licensed by First Steps - all data are owned by First Steps	Child outcomes will improve by being directly served by state-funded programs.	Children served by high intensity programs through First Steps 4K and Local Partnerships.	0100.000000.000; 0502.051000X000; 0502.150100.000; 0501.050500X000; 0502.050100.000; 9500.050000.000	
3.1	**Increase enrollment in publicly funded preschool.**								**State Objective:**	**Government and Citizens**			

Perf. Measure Number	Description	Base	Target	Value Type	Desired Outcome	Time Applicable	Calculation Method	Data Source	Data Location	Stakeholder Need Satisfied	Primary Stakeholder	State Funded Program Number Responsible	Notes
3.1.1	Reduce the number of children on the public school 4K waitlist, throughout the year, by at least 15%.	400	340	Count	Equal to or less than	Other	Match the names of children and district on the waitlist to those enrolled in First Steps 4K program.	CaseWorthy	CaseWorthy is licensed by First Steps - all data are owned by First Steps	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend 4K.	Children eligible for 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	
3.1.2	Increase the percent of kindergarteners, in poverty, who were served by CERDEP 4K, First Steps 4K, or Head Start by 2 percentage points.	51%	53%	Percent	Equal to or greater than	Other	Provided by the Education Oversight Committee KRA Report	Education Oversight Committee's State-Funded Full-Day 4K Report	Education Oversight Committee's State-Funded Full-Day 4K Report	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend 4K.	Children eligible for 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	
3.2	**Increase availability for and utilization of home visiting programs for families with children age 5 and under.**								**State Objective:**	**Government and Citizens**			
3.2.1	Increase the number of families served by statewide home visiting programs to 6,200.	5,940	6,200	Count	Equal to or greater than	Other	Provided by the National Home Visiting Resource Center's 2024 Yearbook	National Home Visiting Resource Center's 2024 Yearbook	https://nhvrc.org/state_profile/south-carolina-2025/	Child outcomes will improve by being directly served by state-funded programs.	All children in South Carolina.	0100.000000.000; 0502.051000X000; 0502.150100.000; 0501.050500X000; 0502.050100.000; 9500.050000.000	
4.1	**Increase the percentage of children demonstrating readiness on the KRA by 47% over the next five years.**								**State Objective:**	**Education, Training, and Human Development**			
4.1.1	The percentage of students in kindergarten who score at or above benchmarked on the KRA will increase by two percentage points.	38%	40%	Percent	Equal to or greater than	Other	Provided by the Education Oversight Committee KRA Report	Education Oversight Committee KRA Report	Education Oversight Committee KRA Report	All children should arrive at kindergarten ready to learn.	All children in South Carolina.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.051000X000; 0502.150100.000; 0501.050500X000; 0502.050100.000; 9500.050000.000	
4.1.2	The percentage of SCFS 4K students in kindergarten who score at or above benchmarked on the KRA will increase year over year.	28%	29%	Percent	Equal to or greater than	Other	Provided by the Education Oversight Committee KRA Report	Education Oversight Committee's State-Funded Full-Day 4K Report	Education Oversight Committee's State-Funded Full-Day 4K Report	Child outcomes will improve when they enroll in and attend 4K.	Children eligible for 4K.	0100.000000.000; 0504.100100.000; 0502.150100.000; 9500.050000.000	

Budget Data

2026

as submitted for the Accountability Report by:

