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KIDS COUNT SETS PRIORITIES FOR ACTION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD

Jackson...According to a report from KIDS COUNT Mississippi released today in Jackson, including kindergarten in the State's compulsory education program should be the number one priority of an early childhood action agenda.

The report, *Myth and Reality: Assessing the Need for Early Childhood and Pre-Kindergarten Services in Mississippi*, uses data from the 2000 Census to identify need in the State.

"We're at the point where we have to decide if we're going to keep on dreaming about a better present and brighter future for the children of our state," said Jane Boykin, President of the Forum on Children and Families and project director for KIDS COUNT Mississippi. "I hope this is the year we stop just dreaming and start to make our dreams come true".

According to the report, there are 16 *highly enrolled counties* in Mississippi. In these counties, 75 percent or more of the children three and four years of age are enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program providing an educational experience. There are also 10 *low enrollment counties* where fewer than 50 percent of the children in this age group are enrolled. Enrollment levels in the remaining 56 counties fall between 50 and 75 percent of the three and four year old population.

The percent of the total population three and four years of age enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs in each of the 16 *highly enrolled counties* is: Claiborne (97.3); Jeff Davis (89.2); Stone (83.3); Lafayette (82.7); Jefferson (82.7); Adams (81.8); Lowndes (81.7); Madison (81.6); Pike (81.3); Warren (80.7); Humphreys (80.7); Coahoma (80.7); Hinds (80.6); Wilkinson (79.4); Washington (79.2) and Quitman (75.5). The average enrollment when these counties are combined is 81.3 percent.

Low enrollment counties, with the percent of the three and four year old population enrolled included are: Smith (48.8); George (48.2); Calhoun (46.9); Pontotoc (46.6); Noxubee (44.4); Green (43.8); Prentiss (43.7); Simpson (43.1); Itawamba (41.2) and Union (35.8). For these counties as a group, the average enrollment is 43.8 percent.

The statewide average for the population of three and four year old children enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program providing an educational experience is 66.1 percent.

“Not only are the counties appearing on each list a surprise, the differences between the two groups was startling,” Boykin said. In the highly enrolled counties the enrollment average for pre-kindergarten was 81.3 percent and only 81.6 percent for public school kindergarten. However, in the low enrollment counties, there was a significantly lower average enrollment in pre-kindergarten programs, 43.8 percent, and a much higher level of enrollment in public school kindergarten, 92.8 percent.

“We felt like the handwriting was on the wall when we saw the difference in the national percentile ranking of reading achievement for the average third grade public school student in each group,” Boykin continued. “The average ranking for the *low enrollment counties* was 13 percentiles above that of the *highly enrolled counties*. Making certain every Mississippi child has a kindergarten experience before first grade has to be the first priority.”

The remaining four priorities revealed by the needs assessment include: (2) Strengthen the natural providers of early childhood services in a community – parents, extended family, and neighborhood caregivers; (3) Nurture young children in pre-kindergarten programs while their parents work by supporting full day, year round services; (4) Test instructional methods that are as creative as we hope our children will be; and (5) Maximize existing funding before committing State funding.

Boykin says the remaining issue briefs in the *Myth and Reality* series will be released by the end of January. Starting next week, *Myth and Reality* briefs and supporting data tables will be on the Forum’s website www.mfcf.org/kidscount.html. Also available on the site are two newly developed county-by-county data tables on the 10 national KIDS COUNT indicators of child well being – one comparing data on these indicators from the 1990 Census to that reported in the 2000 Census and the other charting the most recent five year trend.

In early February, the Forum will officially launch the web-based Center for Data on Mississippi’s Children and Families. At that time, KIDS COUNT Mississippi Data will link to the national KIDS COUNT project. Users will be able to obtain graphs, profiles and rankings of Mississippi county level data.

The Forum on Children and Families is a Jackson-based non-profit organization providing community resource development through information, education and training. KIDS COUNT, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the U.S.