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Coordinating State Early Childhood Governance

A Case Study

SOUTH CAROLINA



Executive Summary

Strategies for governing and administering early childhood programs and services at the state level affect parents' awareness of, access to, and experience with vital services for their families. No consensus exists on the optimal governance structures for early childhood, which underscores the need for additional research on best practices for state-level early childhood governance.



To understand the full range of state early childhood governance strategies, the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center at Vanderbilt University (Policy Impact Center) conducted a national landscape scan to identify each state's strategy for organizing the administration of early childhood programs and services. The Policy Impact Center then selected states with various governance styles for in-depth case studies. This brief presents the case study results for South Carolina.

South Carolina has early childhood services spread across six entities; nonetheless, the state has been able to make steady progress on early childhood initiatives over time.

South Carolina's unique governance structure offers the following key lessons learned:

- South Carolina prioritizes local control of early childhood programs and services.
- The state leverages uniquely structured entities to implement early childhood programs and services.
- State leaders are increasingly prioritizing intentional collaboration among early childhood service entities.
- Data sharing is central to successfully coordinating between governing entities.
- Messaging on early childhood is crafted to resonate within the political and economic climate of the state.

Introduction

Across the United States, state approaches to organizing the administration of programs and services for young children and their families vary widely. Some states consolidate governance of early childhood programs into relatively few agencies and departments. Other states disperse early childhood programs across numerous state government entities. States also make different choices on which services to group together within an office or division, and the types of departments where a given service lives.

Research to date, however, does not identify the optimal governance structure for early childhood programs to maximize effectiveness or efficiency of service provision. Existing resources also do not comprehensively document how state governance choices are similar to or different from one another, either.

The Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center at Vanderbilt University (Policy Impact Center) conducted a study of early childhood governance in the US beginning in the spring of 2024. The study includes a [comprehensive national landscape scan](#) of early childhood governance and case studies of selected states with different early childhood governance strategies. Through the study, we identify patterns in early childhood governance; examine the benefits and challenges of different governance strategies; and identify best practices and lessons learned from states to inform effective and efficient early childhood governance.

This brief provides the case study findings for South Carolina. For the case study, we interviewed 11 early childhood leaders in South Carolina representing state government, academia, nonprofits, and advocates. We selected South Carolina in part because of their recent development of a coordinated eligibility assessment (First 5) for early childhood programs and services but found through our interviews a much more complex story that does not center the eligibility assessment. Our findings summarize what we learned.

Early Childhood Governance in South Carolina

Governance Structure

For our study, we considered all education, health, and economic programs administered by the state that benefit families with children prenatal to age 3. In South Carolina, we found early childhood programs are housed across six entities, with the majority of programs housed in the Department of Social Services (DSS) (see Figure 1).

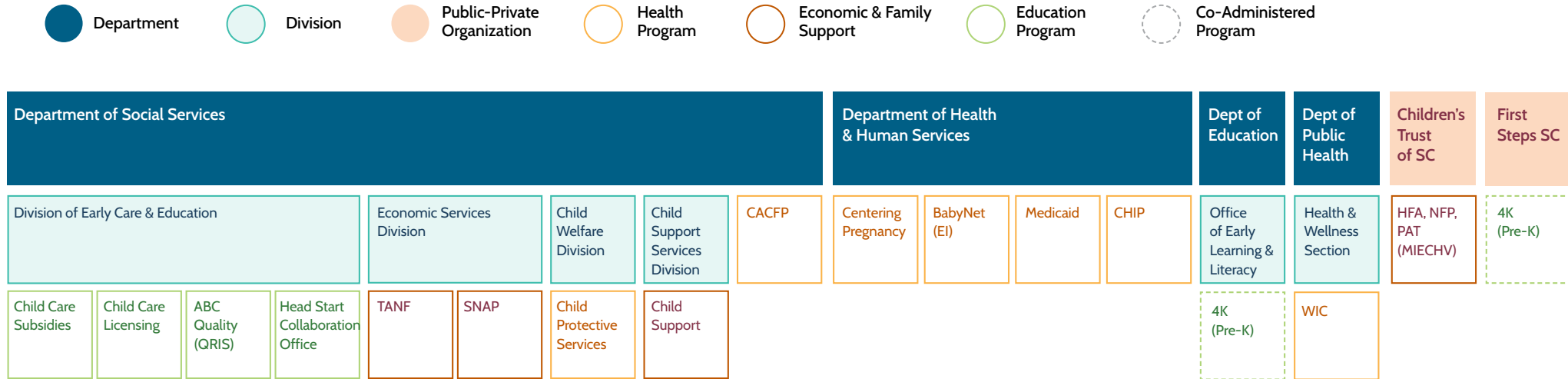
Specifically, DSS is responsible for administering a range of programs that benefit families with young children. Early learning programs within the Division of Early Care and Education include child care subsidies, child care licensing, child care quality ratings (ABC Quality), and the Head Start State Collaboration Office. Additionally, economic and family supports such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and child support are also housed within DSS.

