



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**State Group of Business, Community Leaders Promotes
Investment in Early Learning**
*OKCEO to raise awareness of link between
early childhood development, economic growth*

Oklahoma City, March 16, 2011 -- A newly formed coalition of Oklahoma business and community leaders called Oklahoma Champions for Early Opportunities (OKCEO) is urging Oklahomans to promote and invest in early childhood development programs, stressing that such initiatives are critical for economic growth.

A joint effort of SmartStart Oklahoma, the Potts Family Foundation and the Oklahoma Business Roundtable, OKCEO is committed to raising awareness of the pivotal role early learning has in a child's overall education. About 85 percent of a child's brain architecture is developed by the time he or she is 3 years old, but less than 4 percent of education dollars is typically spent on children by that time.

In the midst of an ongoing recession and a state budget crisis, OKCEO members say it's more important than ever to invest in programs that will help ensure a literate and highly skilled workforce for the future.

"By focusing more dollars in the early years, we stand to save millions in future tax dollars. The evidence is clear and impressive. If we invest in early learning opportunities for Oklahoma children, all of us will benefit," said Oklahoma Business Roundtable President Blake Wade.

“An investment in those early years pays big dividends later. It’s like the miracle of compound interest: the more you invest early, the bigger the payoff later.”

Studies indicate that children who have difficulty reading in the first grade are much more likely to continue to struggle in school. Conversely, experts note that children who take part in early learning are more likely to succeed in academics, graduate high school and attend college. They are less likely to experience teen pregnancy, have disciplinary problems or be forced to go on welfare programs.

Business and community leaders who comprise OKCEO include the following:

- Lt. General Dick Burpee, Oklahoma City
- Dr. Robert Block, Tulsa
- David Burrows, Enid
- Kathy Cronemiller, Midwest City
- Peter Delaney, Oklahoma City
- Dr. Marny Dunlap, Oklahoma City
- Jim East, Tulsa
- Dr. Stacie Elfrink, Duncan
- Marilyn Feaver, Chickasha
- Fred Fitch, Lawton
- Tom Friedemann, Oklahoma City
- Bob Harbison, Lawton
- Kim Henry, Oklahoma City
- Lisa John, Ada
- Craig Knutson, Norman
- Ken Levit, Tulsa
- Ed Long, Stillwater
- Dave Lopez, Oklahoma City
- John McCarroll, Oklahoma City
- David McLaughlin, Oklahoma City
- Mary Mélon, Oklahoma City
- Brit Messer, Idabel
- Chris Mills, Tulsa
- Joe Moran, Tulsa
- Martie Oyler, Enid
- Dr. Ramona Paul, Oklahoma City
- Ray Potts, Oklahoma City
- Matt Robison, Oklahoma City
- Bob Ross, Oklahoma City
- Natalie Shirley, Oklahoma City
- Tom Sipe, Ponca City

- Wes Stuckey, Ardmore
- Blake Wade, Oklahoma City
- Trent Ward, Oklahoma City

As part of their commitment to OKCEO, participants are available to speak to organizations throughout Oklahoma and educate people about the importance of investing in such initiatives.

“This is an economic issue as much as it is an education issue,” Wade said. “Businesses need to be able to tap a highly skilled workforce and benefit from the expertise of tomorrow’s leaders. Early learning makes good economic sense.”

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