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MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS

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Mississippi's Retired Military Brass Concerned: 75 Percent of Young Adults Unfit to Serve

Retired generals say investing in early childhood education key for strong defense

JACKSON, MISS. (22 April, 2010) – Brigadier General Augustus L. Collins (US Army, Ret.) and Brigadier General Roger L. Shields (US Army, Ret.) held a news conference today at the State Capitol to call for greater investments in early childhood education to ensure America's national security for the future. They released a report "Ready, Willing and Unable to Serve," showing that investing in high-quality early education would reduce dropout rates and arrest rates and increase the pool of candidates qualified for the U.S. military and Mississippi National Guard.

The retired military leaders, all from Mississippi, cited recent statistics from the Department of Defense showing that 75 percent of American young adults ages 17 to 24 are unable to enlist in the military primarily because they fail to graduate high school, have a criminal record, or are physically unfit. Based on graduation rates, crime rates, and obesity rates in Mississippi, an estimated 250,000 young adults cannot join. However, that may actually be a low estimate because, compared to the national average, Mississippi has more young people who do not graduate on time or drop out and more young people who are overweight.

"We cannot let today's dropout crisis become a national security crisis. Starting with early learning will ensure young people are prepared for whatever path they choose, including uniformed service," General Shields said. "We need our elected officials to help provide early education opportunities to more young children."

The report details long-term research studies showing that at-risk children who benefit from high-quality early childhood education are significantly more likely to graduate from high school and avoid crime as adults. Researchers at UNC-Chapel Hill found that at-risk kids who did not attend a high-quality early education program were 48 percent more likely to drop out of high school. A similar study of a Michigan preschool program found that children who attended were 44 percent more likely to graduate from high school compared to similar kids who did not attend. By age 27, the kids who did not attend were five times more likely to be repeat law-breakers than those who did participate.

Head Start, the school readiness program for 3- and 4-year-olds funded through federal grants, serves 36 percent of four-year-olds and 24 percent of three-year-olds in Mississippi. However, many children in families just above the poverty line cannot enroll even though they are still at higher risk than other children of performing poorly in school. Despite the evidence in support of high-quality early learning, Mississippi is one of only a handful of states with no state-funded pre-kindergarten program.

"Field commanders need our service members to respect authority, work within the rules and know the difference between right and wrong. Early learning opportunities help instill the qualities that make better citizens, better workers

(more)

MISSION: READINESS is the nonprofit, bi-partisan organization of senior retired military leaders ensuring continued American security and prosperity into the 21st century by calling for smart investments in the next generation of American children.

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and better candidates for uniformed service,” General Collins said. “We ask that Mississippi’s elected leaders consider this as they make decisions that will determine the future security of our nation and the future of our children.”

The retired generals called on Mississippi legislators and Governor Barbour to make new investments in early learning by providing state funding for high-quality early childhood education and care for children birth to age five.

Brigadier General Collins and Brigadier General Shields are members of an organization called Mission: Readiness, led by more than 130 retired admirals and generals nationwide. The group supports policies to help young people get the right start in life so they are prepared for the workforce or military service, if they choose that path.

Visit www.missionreadiness.org to read the report “Young Mississippians: Ready, Willing and Unable to Serve” and learn more about the organization’s members and activities.

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