The South Carolina General Assembly has also established two uniquely structured entities that have both public and nonprofit designations to provide early childhood services. South Carolina First Steps administers the public pre-K program (4K) in community-based settings,ⁱ in addition to leading several other early childhood initiatives (such as the First 5 portal). Children's Trust of South Carolina administers home visiting programs, among other preventative services for children and youth.

The Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, and the Department of Public Health also provide relevant services for families with young children in South Carolina.

ⁱ Community settings include licensed child care centers, private schools, and charter schools. 4K programs in public school districts are administered by the Department of Education.

Figure 1. South Carolina Governance Chart (As of October 1, 2025)



History of South Carolina's Early Childhood Governance Structure

Quasi-governmental entities have long shaped the early childhood landscape of South Carolina. In 1984, the General Assembly established the Children's Trust Fund of South Carolina in statute, tasked with implementing prevention programs for child abuse and neglect.^{ii,1} Similarly, in 1999, the General Assembly established South Carolina First Steps to close the opportunity gap for the state's youngest learners.² As both state agencies and registered nonprofits, these organizations are uniquely positioned to serve South Carolina's children and families.

The early childhood landscape was transformed in 2006 in response to the school funding lawsuit, *Abbeville County School District et al. v. South Carolina*. The plaintiffs claimed that the South Carolina K-12 funding formula was unfair to rural and poor areas, violating their constitutional right to a minimally adequate education for every student. The complaint was originally filed in 1993, and the court ruled in the favor of the plaintiffs in December 2005.

ⁱⁱ In 2008, the Children's Trust Fund merged with Voices for South Carolina's Children and Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina to become the Children's Trust of South Carolina.



In response to the ruling, the state allocated funding to pilot a full day public preschool program (known as 4K) for qualifying children, among other things. Although the Half Day Child Development Program (known as half-day 4K) had been in public school districts since 1984, a pilot program for full day 4Kⁱⁱⁱ was established by the General Assembly for children living in the plaintiff districts of the lawsuit.^{3,4}

Since piloting, the 4K program has expanded statewide, with the Department of Education managing 4K in public school districts and First Steps managing 4K in community settings. Furthermore, in 2021 First Steps, in partnership with the Department of Social Services, launched 4K+. Under the 4K+ program, siblings (up to age 12) of children enrolled in 4K are eligible for child care subsidies, making high-quality child care and after-school programs affordable for the entire family.

The 4K program has repeatedly demonstrated improved school readiness for participating young children (compared to children not enrolled in 4K),⁵ and as such, the state has continued to invest in the program. In fact, the 4K program has received continued support regardless of the political or economic environment, including increased investments during the Great Recession.

In 2022, the Early Childhood Advisory Council (housed at First Steps) released a common eligibility portal, First 5. Funded by the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5), the portal assesses eligibility for over 40 education, health, and economic and family support programs. The portal was further enhanced in 2023 to provide application support; specifically, the information families entered in the portal would be pre-filled in certain program application forms.⁶ Although the First 5 portal was applauded nationally by those in the early childhood field, leaders in South Carolina emphasized the strength of the idea has yet to actualize.

