Spotlight on South Carolina's Use of the STEP Forward with Data Framework to Inform a New Data System

Van-Kim Lin

South Carolina's General Assembly established South Carolina First Steps (First Steps) in 1999 to improve school readiness for the state's youngest learners. The agency is driven by a legislatively mandated goal to ensure that "all children start school ready to reach their highest potential with engaged support from their parents, caregivers, and communities." Because First Steps administers a variety of programs through local partnerships, it can be difficult to collect and analyze data across their network—and to roll data up from the local or program level to the state level. As First Steps started the process of updating its data system, the agency leveraged the System Transformation for Equitable Preschools (STEP Forward with Data) Framework to determine how to best connect data elements collected across programs and counties in a new data system. First Steps' primary goal was to ensure that it could determine whether it was meeting its legislatively mandated goal.

About South Carolina First Steps

As both a state agency and nonprofit organization, First Steps leverages public and private resources to deliver over 30 types of programs and services to children and families, administered across 46 county-level local partnerships. Eligibility is generally based on a defined set of risk factors, such as family income at or below the federal poverty level; however, children in foster care, children experiencing homelessness, and children from families receiving public assistance are eligible regardless of family income. Each local partnership decides which programs and services it wants to offer at the county level—across health, parenting, early care and education, and school transition—to best meet its community's local context and needs.

First Steps brought a working understanding of the challenges in collecting and linking data across its many programs and drew on the STEP Forward with Data Framework to systematically examine those issues. The agency was able to define the scope of its data needs, identify desired data elements, and map those elements to its existing data system.

About the STEP Forward with Data Framework

The STEP Forward with Data Framework is designed to help early childhood system leaders use data to support the experiences of *focal populations*—defined as populations that have been shown to experience inequities or that are of specific interest to communities. System leaders include state, local, and Tribal agency and programmatic leadership, including state and local administrators, program directors, curriculum and workforce specialists, or early childhood councils. The Framework organizes 20 essential questions into six system steps, which align with points at which a leader could make actionable changes to improve quality and access to early learning experiences (Figure 1). For each step, the Framework offers a description of the step, a high-level look at the relevant questions and metrics, and a deeper dive into how to measure those metrics—including suggested measurement approaches, the level at which data could be collected (from individual children and families up to the system as a whole), and example data sources.

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Figure 1. Six System Steps of the STEP Forward with Data Framework



First Steps' Approach

First Steps wanted to determine how best to align the data it already collects across its various programs to understand how participation in a combination of programs supports the needs of First Steps' focal population (families with young children who meet the agency's eligibility requirements). The agency leveraged the Framework to understand what types of questions it could answer with available data and what questions it could answer *after* adding or changing data within its data system. Given the flexibility of the Framework, other system leaders looking to supplement or modify their data systems can either use the approach below, which shows how First Steps applied the Framework to meet its goals, or adapt it to their own contexts.

Step 1. Understand the capacity of the current data system.

Given its funding and administration structure, First Steps could have taken a number of approaches to answering whether it supports young children in reaching their highest potential. However, the agency still faced limitations: its current data system was capable of answering questions about individual programs, but it wasn't structured to allow data elements across programs to be linked together to reveal compounding impacts over time. For example, First Steps wanted to understand outcomes for children who participated in the agency's home visiting programs *and* attended their publicly funded pre-K, but the current data system made it difficult to link information on the same child across data sources. First Steps realized that updating its data system was key to having the necessary data to monitor progress on any improvement effort. With better data, the agency could measure how changes at any step of the system—across any of its programs—might affect young children's outcomes.

Step 2. Identify desired updates for a new data system.

To identify desired updates for its new data system, First Steps conducted a mapping exercise. Using the Deep Dive sections for each system step of the Framework (see Figure 2 for an example), the agency not only determined the desired data elements it would need to answer critical questions but also determined how those data could be structured (e.g., level collected or how data are defined). They also identified whether any data elements they were not currently collecting would be needed to answer key questions. While reviewing the Deep Dive sections, First Steps realized that its current data system would not be able to link data in the way it needed to answer its questions of interest. Therefore, the agency realized it needed to structure its new data system to allow it to answer these questions.

