Quinn Administration Spotlights Importance of Early Childhood Development

Child welfare leaders review early brain science research; goal is to ensure policies that promote healthy development of children

OAK LAWN – July 20, 2011 – Governor Pat Quinn’s Office of Early Childhood Development today convened a high-level conference of researchers and policy makers to review state-of-the-art developments in the field of early childhood development. The goal of the conference, which is co-sponsored by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and made possible through the collaboration of Casey Family Programs, is to ensure that child welfare and other social service agencies in the state are taking into account groundbreaking research in the field and using all resources at their disposal to promote healthy development in children from birth onwards.

“In step with Governor Quinn’s emphasis on early childhood development as a major priority on his education agenda, this conference is a tremendous opportunity to bring all our child welfare policy makers and advocates in Illinois together and learn about the cutting edge research in the field of early brain development,” said DCFS Director Erwin McEwen. “There are so many well-meaning and extremely hard-working stakeholders and organizations in our state. We want to make sure that our efforts are in line with the latest research in the field that is coming from scientists like Dr. Shonkoff.”

The keynote speaker at the daylong conference is a pediatrician and a leader in the application of research in early brain development, Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D., Director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Shonkoff describes research showing that exposure to “toxic stress” at the earliest stages of life can affect the developing brain circuits and hormonal systems of the child and lead to lifelong problems responding to stress and health problems, including heart disease. Toxic stress occurs when a child experiences prolonged exposure to stressful events without the support of caring adults.
“Experts who are studying how the brain develops in very young children are telling us that what happens to a child very early on in life has consequences that can last a lifetime. Those consequences affect the individual and society as a whole,” Director McEwen said. “That is why it is so important that we base our policies on the latest science that teaches us how to promote the healthy development of the brain in our youngest children.”

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Other speakers include Bryan Samuels, the former director of DCFS and currently the Commissioner of the federal Administration on Children, Youth and Families, as well as researchers, child welfare advocates, state agency leaders and a Cook County judge.

The conference in Illinois is one of a series around the nation made possible through the collaboration of Casey Family Programs, a private operating foundation committed to improving the lives of children and families in Illinois and across the nation. For more information about Casey Family Programs, go to: www.casey.org.

Early childhood education is a major part of the Governor’s education agenda. The Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development was established in 2009 at the recommendation of the Governor’s Early Learning Council, an advisory group representing early childhood stakeholders from around the state. Its mission is to strengthen Illinois’ efforts to establish a comprehensive, statewide system of early childhood care and education.

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Erwin McEwen
Director

Pat Quinn
Governor