As described above, South Carolina has taken steps to strengthen early childhood programs and services without any significant governance change since the creation of First Steps. Although leaders have considered consolidating programs into a unified children's office or similar cabinet-level entity in the last 5 years, interviewees largely felt that South Carolina's governance structure does not need altered; rather, continued intentional collaboration among leaders was the most resounding strategy to improve early childhood governance.

ⁱⁱⁱ The full day 4K pilot program was called the Child Development Education Pilot Program (CDEPP). The 4K program was codified in 2014 as the Child Early Reading and Development Education Program (CERDEP).

Nonetheless, in April of 2025, South Carolina did consolidate three agencies (the Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, Department of Mental Health, and the Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services) into one new agency, the Department of Behavior Health & Developmental Disabilities. While still too new to definitively assess the impact of this consolidation, it will likely impact the early childhood landscape, particularly concerning maternal and infant health.

Looking ahead, interviewees repeatedly shared goals around increased funding and access for early childhood programs and services. Amidst the changing policy landscape at both the state and federal level, South Carolina leaders remain committed to serving children and families.



Lessons Learned

South Carolina prioritizes local control of early childhood programs and services.

Interviewees repeatedly pointed to the significant latitude local entities are given in implementing early childhood programs. While the state provides resources (e.g., curriculum, software, etc.), local entities can choose if and how to use these resources; similarly, local entities can choose how to meet state mandates. For example, the state may require certain data to be collected, but it is the county's choice whether to use the provided data system or a different system altogether.

The prevalence of local control is apparent in the county-level offices for programs; most notably, First Steps has a local partnership office in each of South Carolina's 46 counties. These local offices provide direct services to families in the community, with local offices choosing which programs they offer from a list of pre-approved programs. The direct, local engagement also allows for the elevation of community voice, and interviewees noted family voice is utilized across all agencies and at all levels.

Interviewees appreciated that local control allowed flexibility for each entity to respond to the unique needs of their community. Yet, interviewees also expressed that the localized approach created inefficiencies, with some counties serving significantly more children than others; this is especially true in funding, as each local First Step partnership receives the same baseline funding of approximately \$222,000 before allocations are distributed according to child population and poverty metrics. Instead, multiple interviewees felt a compromise of regional collaboratives may continue to address localized needs while creating greater efficiencies.

The state leverages uniquely structured entities to implement early childhood programs and services.

South Carolina's General Assembly has established a total of 11 quasi-governmental organizations addressing a variety of issues; as noted above, two of these entities, Children's Trust and First Steps, address specific issues facing children and families.

Children's Trust is the only statewide organization focused on prevention of abuse and neglect, and provides numerous prevention programs for children and youth, including home visiting services for young children.

Similarly, First Steps is the only agency in South Carolina dedicated solely to the birth to 5 period. First Steps is responsible for 4K (pre-K) in community settings, the Early Childhood Advisory Council (which manages the First 5 portal), and local First Steps partnerships in every county, among other things.

Although both organizations are uniquely structured as quasi-governmental entities, they diverge in implementation. For example, each organization leverages funding from both public and private sources. Yet, state funding accounts for 97 percent of First Steps' budget, compared to less than 5 percent of Children's Trust's budget; concerning the home visiting services for young children, Children's Trust is the recipient of the federal MIECHV funding. Additionally, while First Steps governing board is appointed in part by the governor, all positions on the Children's Trust board are governor-appointed.

Interviewees largely felt the structure was beneficial, citing different reasons for each organization. Concerning First Steps, although interviewees felt it was largely subject to the same bureaucracy as other state agencies, it was acknowledged that the nonprofit arm likely allowed First Steps to successfully attract more charitable donors.

