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TWO GEORGIA COUNTIES IN EARLY EDUCATION EMPOWERMENT ZONES (E3ZS) HONORED FOR EARLY LITERACY WORK

National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading Recognizes Whitfield and Colquitt Counties as Exemplary

Colquitt and Whitfield counties, located in two of Georgia's Early Education Empowerment Zones (E3Zs), have been honored as Pacesetters by the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (GLR). The counties were chosen for exemplary work in eliminating barriers to becoming proficient readers faced by children from low-income families.

"Pacesetter Honors are among the highest awards presented by the GLR Campaign," said Ralph Smith, managing director of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. "We are proud of Whitfield and Colquitt counties and the numerous organizations and individuals in their communities for joining forces and working tirelessly to uplift children and families. They remind us that we are seeing great progress and real results all across the country."

In 2014 the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) designated four E3Zs in the state. E3Zs are targeted regions of Georgia that agreed to work with DECAL and other state agencies to pilot early education system reform initiatives and partnerships to support better outcomes for young children. The E3Zs implement specific strategies to increase the quality of and access to early care and learning options and to support local efforts to coordinate key programs and services for young children and their families. Colquitt County is located in the southern E3Z, and Whitfield County is in the northern E3Z.

"One of the goals of the Early Education Empowerment Zone concept was to spark new, local initiatives to improve and better coordinate a system of supports for children from birth to age eight," said Kristin Bernhard, Deputy Commissioner for System Reform at DECAL. "This national recognition for counties in two of the state's four E3Zs signals that others are beginning to notice the way collaboration can lead to improved systems, and ultimately we hope, to improved outcomes for children."

Reading proficiency by the end of third grade is a critical milestone toward high school graduation and career success because it marks the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." National tests show that two-thirds of U.S. fourth graders (four-fifths of whom

are from low-income families) are not reading proficiently. Students who have not mastered reading by that time are more likely to drop out of high school and struggle throughout their lives.