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HARRISBURG (August 30, 2010) – As students and parents gear up for another school year, Pennsylvanians from every walk of life -- from child care providers and education leaders, seniors, teachers and backers of the military -- today kicked off a campaign to make sure that the next governor focus on the importance of early childhood education.

The First Steps PA campaign, found at www.firststepspa.org, is the largest voter education and registration effort of its kind ever launched in Pennsylvania. The coalition includes more than 1,200 members representing approximately 22,000 professional staff who provide service each day to more than 200,000 children across the state. More than 300,000 parents are relying on them each day to assure their children are well cared for and have the opportunity to learn, grow and develop.

“The candidates as well as voters need to understand how important a strong and well-funded early childhood education system is to our students and to our state’s long-term success,” said Joan L. Benso, President and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC), one of the organizations supporting First Steps PA. “We’ve made great strides in the Commonwealth during the last eight years and we cannot afford to stop now. The breadth and depth of this coalition reflects that progress – and the need to keep moving forward.”

Benso noted the array of supporting organizations behind the effort, including virtually every leading early childhood education group in Pennsylvania, as well as the military-oriented Mission: Readiness, Pennsylvania Seniors 4Kids, and the United Way.

“The research is there. When you invest and invest wisely, the dividends are enormous, for children, for their families, and for the Commonwealth,” said Terry Casey, President, PA Child Care Association.

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Studies demonstrate that children enrolled in high-quality child care experience fewer grade retentions and have better math and reading scores in the critical elementary school years. Children who are engaged in high-quality early learning programs need less remedial help and special education services, are less likely to need welfare, get better paying jobs and pay more taxes, and are even less likely as adolescents to get in trouble with the law.

“The goal of First Steps PA is to make early childhood education a priority issue for the next state administration. We are not going to permit the Commonwealth to slip backward,” said Jodi Askins, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Association for the Education of Young Children (PennAEYC).

First Steps Pennsylvania Steering Committee members include:

Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children
Education Voters of Pennsylvania
Fight Crime: Invest in Kids
Mission: Readiness Pennsylvania
Pennsylvania Association for the Education of Young Children
Pennsylvania Child Care Association
Pennsylvania Head Start Association
Pennsylvania Home-based Child Care Providers Association
Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children
Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children
Public Citizens for Children and Youth
Seniors4Kids -- Pennsylvania
United Way of Pennsylvania

The campaign will engage in a sustained, aggressive voter registration, education and “Get Out The Vote” effort across Pennsylvania.

“In these lean economic times, it makes sense to fund initiatives which produce a strong return on investment in our communities,” said Christie Balka, Director of Child Care and Budget Policy, Public Citizens for Children and Youth. “These programs enhance a child’s school readiness, help him do better when he gets to school, and help keep working parents working.”

By highlighting the success of Pennsylvania’s early learning programs and how these benefit all Pennsylvanians, the First Steps PA campaign will ensure gubernatorial candidates keep funding for these programs a priority, and voters keep this as a key issue as they make their decision in the voting booth in November.

For more information, go to www.firststepspa.org

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