Concerning Children's Trust, interviewees pointed to the stability of a government entity while enjoying the flexibility of a nonprofit (e.g., simplified rules of procurement to contract in a timelier manner). Additionally, their status as a quasi-governmental entity was attributed to creating a more positive public perception (compared to a government agency), thereby promoting greater family engagement.

State leaders are increasingly prioritizing intentional collaboration among early childhood service entities.

Interviewees in South Carolina repeatedly emphasized the recent increased collaboration among early childhood entities. Specifically, interviewees pointed to more productive meetings of various workgroups (including the Early Childhood Advisory Council) and increased willingness to partner across programs.

The collaborative nature has also resulted in greater goal alignment. For example, leaders at First Steps aligned with the Department of Education goal of 75 percent school readiness for children entering kindergarten. Similarly, the Education Oversight Committee is working to align 4K and Head Start practices to increase participation.^{iv}

Critically, effective collaboration requires strong leadership. Multiple interviewees credited the leadership of Ann Vandervliet, the Director of First Steps, for the increased collaboration in the space.

Messaging on early childhood is crafted to resonate within the political and economic climate of the state.

As stated above, interviewees did not feel it was necessary to change the governance structure but instead pointed to a lack of funding as one of the biggest barriers for early childhood programs and services. In fact, many interviewees noted that funding from the legislature could be variable year by year depending on perceptions of early childhood programs at the time. As such, crafting a compelling message that clearly articulates the return on investments has been especially important for each program or service.

Interviewees felt the “business case” for early childhood was one of the most successful arguments, and some expressed the desire to further integrate business community leaders into the early childhood conversation. Additionally, interviewees felt legislators’ confidence in programs was bolstered by evidence; many attributed the ongoing investments in 4K in part to the data showing positive outcomes for young children.

^{iv} Currently, only Spartanburg’s Head Start programs participate in 4K.

Data sharing is central to successfully coordinating between governing entities.

Data sharing is particularly critical in a coordinated governance structure like South Carolina. Interviewees recognized the value of data and highlighted that many of the largest early childhood programs and services already have data sharing agreements in place. For example, First Steps and the Department of Education have a shared waitlist for 4K programs, allowing them to place more children in 4K by leveraging slots available in both public and private settings.

The First 5 portal also showcases the growing desire to coordinate data to holistically serve families. As mentioned above, the portal primarily assesses eligibility, which itself requires alignment of data fields across programs. This coordination was seen as a step in the right direction by interviewees, although many noted the difference between a family knowing they are eligible and a family accessing the program. Additionally, initial data indicate that families' use of the portal remains low. Nonetheless, the portal provides leaders with the opportunity to continue raising awareness of programs and services and sharing data to better assess families' holistic needs.

In fact, South Carolina is well-positioned to optimize data sharing because all state level data are housed in the Revenue and Fiscal Affairs (RFA) Office.^v The Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS), managed by the Early Childhood Advisory Council, is housed within the RFA. The ECIDS system allows children to be pre-assigned a K-12 identification number when children engage in certain early childhood programs (managed by First Steps, DSS, or DOE); interviewees recognized the ongoing potential to holistically capture data on the programs and services with which young children and families engage.

^v Established in 2014, the RFA is responsible for fiscal and statistical analysis using education, healthcare, and demographic data, among other sources.

Conclusion

States approach early childhood governance in a variety of ways, and these choices can impact parents' awareness of, access to, and experience with early childhood programs and services. Yet research to date provides little guidance on best practices of early childhood governance.

This work begins to address the gap in knowledge about optimal early childhood governance by considering the benefits and challenges of the governance structure in South Carolina. Interviews with key leaders highlighted the state's use of quasi-governmental entities and elevation of local control to push forward early childhood initiatives. Within this unique environment, leaders emphasized the importance of collaboration, data sharing, and strategic messaging to elevate early childhood programs and services in the state.

Although each state has a unique context, these best practices and lessons learned in South Carolina can benefit leaders in other states working to craft more effective and efficient early childhood governance systems.



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