



## **Statement of the Early Learning Council of Georgetown County to SC Legislators – 2017 Session**

### **What is The Early Learning Council of Georgetown County (ELC)?**

The ELC is a civic leadership group whose mission is to champion the education and well being of young children through advocacy, research development, and promotion of opportunities that allow them to reach their full potential. The ELC's members include experienced educators, school administrators, health care professionals and non-profit executives. While all ELC members participate solely in their individual capacity, many of them are affiliated with other organizations working to ensure that the children in our county will reach their full potential.

### **What can the Legislature do to help our children thrive?**

The South Carolina Legislature can help the children of our state and county thrive by establishing a cabinet level state agency responsible for delivering accountable education and care services to children from birth up to kindergarten and requiring the use of a single assessment for kindergarten readiness.

### **Why do we want this?**

- To arrive at kindergarten ready to learn, infants and young children require a seamless integration of services for learning and care. Currently, the system is fragmented and no one organization is accountable. For example, the SC Department of Education is responsible for education of children from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Responsibility for state funded pre-k programs for 4 year olds is split between First Steps and the Department of Education. The Department of Social Services' Division of Early Care and Education focuses on quality childcare for infants up to 12 year olds. The Department of Health and Human Services is responsible under BabyNet for identifying and providing resources to children under 3 who have special needs.
- We need a single cabinet level agency that will be accountable for providing all the services necessary to enable all children to be ready for kindergarten. When SC First Steps to School Readiness was authorized in 1999, its intended purpose was to prepare all children for kindergarten, but it consistently failed to be accountable at the local and the state levels. The First Steps structure has not been an effective one for our state.
- Under First Steps, services vary depending on where a child resides with children living in affluent counties receiving more and better quality services than those who live in poorer counties. The First Steps Study Committee concluded, "The absence of a statewide systemic system is resulting in children being prepared for school at an uneven and inconsistent level across the state, and exacerbates missed opportunities for funding, including federal and private funding, and the leveraging of private sector dollars."
- We can learn from states like Connecticut and Washington that have a single cabinet level agency. We need a single statewide agency that has decision-making authority over all early childhood care and education programs and that operates in a collaborative and inclusive manner. Such an organization could improve access to and the quality of services provided to our young children and families, and it could save money by coordinating services and eliminating duplication of efforts. This agency could be held accountable for preparing children for kindergarten as measured by assessing each child's readiness for kindergarten using the same assessment tool, except for special needs.

### **Why now?**

After 17 years, First Steps still has not achieved its goals. Immediate implementation of an accountable, statewide system for early childhood must be a priority. We ask that the Legislature act promptly to establish a cabinet level state agency devoted to delivering education and care services for young children and their families. Further, that agency should be charged with specifying a single evidence-based assessment that must be used throughout the state to measure each child's readiness upon entering to kindergarten.