BOSTON, MA – The Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care has partnered with the school readiness initiative Reach Out and Read to support communities in providing the next generation of children with a strong foundation for healthy and productive lives as tomorrow’s citizens, workers, and parents.

The Department and Reach Out and Read are co-hosting “The Journey Toward Literacy Begins at Birth” conference on April 8, 2011 at the UMass Memorial Hospital University Campus in Worcester to provide early educators, community and family engagement providers, and pediatric staff with best practices and professional development on advancing children’s literacy in support of improving the educational outcomes for all students.

The Patrick-Murray Administration has named increasing early literacy rates as a key strategy for closing and preventing achievement gaps statewide.

“Understanding how oral language is developed is critical to fostering children’s literacy, and literacy provides the foundation for lifelong learning and future success,” said Department of Early Education and Care Commissioner Sherri Killins. “Therefore EEC is excited about the opportunity this conference will provide early educators and caretakers, pediatricians, and other members of the community to come together in supporting families as children’s first teachers.”

“Joining forces around school readiness is absolutely critical,” said Reach Out and Read CEO Earl Martin Phalen. “Research shows that if you invest in the first five years of life and partner with parents, you can dramatically increase the early literacy skills of a child, putting them on the right track for success in school and in life.”

Leaders across sectors including education, pediatrics, and research will highlight the importance of providing high quality early learning experiences for children as the necessary basis for them to grow into healthy, responsible adults. Healthy interactive relationships with adult caregivers in the family and community shape the architecture of children’s brains, an investment that is paid back through a lifetime of productivity that will support the community and economic development of the Commonwealth.

A key feature of the literacy promotion event is a workshop on an online early literacy screening tool for use with 4-year-olds to determine their early literacy skills prior to kindergarten, combined with specific enrichment exercises for parents tied to the screening outcomes and a list of carefully-selected online resources to enhance their literacy-related interactions with their children.

Attendees will receive a packet of literacy materials including a DVD that models reading aloud in 14 languages; annotated booklists; and Reach Out and Read’s developmental milestones of early literacy.

Building the capacity of communities to support the early education and care of children through literacy advancement is a quality enhancement designed to meet the developmental needs of all children. High quality resources and programs are necessary factors in making a difference in children’s growth and in being effective in yielding positive outcomes.

Speakers include Phalen and Killins; Reach Out and Read National Medical Director and New York University Professor of Journalism and Pediatrics Perri Klass, MD; Massachusetts Reach Out and Read Medical Director Marilyn Augustyn, MD; A.L. Mailman Family Foundation Vice President Betty Bardige; and Reach Out and Read Early Literacy and Research Specialist Jean Ciborowski Fahey, PhD.

About Reach Out and Read:
Reach Out and Read is an evidence-based, national nonprofit organization that promotes early literacy and school readiness by giving new books to children and advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud at regular pediatric checkups. The model includes providing a carefully-selected, new, age-appropriate book for each child to take home from every checkup from 6 months through 5 years. Along with the free book for every child, doctors and nurses also provide guidance to the parents about the importance of reading aloud with their children every day. The research proves that families served by Reach Out and Read read together more often, and their children enter kindergarten with larger vocabularies, stronger language skills, and a six-month developmental edge.

In Massachusetts, Reach Out and Read serves 195,261 children in 225 locations. Nationwide, Reach Out and Read doctors and nurses serve 3.9 million children and their families annually at 4,654 pediatric practices, hospitals, clinics, and health centers in all 50 states, targeting those centers which serve children at socioeconomic risk.

About the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care:
The Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care provides the foundation that supports all children in their development as lifelong learners and contributing members of the community, and supports families in their essential work as parents and caregivers.