H620 - SC FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS

State Funded Program No.	State Funded Program Title	Description of State Funded Program	(Actual) General	(Actual) Other	(Actual) Federal	(Actual) Total	(Projected) General	(Projected) Other	(Projected) Federal	(Projected) Total
0100.000000.000	First Steps To Sch Readiness	Administration	$ 185,582.00	$ 1,756,556.00	$ -	$ 1,942,138.00	$ 146,872.00	$ 1,910,706.00	$ -	$ 2,057,578.00
0504.100100.000	CDEPP - Private	FULL DAY 4K (CERDEP)	$ 11,167,244.00	$ 26,771,903.00	$ -	$ 37,939,147.00	$ 13,015,423.00	$ 31,202,653.00	$ -	$ 44,218,076.00
0502.051000X000	READY	READY Program - General	$ 3,000,000.00	$ -	$ -	$ 3,000,000.00	$ 3,000,000.00	$ -	$ -	$ 3,000,000.00
0502.150100.000	First Steps to School Readiness	First Steps and ECAC	$ 560,900.00	$ 314,780.00	$ 313,486.00	$ 1,189,166.00	$ 673,080.00	$ 377,736.00	$ 156,743.00	$ 1,207,559.00
0501.050500X000	County Partnerships	Local Partnership FORMULA FUNDING	$ -	$ 14,435,228.00	$ -	$ 14,435,228.00	$ -	$ 15,435,228.00	$ -	$ 15,435,228.00
0502.050100.000	LOCAL FIRST STEPS	Local First Steps	$ 3,229,947.00	$ 4,009,075.00	$ 1,855,566.00	$ 9,094,588.00	$ 4,690,916.00	$ 8,009,075.00	$ 1,282,000.00	$ 13,981,991.00
0504.100100.000	CDEPP	EIA Funds for 4K	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -		$ -	$ -
9838.010000X000	LP INNOVATION INVESTMENTS	LP INNOVATION INVESTMENTS	$ 2,440,618.00	$ -	$ -	$ 2,440,618.00	$ 59,382.00	$ 5,000,000.00	$ -	$ 5,059,382.00
9500.050000.000	STATE EMPLOYER CONTR	STATE EMPLOYER CONTR	$ 752,043.00	$ 1,719,925.00	$ 47,849.00	$ 2,519,817.00	$ 910,000.00	$ 2,452,860.00	$ 170,000.00	$ 3,532,860.00
			$ 21,336,334.00	$ 49,007,467.00	$ 2,216,901.00	$ 72,560,702.00	$ 22,495,673.00	$ 64,388,258.00	$ 1,608,743.00	$ 88,492,674.00

2026

Legal Data

as submitted for the Accountability Report by:

H620 - SC FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS

Law number	Jurisdiction	Type	Description	Purpose the law serves:	Notes:	Changes made during FY2026
§59-152-10 through §59-152-160	State	Statute	The South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness is a comprehensive, results-oriented initiative for improving early childhood development by providing, through local partnerships, public and private funds, and support for high-quality early childhood development and education services for children by providing support for their families' efforts toward enabling their children to reach school ready to succeed. The organization was created as a tax exempt organization under section 501 (c)(3) with Act 99 in 1999. Statute was updated in 2014 and again in 2018 with several changes. Modifications included a long range plan requirement, changes to the membership of the Board of Trustees, and direction in relation to allocation funding for local partnerships and others. Statute allows all funds received by SC First Steps to carry forward if unspent.	Requires a service		No Change
§59-156-110	State	Statute	Statute spells out the responsibilities for the State Department of Education and SC First Steps to School Readiness for the Child Early Reading Development and Education Program, or the states 4 year old kindergarten program. The statute restates much of the content in provisos included in the SFY 2015 appropriations act. Statute was updated in 2014 and in 2018.	Requires a service	High-quality early childhood development and education service	No Change

Law number	Jurisdiction	Type	Description	Purpose the law serves:	Notes:	Changes made during FY2026
§63-11-1710 thru 1750	State	Statute	Statute creates the First Steps to School Readiness Board of Trustees whose purpose is to oversee the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness initiative, a broad range of innovative early childhood development and education, family support, health services, and prevention efforts to meet critical needs of South Carolina's children through the awarding of grants to partnerships at the county level as provided for in Section 59-152-90. Statute was created in Act 361 in 2008. Act also creates the SC Early Childhood Advisory Council. This council is formed to fulfil the responsibilities under 42 U.S.C. Section 9837b(b)(1)(D)(i) of the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007. Act was modified in 2014 and 2018 with a number of modifications. In 2014 the changes include the addition of the Early Childhood Advisory Council responsibilities and additional BabyNet responsibilities. In 2018, additional reporting requirements and a 7 year reauthorization of the agency. BabyNet was moved to DHHS per Executive Order effective June 30, 2017. In 2023, the act was modified to include additional members on the Council and update the Council's responsibilities, adding two additional duties.	Requires a service		No Change
PL 110-134	Federal	Statute	Federal Head Start Act, governing operations of Early Head Start Program	Requires a service	High-quality early childhood development and education service	No Change
Proviso 1A.44 (SDE-EIA: CDEPP Student Information and Reporting)	State	FY25-26 Proviso	State Department of Education and SC First Steps to School Readiness required to acquire unique student numbers and report that. SDE and First Steps required to provide information to Education Oversight Committee.	Report our agency must/may provide		Reenacted
Proviso 1A.9	State	FY25-26 Proviso	Proviso directs payment of teacher supply funds to individuals, including teachers serving in private First Steps 4K classrooms.	Funding agency deliverable(s)	Reimbursement rate was increased.	Amended
Proviso 1A.9	State	FY22-23 Proviso	Proviso directs payment of teacher supply funds to individuals, including teachers serving in private First Steps 4K classrooms.	Distribute funding to another entity		No Change

