Scott McConnell Named 2008–2009 Fesler-Lampert Chair

S cott McConnell, professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and director of community engagement at the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED), has been named the 2008–2009 Fesler-Lampert Chair in Urban and Regional Affairs. McConnell’s appointment was made by the vice provost and dean of the Graduate School, Gail Dubrow, based on recommendations from CURA’s nominating committee.

The Fesler-Lampert Chair in Urban and Regional Affairs is one of four endowed chairs and two named professorships made possible through a generous contribution to the University of Minnesota by David and Elizabeth (R.J.) Fesler. The Fesler-Lampert Endowment in Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies was initially established in 1985 to stimulate interdisciplinary research and teaching through the appointment of distinguished, broadly learned scholars to endowed faculty positions at the University of Minnesota. McConnell has taught at the University since 1986. Most recently, his research has focused on the design and evaluation of assessment and intervention programs that promote school readiness for young children who live in poverty, speak languages other than English, have disabilities, or otherwise are at risk for later learning and behavior problems. Currently that work is embodied in a project called Five Hundred under 5, a collaborative initiative among the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board, and Way to Grow (a community-based family services program) to promote school readiness for young children in North Minneapolis. The initiative has three goals: (1) providing information and resources that engage and empower parents and family members to support children’s development, (2) expanding and enhancing services for families to support the development of school readiness, and (3) researching the factors that promote or inhibit child development to inform the efforts of child and family service programs, policy makers, and others working on behalf of children.

The resources provided by his appointment as Fesler-Lampert Chair will allow McConnell and his research team at CEED to pursue two projects related to the Five Hundred under 5 initiative. The first involves expanding ongoing research on common pathways to the development of school readiness and good health. The team’s experience to date suggests that school readiness and health outcomes may be influenced by similar factors and variables, and therefore may benefit from similar approaches to research and intervention. Although this idea may not seem particularly novel, McConnell notes that “every little systematic research exists that describes the relationship between school readiness and health outcomes for young children and their families, and even less exists on common factors affecting the development of these outcomes and related interventions.” The unique group of collaborators associated with Five Hundred under 5 provides a rich opportunity for exploring these issues. McConnell and his team will isolate overlapping causes and conditions that inhibit school readiness and impair health, and design and evaluate comprehensive behavioral, social, and health interventions that promote improved outcomes across both domains.

A second project McConnell and his colleagues will pursue involves the perceived values and goals of both policy makers and members of high-poverty communities. As McConnell explains, “My experiences over the past several years suggest that community members in North Minneapolis—particularly the parents of young children—have deep mistrust and see little value in research. Similarly, researchers frequently bemoan the fact that research findings have limited effect on the policies and practices of decision makers and government agencies... It’s apparent that the research community needs to better understand how, and under what conditions, it can inform and be respected by these two important constituencies.”

To help address this problem, McConnell proposes to systematically examine the factors that affect the value of research for community members and policy makers, starting with the Five Hundred under 5 project in North Minneapolis. McConnell will interview family support advocates, agency staff, and parents to identify features that make research findings meaningful to these groups, and how best to communicate assessment and research results to parents and community audiences. In addition, McConnell will work with county, city, and school district program managers to identify features of university-community partnerships that help governmental and other service agencies make systematic, ongoing improvements to the services they provide to citizens. The Fesler-Lampert Endowment is intended as a tribute to David Fesler’s grandchildren, Bert Fesler and Jacob Lampert. The Fesler-Lampert Chair in Urban and Regional Affairs is appointed for a one-year period and receives approximately $40,000 for research, salary, and logistical support. The funds are jointly administered by the University of Minnesota Foundation and the University of Minnesota.