For example, the Deep Dive suggests collecting information on a child's developmental progress at the child level. First Steps can leverage data from multiple services and programs to understand children's developmental and learning milestones; however, these data are sometimes collected at various levels (i.e., the child and/or family level). Although First Steps could apply family-level data to the child level to answer this question, the agency lacked a seamless way to identify which children belonged to the families who participated across multiple programs. However, determining a way to link children with families across multiple programs in a new data system would open doors for First Steps to answer additional questions.

Figure 2. Example of a Deep Dive Section From the Framework

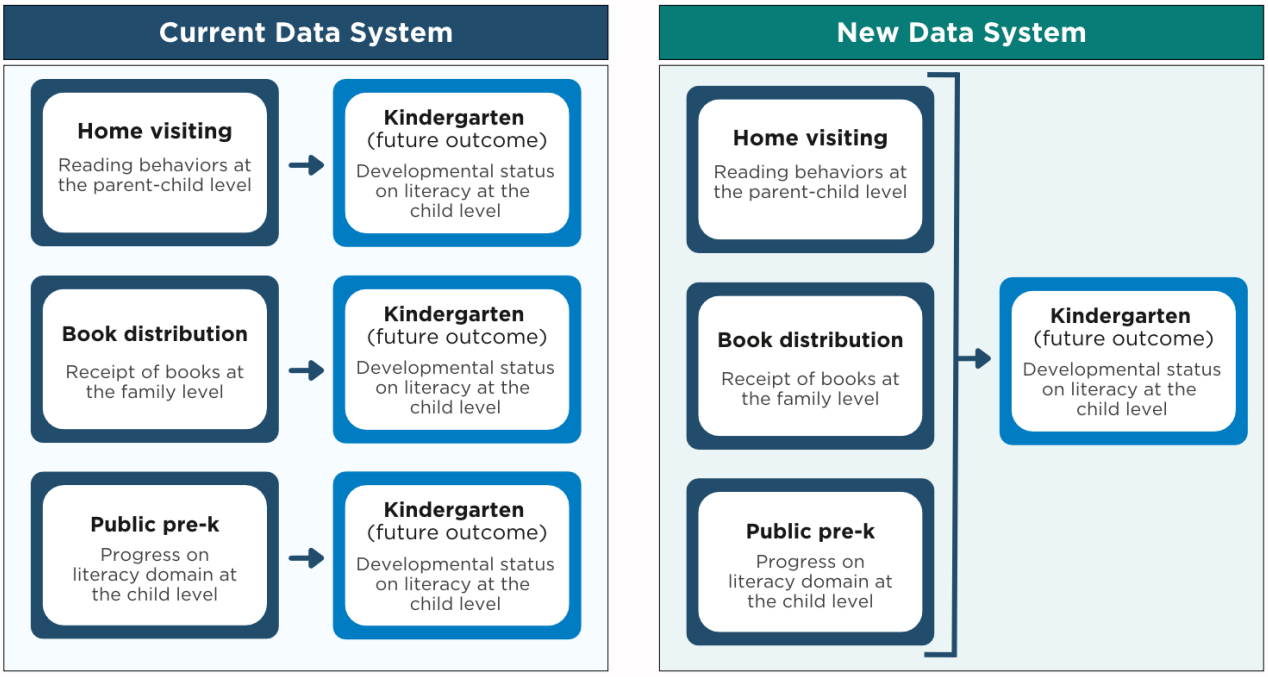
Essential Question and Metric	Suggested Measurement	Level Collected	Example Data Source Details
Question 16. Are children from focal populations reaching developmental and learning milestones when transitioning to kindergarten? *Metric*: Percentage of children from focal populations meeting benchmarks across all developmental domains (language/literacy; cognition; social emotional development; approaches to learning; and physical development).	The number of children from focal populations who are meeting the expected benchmarks across developmental domains divided by the total number of children from focal populations.	Child	*Administrative data*: Data on children's development across and by each developmental domain that take into account a host of evidence and sources to inform whether a child is or is not meeting benchmarks (accounting for various approaches to defining benchmarks), such as workforce member, family, or child input, kindergarten readiness assessment, formative assessment, or direct child assessment data that include all developmental domains.

Step 3. Define how to structure a new data system.

