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First Steps: DeVenny a vocal advocate for state's preschool children

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First Steps

DEVENNY A VOCAL ADVOCATE
FOR STATE'S PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

According to Susan Williamson DeVenny '84, it's never too early to start thinking about your child's education. In fact, she says, parents should do so as soon as their child is out of the womb.

They couldn't have a better role model than DeVenny. As director of South Carolina First Steps, a program that promotes school readiness in children ages 0 to 5, she is on a mission for the state's children.

"Most of our potential for academic achievement is formed in the first 36 months of life," she says. "If we fail to provide for their needs before they can make conscious choices for themselves, the damage could be irreversible."

First Steps was founded in 1999 in response to studies indicating that a child's potential for academic success is closely tied to preschool preparation. More recently the agency has shifted its emphasis toward ensuring adequate childcare for families who cannot afford it and trying to eradicate inequities that children born into poverty may face.

DeVenny's interest in education blossomed at Furman, where she earned her degree in elementary education. After marrying classmate Alston DeVenny and receiving a master's in education from the University of Georgia, she moved back to South Carolina and began doing corporate education programs for business professionals in Columbia.

As she watched her four children grow and develop, however, she came to realize that more attention should be focused on the plight of those who do not receive adequate educational preparation. After becoming involved through PTA and other volunteer work in her children's schools, she was inspired to abandon her efforts in corporate education in favor of work in early development.

When Gov. Mark Sanford '83 took office in 2002, he asked DeVenny, then a member of



Susan DeVenny says, "With commitment first to our youngest children in poverty, we may at last break the cycle of educational failure."

MEGHAN MCCUIRE

the First Steps board and a founder of Parents for Public Schools in South Carolina, to become the agency's executive director. Since then, she's pushed for a more aggressive approach to helping the state's at-risk children.

"A lot of the work that we do attempts to reach families," she says. "We believe very strongly that parents are the first and best teachers, so the best opportunity to reach families is through parent education."

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First Steps has really moved forward since the 2005 *Abbeville v. South Carolina* ruling, in which the S.C. Supreme Court said that students in some districts suffer from a "lack of effective and adequately funded early childhood intervention programs designed to address the impact of poverty on their educational abilities and achievements." The court ordered the state to address this issue through interventions and other programs, "at least through grade three."

Says DeVenny, "It's helped us to redouble our efforts." Today each county in South Carolina has a First Steps partnership consisting of community leaders, educators, parents and faith-based agencies.

Much of her job involves convincing skeptical legislators that First Steps is vital to the future of South Carolina. "Often the addition of more resources is the answer," she says. "It's an issue of looking at how to better coordinate what's there for families. We must make access

to services easier, but we have to be honest about the gaps we face."

Among the biggest challenges, she says, is "finding the children who truly have need of services, and providing an appropriate level of service that meets those needs." Another challenge: recruiting qualified teachers to the First Steps program and encouraging them to focus on early childhood education.

Of equal importance are childcare providers. To attract better qualified workers, DeVenny says, pay needs to be more competitive, along with other incentives. "We should provide scholarships for those who currently work in the childcare industry, giving them an opportunity to go back to school and keep their education current."

DeVenny says that Furman instilled in her the drive to succeed and a heart for the marginalized. A native of Connecticut, she says she was drawn to Furman because of its emphasis on both teaching and service.

"The Furman experience points us toward a need to give back to those who are less fortunate," says DeVenny, citing such programs as Heller Service Corps. "My work in early childhood was born out of that desire."

Based on her clear sense of commitment, DeVenny seems determined to fulfill her dream of equal educational opportunity for all South Carolina children.

"We have a lot of work yet ahead of us, because we're clearly not reaching all the children that we need to," she says. "But I think we've done some groundbreaking work."

— JESSICA TAYLOR '07

For more on First Steps, visit the Web at www.scfirststeps.org.