



MOVING FIRST STEPS FORWARD

Overview

South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness was authorized in 1999 and implemented in 2000 to make accountable grants to local partnerships, focused on voluntary services to children aged 0-4. The initiative contained a sunset provision, automatically repealing the entire program in 2007 unless reauthorized.

Legislation passed in 2006 reauthorizing First Steps. The following year, a full-day 4-year-old kindergarten program targeting impoverished communities, the Child Development Education Pilot Program (CDEPP) was created as a partial response to early childhood components in the Abbeville lawsuit. CDEPP gave additional responsibilities to First Steps not originally considered in the 1999 legislation.

In 2010, Governor Sanford designated First Steps as the lead Babynet agency, relocating the program from Department of Health and Environmental Control to First Steps. Babynet is responsible for identifying, screening, and referring children with developmental delays or impairments to treatment prior to entry into traditional education institutions. The intent was to use First Steps' relationships with at-risk children and providers to improve identification, screening, and treatment referral.

Significant expansions of CDEPP in 2012, 2013 and 2014 culminated in 4-year-old kindergarten's codification into permanent law within the Read to Succeed Act of 2014. After a year of temporary reauthorization through the state budget, First Steps received a 2-year reauthorization in 2014. Recognizing the continued programmatic problems with the agency, the General Assembly used the 2014 reauthorization to establish a study committee to explore the agency's challenges, and added several legislative mandates focused on defining school readiness and creating usable measures to gauge individual child readiness.

First Steps' scope has significantly expanded since initial inception, beginning as a grants program to address social determinants of school success to a statewide organization with roles in early childhood health, learning, and education. Unfortunately, the agency has experienced many challenges that are currently driving a contentious multi-year conversation about reauthorization, as well as the direction of the agency and its programs.

Challenges

Originally a grant-making entity, First Steps has not effectively handled the increased scope and responsibility if its additional missions, never fully developed data collection and program evaluations systems, and has limited technical support capacity. While anecdotal evidence would indicate significant performance variance among local partnerships, the agency has only begun to developing a definition of school readiness, and the corresponding evaluations to measure it, after receive a direct legislative mandate to do so. This process is still incomplete as of January 2016, and a 2013 Legislative Audit Council report found that the "percentages of children at-risk for not being ready to succeed in school have not decreased since 2000."

Babynet has operated out of compliance every year since 2002 and is currently in year five of a "Needs Intervention" determination by the federal government. Noncompliance findings can be generally characterized as: (a) deficiencies with the timely identification and screening of children, (b) poor financial coordination with the Medicaid program, (c) inadequate oversight of providers, and (d) poor hand-off from early childhood to school-aged care.



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Charting a new path for First Steps

Governor Haley's 2016-17 education agenda includes charting a new path for First Steps. This approach would preserve all programs currently in existence, but restructure overall governance to ensure adequate resources are available to provide fiscal and programmatic oversight. This path also uses the strengths of existing state programs to make early childhood education in South Carolina successful.

County Partnerships

Governor Haley proposes to moving grants management and oversight of local partnerships to the Children's Trust Fund of South Carolina – a quasi-governmental non-profit with a proven record as both a fiscal agent and proponent of children's issues. With new missions, the board's membership would change to reflect the Children's Trust's new missions into determinants of learning. The FY 2016-17 Executive Budget also proposes increased funding to county partnerships for programs, oversight, and technical assistance to facilitate the transition from a wholly public to a quasi-private entity.

Child Early Reading Development and Education Program

Private educators and therapists for South Carolina's most vulnerable children are essential to maintaining parental choice and quality in the 4K system. Recent financial data, however, indicates that 85% of children in statewide 4K programs are being served by public schools, with the State Department of Education. Governor Haley believes that a robust private provider network can and should be maintained within a consolidated 4K program managed under a Division of Early Learning at the State Department of Education.

This model will provide for consistent professional development and technical support for public and private providers and greater consistency in fiscal management of the 4K program. It would also elevate early learning to a position of prominence in the Department consistent with the size, scope, and impact of the 4K program.

In addition, the Early Childhood Advisory Committee (ECAC), currently consists of members of First Steps Board of Trustees, will be reconstituted and supported by the Department of Education's staff. With First Steps' regulatory and technical assistance functions under the Department of Education, the ECAC can return to a more appropriate advisory role for early learning programs.

Babynet

IDEA part C, known in South Carolina as Babynet, has two basic components that need to be addressed with separate expertise. One is health policy and financing, including the duties of fiscal agency for state and federal funds, financial coordination with other early childhood health payers such as Medicaid, and the management of a provider network. The other is the programmatic implementation of systems to identify children with learning delays or challenges, screening and referring them to treatment, and then effectively transitioning children from Babynet to providers that serve school-aged children.

Governor Haley proposes to forge a new partnership between the South Carolina Departments of Health and Human Services (SC DHHS) and Education, designating SC DHHS as the lead Babynet agency. This would result in an effective division of responsibilities between SC DHHS as a fiscal agent and the Department of Education as the programmatic lead.