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Business leaders, advocates organize to push for preschool, early childhood programs

LOUISVILLE, Ky. – Making high quality early childhood development and education programs a priority investment for Kentucky is the goal of a public awareness campaign launched last week by a group of business leaders and advocates.

Joining forces to push for positive change, members of the Shakertown Roundtable and the Business Leadership Council for Pre-K will use public events, personal appearances and other communications tools to generate support for early childhood. The Business Leadership Council was created by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence; the Shakertown Roundtable is an organization of private-sector leaders who focus on policy improvements in Kentucky.

At a Louisville meeting hosted by PNC Bank, Gov. Steve Beshear told the groups that expanding and improving early care and education programs was “one of the main reasons I ran for office. ... This governor believes in this issue wholeheartedly.” Beshear also said he plans to name a task force soon to address issues related to program quality.

Robert Clay, owner of Three Chimneys farm near Midway and chairman of the Shakertown Roundtable, and Louisville attorney Kevin Hable, who chairs the Business Leadership Council, encouraged their members to actively support the campaign in recognition of the strong return that investments in early childhood programs produce.

National research has shown that children who participate in quality programs have greater educational and economic success, with returns ranging above \$7 for every \$1 invested in those programs. The returns are realized as a result of the participants’ higher earnings and less frequent need for social programs.

Robert Sexton, executive director of the Prichard Committee, noted that the long-term goal is to make quality preschool available for all 3- and 4-year-old

Kentucky children. But the immediate goal, in light of the state's revenue shortfall, will be expanding the public preschool program to 4-year-old children whose family income is up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Kentucky's preschool program currently serves 4-year-old children whose family income is up to 150 percent of poverty (about \$32,000 a year for a family of four) and 3- and 4-year-old children with disabilities.

The public awareness campaign, set to begin early next year, will include meetings between business leaders and legislators, online resources, public service announcements and other activities and materials. The effort will focus on building public and policymaker support for making significant investments in early care and education programs as Kentucky's revenue situation improves.

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