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Powers Honored, as Seniors Raise Voices for Pre-K

New Publication Shows Diversity of Support among Older Adults for Early Education in Kentucky

LOUISVILLE – As part of a celebration of Older Americans Month, Generations United’s Seniors4Kids presented the Golden Advocate Award to former Kentucky state legislator and civil rights activist **Senator Georgia M. Powers** and Catalyst4Kids Awards to **Kentucky State Foster Grandparents, The Oak & Acorn Intergenerational Center, and Open Arms of Hardin County**. Generations United also released a new publication profiling Kentucky adults age 50 and over who support quality pre-kindergarten programs in the state.

A highlight of today’s event was the release of a new report, *Kentucky Seniors4Kids: Raising Our Voices for Quality Pre-k*. The publication shows that older adults understand early childhood education is in the best interest of all generations and that quality pre-kindergarten provides children with a strong foundation for academic and lifelong success.

“Developing high-quality pre-kindergarten is the most cost-effective way to decrease the number of unskilled adults in Kentucky’s work force,” says Kentucky First Lady Jane Beshear, who has experienced firsthand how pre-kindergarten prepares students for educational success. She adds that it is crucial for the future of the Commonwealth that children get a strong start in education. Jane Beshear joins former First Ladies Charlann Carroll, Glenna Fletcher, Jean Neel Ford, Phyllis George, Libby Jones, Judi Patton, and Martha Wilkinson as Honorary Co-Chairs of Kentucky’s Seniors4Kids.

Despite widespread bipartisan support in the state, however, pre-kindergarten spending per child in Kentucky remains below the national average. Although Kentucky was once a model for other states, the decision to flat-fund the state’s Kentucky Preschool Program for fiscal years 2009 and 2010 may force programs to either reduce access or cut corners on quality, just when families need them most. “Legislators should do more to try to provide funds. I think it’s money well spent,” said Senator Powers. “Pre-k gives a child an advantage by providing the tools and skills required to enter kindergarten ready to learn and instills in them a sense of accomplishment that will hopefully continue on throughout their life.”

Currently, only 43 percent of Kentucky’s three- and four-year-olds attend pre-kindergarten or nursery school. Enrollment drops to 36 percent in Appalachia. The state’s Kentucky Preschool Program provides pre-k education to all three- and four-year-old children with special needs and four-year-olds whose family incomes are 150% of the poverty level. As more Kentucky families face job losses and pay cuts in a difficult economy, an increasing number of middle income families find themselves struggling to afford quality early childhood education.

“Providing access to a high-quality pre-kindergarten education can help stimulate Kentucky’s economy and promote long-term fiscal health,” noted Anne Tria Wise, Intergenerational Engagement Manager of Generations United. “Expanding access to early childhood education is

especially important for children and families who are struggling to make ends meet. With children unable to vote on these issues and parents burdened with balancing work, family time, and the family budget, older adults can mobilize their skills and experience to raise their voices for programs that benefit all generations.”

Over time, investing in quality pre-k can produce savings in government programs and increased revenues to the state. Research indicates that children who attend high-quality pre-kindergarten do better on standardized tests, require fewer special education services, are less likely to repeat a grade, and more likely to graduate from high school. They are less likely to commit crimes and become teen parents. Adults who attended pre-k programs as children are more likely to be employed and earn higher incomes. Pre-kindergarten programs produce a more competitive and capable workforce for the future.

“Our legislators need to make sure that funding is available for early education. They need to see how very, very important education is to all of our kids,” said Laura Cooper, founder of Open Arms of Hardin County, a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren and one of today’s honorees. Other organizations recognized with Catalyst4Kids awards include The Oak & Acorn Intergenerational Center and the Kentucky State Foster Grandparents Program. A state of the art intergenerational facility, Oak & Acorn provides intergenerational programs, early childhood education, and older adult services through Louisville Central Community Center’s Mini-Versity West Child Development Center and ElderServe Inc. The Kentucky State Foster Grandparents Program engages older adults to volunteer their services to children with special or exceptional needs, offer emotional support to child victims of abuse or neglect, tutor children who lag behind in reading, mentor troubled teenagers and young mothers, and care for premature infants and children with physical disabilities and severe illnesses.

Through Generations United’s Seniors4Kids initiative, which works in partnership with the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, older adults throughout the state are actively encouraging public officials to expand Kentucky’s preschool programs to include all three- and four-year-old children and to ensure adequate funding for quality programs. In about 10 years, more than 36 percent of Kentucky’s population will be over the age of fifty. As they experience longer periods of healthy and active retirement or “encore” careers, seniors represent a significant resource for Kentucky’s children and communities. A recent survey reported that older adults are concerned about leaving the world a better place for the future. Their primary reasons for volunteering include helping others, making a difference, and contributing to causes they care about.

For more information about older adult efforts to support quality early childhood education in Kentucky, see www.gu.org and www.seniors4kids.org.

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Generations United is a national, non-profit organization that works to improve the lives of children, youth, and older people through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit of all.

Seniors4Kids is a civic engagement initiative at Generations United that demonstrates the important role older adults can play in support of issues that directly benefit children and youth. There are over 125 Kentucky Captains4Kids from around the state.