The Half-Day Child Development Program (also known as 4K) grew out of 1984’s Education Improvement Act as an effort to better prepare 4-year-olds for kindergarten and first grade. School districts receive allocations based on the number of children who fail readiness tests in first grade, and give priority to 4-year-olds most at risk of school failure. Every district must provide at least one 4K program. Although public schools may collaborate with private child care settings or Head Start to provide 4K services, this is rarely done. State funding only pays for a part-day program during the school year, but many districts use Title I or local funds to extend the 4K program day.

During 2002–2003, an estimated 16,000 children attended 4K programs, which received $23,476,278 in state funding.

While not the focus of data in the current report, the state-funded First Steps to School Readiness program supplements 4K funding. Signed into law in 1999, First Steps combines public and private support through county partnerships to enable individual communities to address the unmet needs of young children and their families. Local First Steps County Partnerships decide how to distribute funds, with some guidance from the state. Many partnerships choose to fund the extension of half-day 4K programs to full-day, add new full-day classes, or to have additional children served in half-day 4K in public schools. In fiscal year 2003, First Steps counties also funded full-day 4K in 16 private child care settings.

It is expected that budget cuts will lead to reductions in enrollment in South Carolina’s preschool initiatives during fiscal year 2004. More than 1,600 slots have already been cut and some districts are seeking alternative sources of funding so as not to further reduce the number of slots.

A new data-gathering system for early childhood in the state was implemented in the 2002–2003 school year. It is expected to result in increased accuracy of program information.