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Maine business leaders see high quality early education as key to future economic success

By Kim Gore, state director for America's Edge

This past fall and into the first quarter of 2010 the Maine State Chamber of Commerce co-hosted a series of six Regional Business Leaders Summits on Early Childhood. Held in Portland, Bath, Augusta, Bangor and Wells, The summits served as special events with national speakers who offered insights into new ways to address Maine's economic future by focusing on strategic investments in early childhood education, which will pay big dividends in the future. A sixth and final summit is scheduled as a luncheon event at the Hancock County Technical Center in Ellsworth on Tuesday, March 30. Maine State Chamber of Commerce President Dana Connors convened each of these events and often served as moderator with national researchers who specialize in the economic benefits of early childhood development. Leading by example, Connors told the audiences that the involvement of the business community as unexpected advocates for early childhood education helps build wider support. "When the business community gets involved, it

will draw considerable attention," said Connors. Dr. Hiro Yoshikawa and Dr. Judy Cameron, nationally-recognized researchers from Harvard's Center for the Developing Child, explained the neuroscience of child development. Experts estimate that 85 percent of all brain development happens by age 5, and why building the strongest possible foundations are critical for successful academic and social achievement.

Rob Grunewald, an associate economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and author of a ground-breaking report on the economic benefits of investing in early childhood education, told summit attendees in Portland and Bath that investing in pre-kindergarten programs results in future public savings on special education, corrections and welfare. According to Grunewald, every dollar spent on early childhood education generates \$16 in benefits.

"This is a rate of return that would not sit on the private market for very long," he said. "It would get invested."

Grunewald also said that it is important for business leaders to become visible unlikely spokespeople for early childhood education and that he has seen business leader involvement across the country translate into shifting public policy priorities to focus on high quality early education.

Connors called on business leaders from across Maine to become involved in public and policy maker education about the value and future economic benefits of high quality early childhood education. Many business leaders are joining America's Edge, a new national organization of

business executives dedicated to creating a strong economy and productive workforce through smart investments in our nation's children.

"I'm not sure if the benefits of early childhood education are well understood by the business community," said Connors, "but when it is understood, it's a call to action."

In addition to the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, the Maine Business Leader Summits were sponsored by America's Edge, the Maine Business Roundtable on Early Childhood Investment, Maine Children's Growth Council, the Partnership for America's Economic Success/Pew Charitable Trusts, Fight Crime Invest in Kids Maine, and The Bingham Program. □

America's Edge is a new national business leaders group focused dedicated to creating a strong economy and productive workforce through smart investments in our nation's children, particularly early investments such as Early Head Start, Head Start and quality child care. America's Edge takes a serious look at the skills, knowledge and abilities that business needs in the 21st century. Based on that analysis, America's Edge urges research-proven investments in children and their families that will protect America's competitive edge in the global market place, get children school ready and work ready, are cost effective and pay big dividends to business and the economy for today and tomorrow. To join America's Edge or for more information, please contact state director Kim Gore by calling (207) 725-5946 or by emailing kgore@americasedge.org.