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EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE
Until 12:01am EDT May 18, 2010

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Reading Success Is Critical to Louisiana's Future

New Orleans, LA, May 18, 2010—Four out of every five Louisiana fourth grade public school students are not proficient in reading, according to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress. In 2009, Louisiana ranked fiftieth among states in terms of the percentage of fourth graders in public schools who are proficient in reading.

Today, the Annie E. Casey Foundation will release *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*, a call to action to ensure that all children become proficient readers by the end of third grade. The report is a reflection of a national commitment to reading success by the Casey Foundation and other major national organizations, including America's Promise, Mission: Readiness, and United Way Worldwide.

Being able to read by the end of third grade is a powerful predictor of later school success, including high school graduation. Research also shows that children who are poor readers are more likely to be retained in a grade and to experience social and behavioral problems in school in subsequent years. Third grade reading is especially critical because third grade is a time when children are making the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." "Making sure that every child who enters fourth grade can read well will not only benefit individual students, it will also benefit our state's economy through an increased number of high school graduates and a better-prepared workforce." says Judy Watts, President/CEO of Agenda for Children.

Louisiana ranked poorly among states on many measures that are associated with a child's reading proficiency. The data in the report shows that:

- One out of every five Louisiana children ages 1-5 are read to less than three days a week, ranking Louisiana 43rd nationally on this measure.
- Louisiana ranked 49th among states on low birthweight babies. In 2007, 11% of all Louisiana babies were born at low birthweight, compared to 8.2% nationally. Being born at a low birthweight increases a child's risk for neuro-developmental problems, behavioral problems and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- Twenty-five percent (25%) of school-age children in Louisiana have had to repeat at least one grade since kindergarten—a larger proportion than any other state.

The report explores several major factors that can undermine grade-level reading proficiency. Research has documented a "school-readiness gap" between low-income children and their higher-income peers. Low-income children are more likely to arrive at kindergarten with fewer of the language and pre-reading skills they need to succeed, with more health problems that can impede their school success, and without the benefit of high-quality early childhood education. Once in school, low-income children are also more likely to experience summer learning

(more)

loss. While low-income children lose an average of two months of reading skills during the summer, their middle-income peers make slight gains during the summer, resulting in a widening of the achievement gap. Low-income children are also more likely than their higher-income peers to attend under-resourced high-poverty schools that are not ready to teach to high standards. Due to all of these factors, significant disparities according to income have persisted both nationally and in Louisiana. In Louisiana, 87% of low-income fourth graders scored below proficient in reading in 2009, while the same was true of just 68% of fourth graders from families with higher incomes.

Addressing these challenges, the report makes several recommendations to “move the needle” on reading proficiency. These include:

- developing a coherent system of early care and education
- empowering parents to play their indispensable roles as co-producers of good outcomes for their children
- prioritizing, supporting, and investing in results-driven initiatives to transform low-performing schools into high-quality teaching and learning environments
- developing and utilizing solutions to two of the most significant contributors to the under-achievement of children from low-income families—chronic absence from school and summer learning loss

Despite Louisiana's poor ranking on fourth grade proficiency, there are many signs that Louisiana is making progress in key areas that can affect reading proficiency:

- Louisiana ranked 5th in the country in terms of the percentage of children ages 3-5 who are enrolled in nursery school, prekindergarten, or kindergarten in 2008.
- According to the National Institute for Early Education Research's *The State of Preschool 2009* report, Louisiana's public prekindergarten programs rank 12th nationally in terms of both access and state funding.
- Louisiana's Bright Start initiative is working to create a comprehensive system of early childhood services and supports for Louisiana's youngest children.
- Louisiana's Department of Health and Hospitals operates the Nurse Family Partnership program, which supports first-time mothers by providing them with the tools and resources they need to improve outcomes for their children.

“While there are many positive developments in Louisiana that will contribute to increasing reading proficiency, it is clear that Louisiana must do much more to ensure that every child begins fourth grade reading proficiently. For example, we need to pursue innovative strategies to stem summer learning loss, such as ensuring that low-income children have access to high-quality summer learning opportunities and working with schools, libraries, and community groups to provide children with learning opportunities when they are not in summer programs,” reports Judy Watts.

Agenda for Children, Louisiana's statewide child advocacy organization, works to make Louisiana a state in which all children can thrive. Agenda for Children serves as the KIDS COUNT grantee in Louisiana, providing up-to-date information on the well-being of Louisiana's children. For more information, please visit the Agenda for Children website at www.agendaforchildren.org.

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The Casey Foundation will release the report during a webcast on May 18th at 1:00 PM ET. The live webcast will include featured speakers and a panel discussion, moderated by Michel Martin, Host of NPR's “Tell Me More,” with representatives from the education, government, and business sectors. To register for the webcast, please visit www.visualwebcaster.com/casey-foundation-briefing.

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