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NATIONAL LEADERS, EDUCATORS, WHITE HOUSE POLICY ADVISERS TO EXPLORE IMPACT OF EARLY LEARNING ON FUTURE GENERATIONS OF INNER-CITY CHILDREN

“Transforming Inner-City Education: Can an Early Start Change the Outcome?” is the theme for the ninth annual Gesu Symposium on Inner-City Education, to be held November 1, 2 p.m. at Gesu School in Philadelphia

PHILADELPHIA (October 2006) – If America could do just one thing to ensure higher student test scores and graduation rates, less crime, better social skills, less grade repetition, fewer teen pregnancies and abortions, increased earnings, reduced need for special education, and less smoking, what would it be?

Support high-quality pre-kindergarten programs, says the National Institute for Early Education Research, which credited all of those long-term benefits to quality early learning programs. The question of whether those benefits can be even more dramatic for inner-city children will be explored on November 1 at 2 p.m. by a panel of distinguished policy advisers, educators, researchers and community leaders at the ninth annual Gesu Symposium on Inner-City Education.

“Transforming Inner-City Education: Can an Early Start Change the Outcome?” is the theme for this year’s symposium, which will be held at Gesu School, the North Philadelphia independent Catholic elementary school that has been heralded as a national model for urban education. Moderated by **Dr. John J. DiIulio, Jr.**, a Gesu trustee and University of Pennsylvania professor who served as founding director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, the panel includes:

- **Michael J. Gerson**, former White House senior policy adviser to President Bush, *Newsweek* writer and *Washington Post* columnist
- **Jacqueline Rivers**, co-founder and executive director of the National Ten Point Leadership Foundation, which helps nurture and support faith-based programs that address the needs of at-risk inner-city youth
- **Dr. John W. Fantuzzo**, a University of Pennsylvania education professor whose research focuses on school- and community-based strategies for young low-income children living in high-risk urban settings
- **Brigit Beyea**, executive director for the mid-Atlantic region for Jumpstart, the national nonprofit organization that pairs trained college students with low-income preschool children in a year-long, one-to-one mentoring relationship to improve language, literacy and social skills
- **Susan K. Urahn**, managing director of state policy initiatives for the Pew Charitable Trusts and former education policy analyst with the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota House of Representatives
- **Christine S. Beck**, president and CEO of Gesu School and long-time advocate for inner-city youth

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Early learning is valued at Gesu, where 80% of students come from single-parent households and more than 70% qualify for free or reduced-fee breakfast and lunch programs. In the school's pre-kindergarten program, Temple University students from Jumpstart work with the school's four-year-olds three days a week. Family literacy is supported through the Parent's Literacy Program, which all pre-kindergarten parents are required to attend.

"We know research shows that if children are not reading at grade level by fourth grade, it's increasingly difficult for them to catch up and achieve in later grades," says Beck. "Since most inner-city children do not start kindergarten prepared, an earlier start becomes even more important. And a quality early start is vital."

Established as a parish school in 1868 and facing extinction in 1993 when the parish was closed, Gesu was saved by a diverse group of business and community leaders who converted it into an independent Catholic school in the Jesuit and IHM traditions. At the core of Gesu's success is its philosophy that all children – including its youngest ones in pre-kindergarten – can learn and flourish given the right support. The school brings an entrepreneurial approach to governing and fundraising, sets high academic expectations and offers programs that include early learning, single-gender classes in grades three through five, intensive literacy and resource programs, counseling, peer mediation, mentoring and after-school programs, advanced technology instruction and several innovative cultural arts programs.

The results from these ongoing efforts are dramatic. Despite living in often difficult circumstances and in a neighborhood where the high school graduation rate is under 50%, three-quarters of Gesu's graduates attend competitive high schools, more than 95% go on to earn their high school diplomas, and a growing number pursue a higher education.

This year's symposium is being sponsored by Gesu School and its nonprofit subsidiary, the Gesu Institute, which was formed to help improve education in other inner-city neighborhoods in Philadelphia and throughout the country. For more information, call 215-763-9077.

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