Law number	Jurisdiction	Type	Description	Purpose the law serves:	Notes:	Changes made during FY2026
Provisos 1.47 and 1A.26 (SDE: Full Day 4K)	State	FY25-26 Proviso	Companion provisos (General Fund and EIA) set the funding, payment guidance, and geographical parameters of the SC Early Reading and Child Development Program per Act 284 which included Read to Succeed. Requires payments to the EOC annually. Proviso allows SC First Steps to deliver CERDEP 4K program in military child care centers monitored by the US Department of Defense. Proviso authorizes First Steps to create a pilot program with up to $2,000,000 for higher reimbursement rates, and up to $100,000 through which grants of up to $30,000 may be awarded for the purpose of creating new 4K classroom enrollment capacity in underserved communities. In addition, if funding is available, funds may be used to extend the day up to 8 1/2 hours, and the year up to 220 days. $1 million can be used for Public Private Partnerships that serve multi counties and multi districts for building renovations and designs to increase student enrollment. Identifies specific reports that have to be delivered related to the activities specified in the proviso.	Requires a service	Previously Provisos 1.48 and 1A.26: FY 23-24. Changes include an expansion of the scope for EOC's annual evaluation of CERDEP, directing the Dept. of Education to provide additional data related to four-years-old served.	Amended
Provisos 1.57 and 1A.29 (SDE: Full Day 4K)	State	FY21 Proviso	Companion provisos (General Fund and EIA) set the funding and geographical parameters of the SC Early Reading and Child Development Program per Act 284 which included Read to Succeed.	Requires a manner of delivery	High-quality early childhood development and education service	No Change
Title 12-6-5060	State	Statute	Creates tax check off donation to the First Steps to School Readiness Fund.	Funding agency deliverable(s)		No Change
Proviso 1.84 (SDE: READY Program)	State	FY25-26 Proviso	Creates new grant program for SC First Steps and establishes that the funds appropriated will be awarded to the Local Partnerships through a competitive and targeted grants process. Establishes the priorities and restricts amount for each partnership and the amount used by SC First Steps to administer, monitor and evaluate the program. It also requires an annual report on the state's investment in early learning and development.	Requires a service	Previously Proviso 1.88: FY 23-24.	Amended Proviso Number Only
Proviso 1.97 (SDE: First Steps Transfer Plan)	State	FY23-24 Proviso	First Steps shall work with other state entities to develop a plan to operate independently from the Department of Education.	Report our agency may/must provide		Repealed

Law number	Jurisdiction	Type	Description	Purpose the law serves:	Notes:	Changes made during FY2026
§63-11-1726	State	Statute	Statute prompts all publicly funded early childhood-serving agencies and entities to participate in data-sharing initiatives supported by the Early Childhood Advisory Council in furtherance of the Council's duties.	Requires a manner of delivery		No Change
Proviso 1.109 (SDE: First Steps Division)	State	FY 24-25 Proviso	Effective July 1, 2024, SC First Steps is authorized to operate independently from the Department of Education.	Not related to agency deliverable.		Repealed

2026

Services Data

as submitted for the Accountability Report by:

H620 - SC FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS

Description of Service	Description of Direct Customer	Customer Name	Others Impacted by Service	Division or major organizational unit providing the service.	Description of division or major organizational unit providing the service.	Primary negative impact if service not provided.	Changes made to services during FY2026	Summary of changes to services
Oversight of the finances and programming of 46 local First Steps partnerships.	Approximately 340,000+ children under age 6	Children under age 6	Families (adult family members and siblings); child care providers; other local early childhood partners and service providers	Early Childhood Services; Policy and Accountability	SC First Steps serves as a grantor and provides oversight and technical assistance to 46 local non-profit First Steps partnerships charged under state law with meeting local school readiness needs.	Children across the state will not receive necessary direct or indirect supports to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.	No Change	
Oversight and technical assistance to ensure compliant, high-quality service delivery in 200+ non-public school preschool settings.	Non-public school settings serving age and income eligible four-year-olds.	Child care providers in non-public school settings	Families (adult family members and siblings)	First Steps 4K	First Steps administers publicly-funded full-day, four-year-old kindergarten within a network of non-public school preschool providers. On a rolling basis, providers are approved and students enroll.	Children across the state will not receive necessary direct supports to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.	No Change	
Provision of tuition and transportation payment for age-, income- and geographically-eligible children and their families.	Eligible children must be four years of age by September 1, reside in South Carolina, and qualify for free- or reduced-price school lunches or Medicaid.	Age and income eligible four-year-olds	Families (adult family members and siblings); child care providers in non-public school settings	First Steps 4K	First Steps administers publicly-funded full-day, four-year-old kindergarten within a network of non-public school preschool providers. On a rolling basis, providers are approved and students enroll.	Children across the state will not receive necessary direct supports to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.	No Change	

Description of Service	Description of Direct Customer	Customer Name	Others Impacted by Service	Division or major organizational unit providing the service.	Description of division or major organizational unit providing the service.	Primary negative impact if service not provided.	Changes made to services during FY2026	Summary of changes to services
Development and maintenance of First Five SC, an online eligibility screener and common application for families to access publicly-funded early childhood services statewide	Approximately 340,000+ children under age 6	Children under age 6	Families (adult family members and siblings); child care providers; other local early childhood partners and service providers	Early Childhood Advisory Council	South Carolina's Early Childhood Advisory Council is a collaborative body representing the state's early childhood system. Established in law, the ECAC includes the directors of eight state agencies and government entities that provide state- and federally-funded services to young children. South Carolina First Steps coordinates the activities of the council.	Children across the state will not receive necessary direct supports to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.	No Change	

2026

Partnerships Data

as submitted for the Accountability Report by:

H620 - SC FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS

Type of Partner Entity	Name of Partner Entity	Description of Partnership	Change to the partnership during the past fiscal year
Federal Government	Head Start Collaboration Office	As the federal government's liaison between Head Start and local grantees, the Head Start Collaboration Office is a valued partner. SC Collaboration Director Mary Lynne Diggs sits on the SC First Steps Board of Trustees.	No Change
Non-Government Organization	Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation	Funder of Harvard Strategic Data Project fellow	Add
Non-Government Organization	Chapin Hall	Providing technical assistance to First Steps	No Change
Non-Government Organization	Child Trends	Providing technical assistance to the Early Childhood Advisory Council and commissioned to complete legislatively-mandated evaluations of First Steps local partnerships	No Change
Non-Government Organization	Harvard Strategic Data Project	Coordinated the placement of Strategic Data Fellow; supported fellow and supervisor in professional development and completion of capstone project	Add
Non-Government Organization	Hunt Institute	Providing technical assistance on early childhood policy development	No Change

Type of Partner Entity	Name of Partner Entity	Description of Partnership	Change to the partnership during the past fiscal year
Non-Government Organization	Leon Levine Foundation	Funder for First Five Pee Dee pilot	Add
Non-Government Organization	The David and Lucile Packard Foundation	Funder of First 5 for All technical assistance consultancy	No Change
Non-Governmental Organization	Alliance for Early Success	Funding to First Steps	No Change
Non-Governmental Organization	Fund for Shared Insight	Providing technical assistance to First Steps	No Change
Non-Governmental Organization	Local First Steps Partnerships	First Steps' local partnership grantees deliver needed early childhood education services in each of the state's 46 counties. Two First Steps Local Partnership Executive Directors serve on the SC Early Childhood Advisory Council.	No Change
Private Business Organization	Private 4K Service Providers	Non-public school settings partner with SC First Steps to ensure the delivery of high-quality four-year-old kindergarten statewide.	No Change
State Government	Department of Disabilities and Special Needs (DDSN)	DDSN is a valued partner and service provider within the interagency BabyNet system. Agency Director Constance Holloway sits on the SC First Steps Board of Trustees.	Amend

