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Press Release

COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE

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National pre-kindergarten advocacy group praises Governor Palin and Alaska for its new pilot preschool project

JUNEAU –Gov. Sarah Palin is one of three governors who proposed new pre-kindergarten initiatives in their fiscal year 2010 budgets, according to Pre-K Now, a campaign of the Pew Center on the States.

The Alaska Legislature approved the administration's request for \$2 million for a voluntary pilot preschool program that will serve up to 500 children statewide in school district-operated half-day preschools for 4-year-olds and those 5-year-olds who are too young to enter kindergarten. Interested school districts will apply for grants from the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development. Aside from operating preschools, grantees will be required to offer support, such as training and access to learning materials, to parents who care for their young children at home.

"For the first time, Alaska stands out for true leadership on pre-k," said Danielle M. Gonzales, project manager of Pre-K Now, in a prepared statement. "Governor Palin's early education proposal is an important step toward providing families the opportunities they need to help their children start school ready to learn and succeed. However, the governor will need to continue to champion this issue and ensure that any new funds are directed only to a research-based, high-quality program."

The non-partisan annual Pew report, "Leadership Matters: Governors' Pre-K Budget Proposals Fiscal Year 2010," evaluates states' budget proposals and any remarks by governors about voluntary, high-quality pre-k programs. It is available at www.preknow.org.

"It is gratifying to receive public acknowledgement from a national organization. At a time of tight budgets, the administration is moving forward with this initiative because we recognize that the benefits of children coming to school ready to learn far outweigh the costs of preschool," said Alaska Education Commissioner Larry LeDoux. "The value of preschool is well-established. The purpose of the pilot is not to prove that point, but is precisely to let school districts try out different approaches to research-based high-quality

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programs that fit their community's needs. We will find Alaskan solutions that blend statewide standards with local ideas.”

Alaska's early education community -- including private providers, educators and state agencies -- created richly detailed early learning guidelines in 2007. See <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/publications/EarlyLearningGuidelines.pdf>.

Grantees will be expected to adhere to those standards and to developmentally appropriate practices as expressed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Alaska's pilot programs will focus on all areas of a child's development while emphasizing school readiness, language development, early literacy, mathematics, and cognition.

The purpose of the pilot is not to supplant but to supplement private child care. The department expects that some of the school districts applying for grants will partner with entities such as Head Start and private providers. In other cases, the school districts may be the only entities providing preschool in their community. The programs are expected to begin in the fall of 2009.

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