First Steps used the development of a new data system as an opportunity to reimagine how it collected, stored, and linked data to ensure that it could answer questions about children that were important to the agency itself, as well as its constituents and the South Carolina legislature. First Steps realized that, because its current system did not easily allow the connection of child- and family-level data—especially across programs and services—it should instead structure its new data system to assign every individual a client ID and every family a family ID that could be used (and thus linked) across programs and services. In addition to updating the structure of its data system, the agency also added processes to ensure that programs were not creating duplicate entries for the same individual or family. With the new data system, when a program enters a client into the data system, program staff must also check to see whether the client has any existing records. Then, staff can use existing records to combine information across programs instead of having entries for each separate program.

Figure 3 shows the benefit to First Steps in making this change to its data system. With the current system, First Steps could pull literacy engagement and participation for each program and link the information to future literacy outcomes in kindergarten. However, the new data system allows the agency to explore how a child's exposure to *multiple* programs and services that support their literacy development could contribute to literacy outcomes in kindergarten. With these updates, First Steps is now better able to understand how to restructure data across programs in an updated system to explore priorities.

Figure 3. Tracking Literacy Development Across First Steps Programs (Including Future Outcomes), Current vs New Data System



Next Steps for First Steps

Using these findings from the mapping exercise, First Steps determined its next steps.

- **Apply findings to the data system update.** Because First Steps was scheduled to update its data system, the agency used the results of the mapping exercise to directly inform which updates to prioritize. Their decisions included standardizing how families are identified across programs so that data could be linked and analyzed together.

- **Reduce knowledge gaps**. The Framework helped First Steps distinguish between what it could answer with current data—particularly for children enrolled in more than one program—and what it would be able to answer once system updates were in place. This distinction gave the agency a clear roadmap for building out its data infrastructure over time and allowed it to plan for the types of questions it could answer about its legislatively mandated goal in the future.
- **Support integrated data efforts across South Carolina**. First Steps also participates in a statewide early childhood integrated data system (SC ECIDS), an effort that connects local partnership and public pre-K data with other early learning programs, such as Head Start and child care scholarships. By ensuring that its internal data system can link data across programs, First Steps is now better equipped to share data statewide and understand the impact of early learning efforts, especially for families served by First Steps and similar initiatives. This work strengthens not only First Steps' internal data system, but also the broader statewide data landscape.

First Steps expects that its efforts will create impact at multiple levels. With an updated data system, the agency will be better equipped to answer critical research questions about how participation in multiple programs affects children's school readiness. This, in turn, will help First Steps communicate its impact to audiences like the General Assembly, agency leads, local partnerships, and the general public, while giving state leaders a clearer, data-driven picture of how the agency's combined services support young children across South Carolina.

Lessons Learned for Other System Leaders

Throughout the process described in this spotlight, First Steps shared lessons that other system leaders may want to consider.

- **Leverage the Framework's flexibility to meet system leaders where they are.** The Framework's questions translate easily to any early childhood program, like home visiting or parent education. This flexibility made it especially valuable for an agency like First Steps that oversees many types of programs. Further, the Framework also meets system leaders at their current data system's status quo while offering a clear vision for growth and improvement. Rather than a checklist to complete every improvement at once, the Framework offers a roadmap that allows system leaders to identify what their data can currently answer while treating the rest as a meaningful goal to build toward.
- **Engage the right people at the right time for the right roles.** The Framework's structure lends itself to giving each partner the level of information that matches their role. Different parts of the report serve different audiences: The at-a-glance overview works well for agency leadership and legislators who want a quick view of priorities, the mid-level "quick look" sections bridge general goals into more specific questions, and the Deep Dive metrics help data staff translate priorities into measurable indicators. Answering essential questions also often takes more than one team, so the Framework can clarify who else to include when one agency can't answer everything alone.
- **Align efforts with existing priorities.** The Framework's questions are designed to be feasibly answered with data and anchored in priorities that may be shared across a wide audience. Choosing questions that can be answered using an agency's existing data—and are also compelling to the people funding or overseeing the work, such as legislators or agency leaders—can help build support for the work. The Framework is meant to provide clarity for existing efforts and priorities, which ensures that the work resonates with many audiences.

The STEP Forward with Data Framework

The Framework is designed to help system leaders use data to promote greater equity at every step of the early childhood system. System leaders will better understand the experiences of children, families, or workforce members within their systems through 20 essential questions across six system steps. For more information, visit our website.

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