Type of Partner Entity	Name of Partner Entity	Description of Partnership	Change to the partnership during the past fiscal year
State Government	Department of Mental Health	DMH is a critical partner and provider of mental health services for young children and their families. Acting Agency Director Robert Bank sits on the SC First Steps Board of Trustees.	Amend
State Government	Office of Revenue and Fiscal Affairs	Current home of the First Steps Data Collection System; partner in development of Early Childhood Integrated Data System	No Change
State Government	SC Department of Education	As a co-administrator of the state's four-old-kindergarten program and the representative of public school districts statewide, the SC Department of education is a valued partner. Matthew Ferguson represents State Superintendent Ellen Weaver as a member of the SC First Steps Board of Trustees.	No Change
State Government	SC Department of Health and Human Services	As the state's Medicaid agency, DHHS is a valued partner. Agency Director Eunice Medina sits on the SC First Steps Board of Trustees.	Amend
State Government	SC Department of Public Health	DPH is a valued partner in the area of maternal-child health. Interim Agency Director Brannon Traxler, M.D. sits on the SC First Steps Board of Trustees.	Amend
State Government	SC Department of Social Services	DSS is a valued partner in the areas of child care and child welfare. Agency Director Tony Catone sits on the SC First Steps Board of Trustees.	Amend
State Government	The Children's Trust of SC	As the state's Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting grantee and an active partner in the prevention of child abuse and neglect, The Children's Trust of SC is a valued agency partner. Agency Director Sue Williams sits on the SC First Steps Board of Trustees.	No Change

2026

Reports Data

as submitted for the Accountability Report by:

H620 - SC FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS

Report Name	Law Number (if applicable)	Summary of information requested in the report	Date of most recent submission DURING the past fiscal year	Reporting Frequency	Type of entity/entities	Method to access the report	Direct access hyperlink or agency contact (if not provided to LSA for posting online)	Changes to this report during the past fiscal year	Explanation why a report wasn't submitted
4K Extended Day, Professional Development, Impact on Parents	Proviso 1.47 & Proviso 1A.26: FY 24-25 State Budget	Expenditures for Extended Day, Quality Improvement and Professional Development, and Impact on Parents	April-25	Annually	Legislative entity or entities	Provided to LSA for posting online	https://www.scstatehouse.gov/reports/FirstSteps/First%20Steps%204K%20Quality%20and%20Professional%20Development%20Report%20Pursuant%20to%20Proviso%201.47.pdf	No Change	
4K Funding Above the Minimum Reimbursement Rate	Proviso 1.47 and 1A.26: FY 24-25 State Budget	Funding above the minimum reimbursement rate made to any 4K provider	March 2026	Quarterly	Governor or Lt. Governor AND Legislative entity or entities	Provided to LSA for posting online	https://www.scstatehouse.gov/reports/FirstSteps/Quarterly%20Report%20for%20March%2026%20Report.pdf	No Change	
4K Underserved Communities	Proviso 1.47: FY 24-25 State Budget	Process, expenditures and expanded enrollment for needs grants.	March 2026	Annually	Legislative entity or entities	Provided to LSA for posting online	https://www.scstatehouse.gov/reports/FirstSteps/First%20Steps%204K%20Report%20Pursuant%20Provision%201.47%20%20March%2013,%202026%20Report.pdf	No Change	
Agency Accountability Report	§1-1-810, 59-152-20	The report "must contain the agency's or department's mission, objectives to accomplish the mission, and performance measures that show the degree to which objectives are being met." Agencies must "identify key program area descriptions and expenditures and link these to key financial and performance results measures."	September 2025	Annually	Governor or Lt. Governor AND Legislative entity or entities	Provided to LSA for posting online	https://www.scstatehouse.gov/reports/aar2025/H620.pdf	No Change	
Annual Report	§59-152-50	Report on the agency's activities, strategic plan, progress on initiatives, financial information, as well as a number of other items for the most recent year.	November 2025	Annually	Legislative entity or entities	Available on agency's website	https://issuu.com/scfirststeps1/docs/south_carolina_first_steps_2025_annual_report	No Change	
Audited Financial Statement for the year ending June 30, 2022.	§11-7-20	Audited financial statement.	June 2025	Annually	Legislative entity or entities	Available on another website	https://osa.sc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/OFS-2024-2025-Financial-Statements-FINAL.pdf	No Change	
CDEPP Student Information and Reporting	Proviso 1A.44: FY 24-25 State Budget	Report required to inform about students SUNS numbers for each student on the 45th day.	December 2025	Annually	Legislative entity or entities	Provided to LSA for posting online	https://www.scstatehouse.gov/reports/FirstSteps/First%20Steps%204K%20SUNS%20Numbers%20Report%20Pursuant%20to%20Proviso%201A.44,%2012.1.25.pdf	No Change	

