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EMBARGOED UNTIL 11:30 a.m. MARCH 11, 2010

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 11, 2010

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Minnesota's Philanthropic Leaders Call for More Accountability, Defined Leadership for State's Early Childhood System

Group says significant changes are needed to ensure all Minnesota children are ready for kindergarten by 2020

Minneapolis – The School Readiness Funders Coalition, made up of eight members of Minnesota's philanthropic community, today announced its recommendations to achieve learning readiness of all Minnesota children by 2020. The School Readiness Funders Coalition identified three essential areas the state needs to focus its attention - leadership, accountability and funding.

Minnesota must address critical early childhood needs

According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, almost 50 percent of children in Minnesota are not prepared for kindergarten. Currently, Minnesota's early childhood education system is fragmented and not-well-coordinated. Minnesota's children are receiving care and education from a vast network of parents, friends, family, neighbors, and center-based care. Childcare choices are limited by access and cost for many families, resulting in inadequate growth and development of many of Minnesota's children.

To address these critical early childhood needs in Minnesota, a group of leading philanthropic organizations has come together as the School Readiness Funders Coalition to provide strategic recommendations to the state. All of the participating organizations have invested significantly in early childhood care and education.

"We will not see progress on K-12 without fixing early childhood education," said Sandy Vargas, president and CEO of The Minneapolis Foundation. "Currently, only half of Minnesota's children enter kindergarten ready to learn. That means our kids and our educators are behind before they even reach the starting line, which leads us to focus on remedial work rather than preparing our students to achieve and compete in a global economy. Minnesota's future is dependent on

our ability to prepare all of our children for success in school and life.”

Over the past two years, the coalition has conducted an inventory of early childhood care and education programs, providers, and research, and developed a series of policy recommendations to establish accountability and ensure greater access and quality care.

Consolidate state agency departments into one early childhood education office

Early childhood education regulatory and appropriating authority in Minnesota stretches across numerous state and local government agencies and departments. To provide clearer, more defined leadership, the coalition proposed coordinating, consolidating and streamlining the state’s current patchwork of early childhood services and programs into one cabinet-level office or agency.

A cabinet-level agency – The Office of Early Childhood Care and Education - would serve as the focal point for the state’s strategy for early childhood education. According to the School Readiness Funders Coalition, This cabinet-level agency would determine how state-administered or state-funded programs contribute to improving child readiness for kindergarten and serve as a clearinghouse for data, research, analysis and funding decisions for Minnesota’s early childhood care and education system. The Minnesota Office of Early Childhood Care and Education would consolidate existing agency responsibility and be held accountable for ensuring the quality of the early childhood system as the body responsible for assessing state progress towards the goal. The Coalition believes the new agency should be operational by 2012.

“Minnesota needs to build a system of clearly defined leadership and informative accountability to support the critical funding needs around early childhood education,” said Frank Forsberg, senior vice president of Community Impact at Greater Twin Cities United Way. “The lack of a coordinated statewide structure and leadership void have dramatically contributed to Minnesota’s declining status as a leader in early childhood education. Clearly defined leadership is a necessary first step to improving the state’s ability to ensure all children have access to quality, affordable care and education. ”

Develop accountability measurements to measure success

In addition to centralized leadership, the Coalition proposes a set of accountability measures, which would gauge success and progress across the early childhood education system. According to the group, a statewide approach to ensuring responsible investment and quality care should include three key initiatives: statewide report card, a childcare provider quality rating and improvement system and expanded screening and assessment of children.

- A statewide report card - An annual report on the state’s progress at all levels of the early childhood care and education system must be implemented to determine needs and gaps in the system for families,

providers and policy makers.

- Expanded screening and assessment of all children - All of Minnesota's children must be screened and assessed for school readiness starting at age 3, with an initial milestone of screening of 50% of children by the year 2015.
- Consistent childcare provider rating system - The Quality Rating and Improvement System must be expanded from its current pilot phase to help policy makers, families and providers understand whether providers are meeting proper standards that are aligned with getting the results Minnesota needs for children's progress and parent satisfaction.

“The state needs to ensure providers are held accountable for quality care, families and leaders have access to the information they need to make informed decisions and appropriate child development is addressed at an early age,” said Jim Hoolihan, president and CEO of the Blandin Foundation.

The Blandin Foundation, in conjunction with Wilder Research and other partners in Itasca County, developed a program, Invest Early, that aims to improve children's school readiness by improving the system of early childhood screening, care, and education. Within three years of starting the program, the percentage of children demonstrating overall proficiency or progress towards proficiency at the end of each program year is trending up. In addition, the program narrowed the proficiency gap for low-income students relative to their higher-income peers.

The Coalition supports efforts to expand the successful ParentAware pilot that rates out-of-home childcare providers in the metropolitan area.

Focus funding on accountability and leadership

The coalition acknowledged that substantial additional funding is essential to meeting the objective of all children being ready for kindergarten by 2020. Currently, more than 70 percent of early childhood education spending in the state comes from families. The remaining funds come from the federal and state government, as well as other private and non-profit organizations, which results in a gap that leaves many children without adequate early childhood education.

However, given the dynamics of Minnesota's current approach to early childhood education, the coalition does not believe funding alone is the short-term solution to this statewide problem. Instead, the coalition's recommendations aim to establish a climate of accountability and leadership to ensure the state will see its return on investment and can make informed decisions about increased investment in the future.

The coalition's policy recommendations are receiving one of their first legislative hearings on Thursday, March 11 in the House Early Childhood Finance and

Policy Division. The hearing is scheduled for 4:30 pm in Room 200 in the State Office Building.

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The School Readiness Funders Coalition

The School Readiness Funders Coalition is made up of eight members of the philanthropic community, all dedicated to providing leadership and funding for early childhood efforts in Minnesota. The coalition funded an extensive review of research and perspectives on early childhood care and education in Minnesota – from an inventory of current early childhood work in the state to best practices around the country. The outcome was an extensive list of critical early childhood education needs and a long list of organizations actively working on the issue. The coalition's efforts endorse and build on many of the programs and efforts currently underway and reflect the sentiment and recommendations of other groups working on this same issue.

The School Readiness Funders Coalition members include Blandin Foundation, Greater Twin Cities United Way, Grotto Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Minneapolis Foundation, Sheltering Arms Foundation, Social Venture Partners, Women's Foundation of Minnesota.