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MEDIA CONTACT:

Chris Watney, President, Colorado Children's Campaign
(720) 272 - 8462 chris@coloradokids.org

Colorado Graduates Initiative Launches Statewide Partnership to Address the High School Dropout Problem in Colorado

New studies examine the gender differences between high school dropouts and the dropout problem in rural Colorado

Denver (Oct. 16, 2009) – Today, the Colorado Graduates Initiative (CGI) released two studies at the Colorado Dropout Summit for School District Leaders focused on gender differences and rural impacts of Colorado's dropout problem. The Summit -- sponsored by America's Promise Alliance and State Farm Insurance and co-convened by the Office of Governor Bill Ritter Jr., the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), and the CGI – provided an important forum for school district leaders working to address this crisis.

The first study, "A Report on Gender and the Dropout Problem in Colorado Schools," finds that male students drop out of school at higher rates than females, who make up more than 40 percent of the overall dropout population, and tend to do so at younger ages. Overall, the research found that this lower dropout rate for females may be due in part to the fact that girls are less likely to display the behaviors associated with dropping out – namely course failures and misbehavior resulting in suspensions.

"Because many girls are still dropping out, we need to pay careful attention to what other factors may be going on to trigger this behavior," said Dr. Laurie Bennett, of the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE), one of the report's authors.

The report suggests girls face different challenges than boys that contribute to their leaving school, including: care-giving responsibilities at home, lack of relationships with adults and peers in the school setting, and reluctance or inability to advocate for themselves in or outside of school.

The NCSE at the Partnership for Families and Children also completed the first of its kind dropout study of rural communities in Colorado. About five percent of Colorado students attend rural schools, and as a whole, rural school districts have the lowest dropout rates and highest graduation rates in the state. The higher levels of school completion in rural areas appears to relate to their small size where students feel more attached and students receive more personalized attention from staff.

“In comparing rural schools with high dropout rates versus those with low dropout rates, the study found that the better performing rural schools had more participation and more programs for extended learning and extracurricular activities after school,” said Ken Seeley, President of the Partnership for Families and Children. Further, a correlation was found between the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) math performance results and dropout rates. Higher math scores correlated to lower dropout rates.

This study supports efforts in rural schools to maintain academic rigor and to engage their students. According to Chris Watney, President of the Colorado Children’s Campaign, “Now more than ever, we should be encouraging the types of programs that help Colorado students finish high school. Programs that engage rural students in their schools and keep them involved appear to have strong returns that will serve those students and their communities for decades to come.”

The Colorado Graduates Initiative (CGI) is a collaboration of partners working to make measurable and meaningful progress towards decreasing Colorado’s student dropout rate and increasing Colorado’s high school graduation rate. The CGI is focused on action to improve state and local policies and practices that promote engagement, re-entry and graduation.

The CGI includes several Colorado school districts, direct-service organizations working with at-risk youth, advocacy organizations, researchers, and leaders in philanthropy who recognize the urgent need for action to address this critical issue. The effort was launched by the Donnell-Kay Foundation and is being coordinated by the Colorado Children’s Campaign, in collaboration with Colorado Youth for a Change, and the National Center for Student Engagement at the Partnership for Families and Children.

In addition to describing the studies’ findings, today’s Summit highlighted the dropout prevention and student recovery efforts of the participating local school districts, as well as related state policy advancements. Among these discussions were presentations about the newly-created state Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement within the Colorado Department of Education. This office was established by a new law enacted last year that also requires districts with significant dropout and graduation challenges to assess their policies and practices and develop research-based plans to improve them. The bill’s primary sponsor, Representative Karen Middleton of Aurora, spoke about the importance of the law and was recognized for her legislative leadership.

The CGI recently partnered with the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University to analyze the attendance, behavior, and course failures of eventual dropouts in the years preceding their withdrawal from school in five of Colorado’s larger school districts in a new report, “Advancing the Colorado Graduates Agenda: Understanding the Dropout Problem Mobilizing to Meet the Graduation Challenge.”

At the Summit, participating school districts also worked together as teams to further organize their plans, including integrating the findings of all three reports into their dropout reduction efforts.

All CGI reports can be found at www.coloradograduates.org.

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