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## Illinois Advisory Group to Examine How School Leadership Can Help Bridge Critical Gaps in Alignment Between Early Learning and K-12 Education

*McCormick Foundation to Fund Statewide Effort Examining How Leadership Can Improve Integration of the Learning Continuum in Illinois*

NORMAL, IL – Illinois State University, in collaboration with an expert advisory committee, is launching a new statewide initiative examining how education leaders can better bridge identified gaps in the coordination between early care and education and K-12 schools, thereby creating a seamless learning continuum.

The project, entitled “Leadership to Integrate the Learning Continuum” (LINC), aims to identify potential barriers to developing and sustaining a learning continuum, and to identify policies and strategies with which education leaders from both early childhood and schools can effectively coordinate the two systems.

“Within the past few years, Illinois has been at the forefront of two national movements to improve Illinois’ educational system: one in creating a statewide system of early learning, and the other in improving school leadership through support from The Wallace Foundation,” said Lisa Hood, Director of the LINC project. “This project aims to provide insight into very important work – finding how education leaders can capitalize on the critical progress made in these two areas”

“While research and common sense tell us that learning is a continuum, we too often retreat into silos that are reinforced by funding streams and institutions. This project will allow us to step out of those silos and think about learning and leadership more holistically,” said Sara R. Slaughter, Director of the Education Program for the McCormick Foundation.

### **Recent Advancements in Illinois Education Policy**

Research shows that quality preschool education pays continuing dividends throughout a child’s education, particularly when supported by high quality learning in the early elementary years. In 2006, the State of Illinois established a Preschool for All initiative, which put Illinois at the forefront of a national movement to make quality early learning available for all children.

In 2006, the Illinois General Assembly passed legislation creating a teacher leadership endorsement, a statewide mentoring program for new principals, and a Master Principal Designation.

## **The Critical Importance of Early Education**

Recent research on early brain development has shown that from birth to five years, the quality of children's early learning and social experiences affect brain development that builds the foundation for academic, emotional, and social functioning for the rest of their lives.

## **An Interruption in Learning Progress**

A case study conducted by the Association for Children of New Jersey in 2007 on that state's early learning continuum found that New Jersey's investment in early childhood (mainly pre-school) was not matched by its investment in the early elementary level, leaving a disparity in resources to assure the same level of high quality education. This led to a fading out of the children's early learning gains as they progressed through the school system.

## **A Disconnect, But Why?**

Little research exists focusing on the extent to which elementary schools or early learning providers coordinate student's early education experiences with academic approaches in elementary school, nor with the role of leadership in aligning this approach.

## **How Might School Leadership Bridge the Gaps?**

Quality leadership is an essential component of any school reform effort directed at improving student achievement. A recent study by researchers at the University of Minnesota and University of Toronto found that a school principal's leadership accounts for about 20 percent of the school's impact on student achievement at the K-12 level, second only to the impact of teachers. However, early childhood and K-12 school leaders' lack awareness, training, and practice in providing instructional leadership that would bridge the divide between early childhood and early elementary learning and create a coordinated learning system.

## **McCormick Foundation Steps In to Help**

Recognizing this dilemma, the McCormick Foundation granted funding to researchers at Illinois State University to lead a statewide advisory committee to identify the current state of coordination between the early learning and K-12 sectors in Illinois.

## **LINC Project – Advisory Committee Members**

Members of the LINC Advisory Committee include members of the Illinois General Assembly, representatives from the Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Department of Human Services, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Illinois Community College Board, and Illinois Board of Higher Education, the teacher's union, early learning organizations and K-12 school administrator organizations. A full listing of the Advisory Committee membership is available online at the LINC project's web home page at [www.leadershiplinc.ilstu.edu](http://www.leadershiplinc.ilstu.edu).

## **LINC Project – Timetable**

The LINC Advisory Committee is scheduled to complete its research and collaboration by the end of the calendar year. Members of the LINC Advisory Committee are scheduled to meet six times before mid-November as they work to develop policy recommendations for building a seamless continuum in Illinois and the related roles of early childhood and school leaders.

### **The Center for the Study of Education Policy**

Established in 1995, the Center for the Study of Education Policy provides research and expertise to policymakers and practitioners geared towards implementing systemic and sustainable education reform strategies. Center activities focus on elementary, secondary, and postsecondary issues. The Center is located in the College of Education at Illinois State University. Policy researchers in the College, the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations, and other affiliated departments conduct policy research, program evaluation, workshops, and seminars.

### **The McCormick Foundation**

The McCormick Foundation is a nonprofit organization committed to strengthening a free, democratic society by investing in children, communities and country. Through its five grantmaking programs, Cantigny Park and Golf, and three world-class museums, the Foundation helps build a more active and engaged citizenry. It was established as a charitable trust in 1955, upon the death of Colonel Robert R. McCormick, the longtime editor and publisher of the Chicago Tribune. The McCormick Foundation is one of the nation's largest charities, with \$1.2 billion in assets.

For further information and updates about the LINC project, please contact Lisa Hood at 309-438-3034 or log on to the LINC web home page at [www.leadershiplinc.ilstu.edu](http://www.leadershiplinc.ilstu.edu) .

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