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Child Well-Being Index Points to Pre-K Participation and Parents' Education as Leading Indicators of Educational Achievement

Washington, D.C. –According to the 2006 Child Well-Being Index (CWI), one of the nation's most comprehensive measurements of trends in the quality of life of children and youth, America has made great strides since 1975 in the well-being of children in many important areas but one: Education. The Child Well-Being Index is being released today at an event at The Brookings Institution.

The CWI suggests several leading indicators that may predict higher academic performance among American students. For instance, this year's CWI shows that an increase in nine year-olds' math and reading performance, as measured by the National Assessment of Education Progress (or NAEP, "the nation's report card"), corresponds with the dramatic expansion of Prekindergarten (Pre-K) since the mid-90s, according to Dr. Kenneth Land, developer of the CWI and a sociologist at Duke University.

Groups of indicators, or "domains," in the parlance of CWI sponsor Foundation for Child Development and CWI developer Kenneth Land, Ph.D., continue to show improvement in safety, family economic well-being, community connectedness and emotional/spiritual well-being. Downturns in the health and social development domains kept the CWI's composite score, 104.67, from rising higher.

The CWI's 30-year flatline in education is particularly troubling for Dr. Land because the quality of our nation's public education system appears impervious to the many efforts over that time period to improve schools.

In a statement, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said, "This year's Child Well-Being Index highlights the tremendous gains our students are making, thanks in large part to the landmark No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Over the last five years, more reading

progress was made among nine-year-olds than in the previous three decades combined. While this is great news for our younger students, we are not seeing the same kind of results at the high school level where reading and math scores remain stagnant. It's time we make high school reform a priority, apply the principles of NCLB and ensure that a high school education in America is a ticket to success; not a certificate of attendance."

FCD President Ruby Takanishi underscored the urgent need to determine why we have not made progress in education over the last 30 years, and to use research to guide policy to move educational attainment levels upwards.

"We have seen how effective integrated Prekindergarten to Grade 3 programs can be in giving children a strong foundation with which to start life," Takanishi said, referring to a trend in public education that connects and closely aligns the learning experiences in Pre-K classes with those found in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades. "Quality early education programs that couple strong curricula with qualified and competent teachers are essential to maintain Prekindergarten's momentum through primary and secondary grades."

Conversely, high school math and reading scores began to decline in 1990 after several years of gradual improvement. Several factors likely contributed to the reversal, including a nationwide shift in instruction, for example, from phonics to whole language; the lack of resources some schools have in handling the influx of English Language Learners; and the influence of video games and other forms of high-tech entertainment, which many experts believe takes time away from reading and studying.

A Brighter Picture on Other Indicators

Based on data beginning in 1975, the CWI provides a composite measure of trends in the quality of life, or well-being, of America's children and young people (ages 0 to 18). On the positive side the 2006 CWI finds:

- The greatest improvements for America's youth since 1975 were seen in the **Safety/Behavioral Concerns Domain**. This means fewer teenage girls are having babies and fewer children smoke, drink, use illegal drugs and commit crimes (or become the victims of crimes);
- Advances in the **Community Connectedness Domain** mean that more three- and four-year-olds are going to Pre-K, and more young adults are getting college degrees; and
- Progress in the **Emotional/Spiritual Well-Being Index** reflects the steady decrease in the number of children who are committing suicide, and a general increase in student attendance at religious services.

"The overall well-being of children and youth in the United States has persistently improved over the past decade," said Dr. Land. "This year's Child Well-Being Index, however, raises serious concerns around education, and illustrates the urgent need for policies and practices that serve our nation's youth in this area."

Persistent Declines in Health and Social Relationships

In addition to the disturbing education trends, this year's CWI also revealed the ongoing historical decline in two other areas: children's health and social development.

- The **Health Domain** is almost 30 percent below its 1975 baseline level, and starkly illustrates the effects of the nation's childhood obesity epidemic.
- The **Social Relationships Domain** is also below base year levels, and reflects the steady rise of children living in single-parent households.

“These findings are a call to action for parents and policymakers,” said Ron Haskins, senior fellow in Economic Studies at The Brookings Institution. “Kids in single-parent families are more likely to repeat a grade, to perform poorly on tests, and to be suspended from school. If we could increase the share of the nation's children living with both their parents, academic performance would improve.”

The Child Well-Being Index was launched in 2004 by the Foundation for Child Development in conjunction with Duke University and The Brookings Institution. It is a national, research-based composite, which combines data from 28 indicators across seven domains, to gauge how young people in the United States have fared since 1975. Those quality-of-life domains are: Family Economic Well-Being, Health, Safety/Behavioral Concerns, Educational Attainment, Community Connectedness, Social Relationships, and Emotional and Spiritual Well-Being.

The full report is available on <http://www.soc.duke.edu/~cwi/>

The Foundation for Child Development (FCD) is a national private philanthropy dedicated to the principle that all families should have the social and material resources to raise their children to be healthy, educated, and productive members of their communities.

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