



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Thursday, April 13, 2023

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**MINNESOTA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS RECOGNIZE
THE SOUTHERN MINNESOTA INITIATIVE FOUNDATION**
**The Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education (MNAFEE) presents the
Friend of the Year Award on April 13, 2023**

St. Cloud, Minn., April 13, 2023 – The Minnesota Association for Family and Early Education announced the Friend of the Year Award winner today. The award is presented to acknowledge MNAFEE's appreciation of contributions to children, parents and families and/or the publicly funded programs that serve them.

The Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF) was chosen as winner of the Friend of the Year Award for 2023. SMIF's entire region has a population of over 755,000 which covers the 20 counties of Southern Minnesota (Blue Earth, Brown, Dodge, Faribault, Fillmore, Freeborn, Goodhue, Houston, LeSueur, Martin, Mower, Nicollet, Olmsted, Rice, Sibley, Steele, Wabasha, Waseca, Watonwan, and Winona.) The programs, grant making and technical support are given throughout the 20 county region which includes approximately 100 school districts. The focus is on developing effective strategies to address the needs of the region which include high quality training, technical assistance, grants, funding and the necessary resources to support the early childhood care and education field.

SMIF invests over \$1.5 million annually to support a variety of early childhood development projects and programs. They clearly see the connection between investing in our youngest children – to prepare them to be the workers, entrepreneurs, and leaders of tomorrow. An example of that is the New Prague school district which received over \$50,000 from SMIF to help fund projects that positively impact families with young children. Their support provided: social emotional learning bags, parent resources totes, equipment for our gym, parent resource website, tuition money for scholarships to service more students, children's books for low income families, screening, little libraries in area businesses, kick off to kindergarten activity kits and this is just one school district! Their support has made a positive impact with thousands of families with young children not only in New Prague but across the southern region of Minnesota.

The dedication and commitment of Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation helps ensure that the quality of the programming and services we provide to families of our youngest children continues for years to come.

RaeJean Hansen accepted the award on behalf of SMIF. RaeJean manages SMIF's Early Childhood strategies working closely with communities, organizations, foundations and other partners. Since joining the Foundation in 1990, she has utilized her knowledge and skills in workforce, business, early childhood and economic development and is involved in regional and state-level work such as the National Academy of Science Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8, Start Early Funders Coalition, Parent Aware Advisory Committee, Minnesota Delegation to Sweden, and the Minnesota P-3 coalition.

About the Friend of the Year Award: This award is presented to an individual, group, or organization who has made significant contributions to the fields of parent education, Early Childhood Family Education, and/or early childhood programming in public schools in Minnesota and thereby has been a champion for young children, parents and/or families, and/or the publicly funded programs that serve them. The individual, group or organization does not provide consistent direct service within parent education, Early Childhood Family Education, or early childhood programming in public schools in Minnesota.

Nominees for the MNAFEE Friend of the Year Award must:

- reside or have resided in Minnesota or do business in Minnesota
- have made a statewide impact on the lives of young children and/or families, and/or the publicly funded programs that serve them
- have improved the quality of life for young children, parents and/or families, and/or the publicly funded programs that serve them.

The Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation was recognized at the MNAEFEE Annual Conference in St. Cloud on April 13, 2023.