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Gesell LEAD Press Conference: Study Results

New Haven, CT (October 14, 2010) – The Gesell Institute of Human Development held a press conference this morning, October 14, 2010, at the Omni Hotel at Yale in downtown New Haven. This was a preliminary event to their 60th anniversary celebration for existing as a beacon of knowledge in the understanding of early childhood development, and for, acting as both an advocate and a resource for teachers, parents and schools across the country since 1950. In honor of this realization, the Mayor of New Haven, John DeStefano, proclaimed October 14th as *Gesell Institute Leadership and Discovery Day*. After welcoming guests, Mayor DeStefano congratulated the Institute on their newsworthy anniversary and commended the establishment on its positive influence on understanding child development for the past 60 years. Members of the New Haven press, key constituents from New Haven, reform-minded representatives from New Haven Public Schools and members of the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education were in attendance.

Gesell Institute’s Executive Director, Dr. Marcy Guddemi, formally announced the results of their three year study, which shows conflict against the current push-down academic philosophy that exists in our nation’s schools, especially in Kindergarten. This system of teaching is not creating better test scores according to recent studies. In fact, studies show that children feel like failures now as early as PreK, preschoolers are being expelled at 4 X higher rates than K-12 children, and social and problem-solving skills such as persistence, creativity, cooperation, and communication, which are all necessary in the adult job market, are not being fully developed. Media such as the *New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *USA Today* have noticed this trend too, and have recently published related articles. With playtime and recess being eliminated from schools in exchange for more test and desk work, children are being denied the ability to engage and expand their

social skills and relationships, which not all educators realize.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) agrees. They released revised Legislative recommendations stating that Elementary School Principals currently lack training in child development and early childhood education. Therefore, NAESP proposes that elementary principals be required to obtain professional development in these areas of child development and early learning. Recently quoted in *The New Haven Register*, Guddemi stated, “When policy-makers and school leaders don’t have access to the latest research about how children learn, they can make mistakes that actually keep down the very test scores they are trying to enhance. Gesell Institute discussed how to use scientific theories and practice to help raise test scores the right way.

Gesell Institute’s national study on children’s development drew a nationwide sample of about 1300 3-6 year olds from 53 schools in 23 states from all demographics and economic backgrounds. Guddemi claimed today that, “Children have sets of abilities that are definitively bound by their developmental level. These developmental abilities of a child are *directly related* to their success at processing the information given to them and to perform the tasks asked of them.” This means that if a child was asked by a teacher to draw a letter, the ability of succeeding at this request would depend upon the rudimentary stages of development that the child has previously progressed through. “For example,” stated Guddemi, “Our data confirms that the large majority of children could not draw diagonal lines into a triangle before the age of 5 ½ . This ability would help a child write the letter A”. The Institute’s study results are consistent with Dr. Arnold Gesell’s results of children at that same age in the 1940’s. However, the unchanging pace of developmental growth in children is being ignored by the educational curriculum that is intended to support it. A child’s ability to draw a triangle is a precursor for learning letters, words and to master reading. “If this task can be performed at 5 ½ years of age, then it is pointless to try to speed up the pace of a child’s development by purposefully giving a 3 or 4 year old letter and number tasks instead of letting them play,” concluded Guddemi. The Institute found this same data trend in PreK and Kindergarten classrooms across the country.

Good quality early childhood programs for age 3 to grade 3 are essential because they provide the proper *experiences* and exploration which allows a child to access his or her greatest potential relative to the developmental level they are at. These programs are not to help children learn more letters earlier, but to learn to negotiate and problem solve with peers, explore materials in creative ways, and engage in the work of making sense of their world alongside teachers who are experienced, patient and creative role models. Unfortunately, in an effort to close achievement gaps, both schools and parents endorse the “earlier is better myth,” believing that by “learning” academic skills earlier, developmental success will follow. Gesell’s data proves the opposite - that developmental abilities must emerge before an academic curriculum has meaning for the child and that it stimulates a corresponding motivation to learn.

The main points discussed at the press conference were that trends in schools today show

that early childhood (age 3 to grade 3) is disappearing due to academic expectations that are inappropriate for their age. This is caused by a reduction of recess time in exchange for more “instructional time,” that there is a corresponding lack of experience in child development coursework by elementary principals, and that a competing pressure and priority to raise students’ test scores strongly exists in our nation’s schools. Gesell Institute, realizing this pressure that exists, has been encouraging schools to reshape their curriculums to incorporate more age appropriate activities and requests, and that school administrators in leadership roles must be educated in more early childhood developmental fundamentals through Gesell’s professional development programs to help teach the implementation of these critical new strategies in their classrooms.

Guddemi concluded the press conference by announcing that on Friday, October 15th, Gesell Institute of Human Development hosted an early childhood leadership one-day conference, the LEAD (Learn, Educate, Advocate, Do!) Conference, also at the Omni Hotel at Yale in downtown New Haven.

Gesell Institute of Human Development is an independent non-profit organization that has been associated with how children grow and learn since 1950. The work of Arnold Gesell, PhD, MD, (1888-1961), founding Director of the Yale Child Study Center in 1911 and the Institute’s namesake, had a profound influence on the field of child development. Based on Gesell’s pioneering work documenting infant and child growth and development during the first half of the century, Gesell programs and publications help parents and educators understand the ages and stages of childhood. Professional development and parent workshops cover a broad range of topics regarding child behavior, healthy growth and development, and positive learning outcomes. The Institute’s community programs help create collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers to support school success. To learn more about the organization, its programs and products, please visit www.gesellinstitute.org.

For more information about Gesell’s LEAD Conference, please visit www.gesellinstitute.org/events.

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