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Education Improvement Act (EIA)	Proviso 1A.29: FY 24-25 State Budget	EIA Program Report activities and expenditures	September 2025	Annually	Legislative entity or entities AND South Carolina state agency or agencies	Available on another website	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EiwI7A0e3YSW3iHLvP780ghbp61-r3tb/edit	No Change	
Education Oversight Committee Review of 4K	Proviso 1.47 and 1A.26: FY 24-25 State Budget	Annual statutory review of the Child Early Reading Development and Education Program (CERDEP)	March 2026	Annually	Legislative entity or entities AND South Carolina state agency or agencies	Available on another website	https://eoc.sc.gov/sites/eoc/files/Documents/CERDEP%202026_Final_2.27.26.pdf	No Change	
Education Oversight Committee Review of Kindergarten Readiness Assessment	Proviso 1.47 and 1A.26: FY 24-25 State Budget	Annual statutory review of the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment	March 2026	Annually	Legislative entity or entities AND South Carolina state agency or agencies	Available on another website	https://eoc.sc.gov/sites/eoc/files/Documents/CERDEP%202026_Final_2.27.26.pdf	No Change	
IT Data Collection Plan	§1-11-10	Summary of the agencies IT Needs and Plans for the next year.	July 2025	Annually	Legislative entity or entities AND South Carolina state agency or agencies	Hard copy available upon request.	Agency contact: BJ Tucker, IT Manager, at btucker@scfirststeps.org or 803-734-0235	No Change	
READY: State's Investment in Early Learning and Development	Proviso 1.84: FY 24-25 State Budget	Annual report on the state's investment in early learning and development	November 2025	Annually	Legislative entity or entities	Available on agency's website	https://issuu.com/scfirststeps1/docs/south_carolina_first_steps_2025_annual_report	No Change	

AGENCY NAME:	First Steps to School Readiness		
AGENCY CODE:	H620	SECTION:	1

2026
Accountability Report

SUBMISSION FORM

I have reviewed and approved the data submitted by the agency in the following templates:

- Data Template
  - Reorganization and Compliance
  - FY2026 Strategic Plan Results
  - FY2027 Strategic Plan Development
  - Legal
  - Services
  - Partnerships
  - Report or Review
  - Budget
- Discussion Template
- Organizational Template

I have reviewed and approved the financial report summarizing the agency's budget and actual expenditures, as entered by the agency into the South Carolina Enterprise Information System.

The information submitted is complete and accurate to the extent of my knowledge.

AGENCY DIRECTOR *(SIGN AND DATE)*:	**SIGNATURE ON FILE**	**Signature Received:** 09/11/2026
(TYPE/PRINT NAME):	Ann Vandervliet	

BOARD/CMSN CHAIR *(SIGN AND DATE)*:	**SIGNATURE ON FILE**	**Signature Received:** 09/11/2026
(TYPE/PRINT NAME):	David Morley, Board Chair	