



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**“Champions for Children” Conference
Set for Aug. 18 in Oklahoma City**
*Conference on early learning to include
Recognition of OKCEO, ex-Gov. Henry*

Oklahoma City, July 18, 2011 -- The state of early childhood education in Oklahoma and its critical importance to Oklahoma’s economic development will be the focus of the “Champions for Children” Conference to be held **Thursday, Aug. 18**, at the downtown Oklahoma City Sheraton, 1 N. Broadway Ave. The one-day conference is sponsored by Smart Start Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Business Roundtable and the Potts Family Foundation.

The three entities also support Oklahoma Champions for Early Opportunities, a statewide initiative highlighting the strong link between early learning and robust economic growth. OKCEOs will receive special recognition at the conference for their commitment to increasing awareness and advocacy of the business community supporting early learning programs.

Smart Start Oklahoma executive director Debra Andersen said the “Champions for Children” conference, which is free and open to the public, is designed for community and business leaders with a stake in education reform and workforce development.

“We are very excited to bring early childhood stakeholders together with business leaders from across Oklahoma to this annual event to discuss the future of Oklahoma’s youngest citizens,” she said. “Investing in programs for young children and their families will lead to successful students, a skilled workforce and ultimately a stronger Oklahoma economy. Events like this solidify Oklahoma’s commitment to our most precious resource -- our children.”

The conference includes several key speakers. Among them is Lisa Klein, executive director of the Birth to Five Policy Alliance. An arm of the Buffett Early

Childhood Fund, the Birth to Five Policy Alliance helps foster state policy changes enabling at-risk preschoolers to become better prepared for success in school and life.

Also speaking will be Barry Downing, a Wichita, Kan., businessman whose staunch advocacy of early childhood education spurred him to create The Opportunity Project (TOP). Wichita's two TOP early learning centers provide a high-quality educational experience to hundreds of that city's at-risk children.

TOP has become an important model in early learning. Studies have shown that kids entering its program scored, on average, in the bottom third of their peer group. By the time they were ready for kindergarten, however, those children had moved to the top 10 to 20 percent.

A panel discussion on public/private partnerships that optimize resources for early learning will be facilitated by state Secretary of Commerce Dave Lopez. Panelists will include state Sen. Andrew Rice (D-Oklahoma City); state Rep. Randy McDaniel (R-Oklahoma City); Martha Burger, senior vice president of human and corporate resources, Chesapeake Energy Corp.; and Ken Levit, executive director, George Kaiser Family Foundation.

Former Gov. Brad Henry and First Lady Kim Henry will receive special recognition during a lunch presentation for their efforts in strengthening voluntary early childhood education. Also during lunch, Oklahoma Policy Institute director David Blatt will present a fiscal map of early care and learning programs in the state.

Potts Family Foundation president Pat Potts said she is excited about the caliber of speakers.

"The conference provides a unique opportunity for people to learn how they can participate in a national initiative that promises change of Oklahoma's negative statistics and improvement in its educational and workforce outcomes," she said.

Following lunch, the conference will focus on breakout meetings of the Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness Board and the Smart Start Communities. A public hearing will be held at 4 p.m. on proposed recommendations on early childhood education to be presented to Gov. Mary Fallin.

The "Champions for Children" Conference runs from **9 a.m. to 5 p.m., with business focus from 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.** Site registration opens at 8 a.m. Advance registration is encouraged. Call Smart Start Oklahoma at (405) 278-6978 or the Potts Family Foundation at (405) 286-6441.

A conference agenda is attached.

For more information:
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