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NEWPORT

Kids Count points out school areas of concern

The report focuses
on graduation, dropout
and absentee rates in
city schools.

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

The graduation rate for Rogers High School dropped to 67 percent for the Class of 2013, discouraging news since the graduation rate had topped 80 percent in 2011, according to data from the 2014 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook.

Of the students that were not counted as part of the graduation class, 4 percent completed a GED equivalency program and received a diploma within four years of entering high school. Another 7 percent were still in high school in the fall of 2013, so the dropout rate is recorded as 22 percent. The graduation rate for the state as a whole is 80 percent.

The chronic absentee rate at Rogers High School is connected to the dropout rate, school officials say. To achieve in school and graduate, students have to be in school.

The chronic absentee rate at Rogers High School was 38 percent in the 2012-13 school year, well over the state average rate of 24 percent. The rate at Thompson Middle School was 20 percent, compared to the state middle school average of 15 percent.

The rate among students in

kindergarten through third grade was 17 percent in the 2012-13 school year, compared to the state average of 12 percent. That was the last year when the students were distributed locally among four elementary schools. The new Pell Elementary School opened in September 2013.

These chronic absentee rates reflect the percentage of students who were enrolled in school for at least 90 days and missed 18 days or more days of school. The number 18 was chosen because it is 10 percent or more of the 180-day school year.

When Kids Count releases its overwhelming amount of data in its annual Factbook — now in its 20th year — there always seems to be a statistic that catches the attention of participants who attend an annual forum in Newport.

This year, the high dropout rate and school absenteeism statistics in the city generated the most discussion among the more than 75 representatives of social service agencies, community leaders and policymakers who gathered Tuesday morning at the Newport Public Library.

Stephanie Gellner, a Kids Count policy analyst, presented key findings of the 189-page Factbook during a Power-

Point presentation, highlighted Newport results, and answered questions from the audience.

School Committee member Robert B. Power said he believes the significant number of students who enter the school system and leave after a year, or a few years, is reflected in the attendance rates and the high number of students not achieving proficiency in state math and reading assessment tests.

"Districts with high student mobility face additional challenges," agreed Gellner.

Senate President M. Teresa Paiva Weed, D-Newport, opened the forum by pointing out how the data show areas where communities have improved and areas where more attention is needed.

"Kids Count matters because we need statistics and data to allow public officials to negotiate a budget," she said. "We need to show that what we are investing public funds in, is showing improvements."

She pointed to RiTe Care, the medical assistance program for

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children younger than 19, parents and pregnant women, as an example of a program whose success is shown in the statistics. All but 5.4 percent of children under the age of 18 in the state have health insurance, which puts the state among the best in the nation in this area.

School Superintendent Colleen Burns Jermain said specific absenteeism and truancy data allow school officials to address the problem with individual children, and the results are good.

In February of this year, school officials sent letters to the families of 17 children who had been chronically absent. Mark McKenna, a family service coordinator at Pell Elementary School, said he and other family service coordinators also go to the homes of families of chronically absent students to talk to the parents and the kids.

School officials monitored the attendance of those 17 students in the current school year, Jermain said. Six of those students have perfect attendance so far, four students have had two absences and one student has had three absences. The six remaining students have moved from the city with their families.

Jermain said these results reflect a "remarkable change in behavior."

She said school officials would continue monitoring attendance of all students. Data from the current school year to date shows an average daily absentee rate of almost 25 percent among high school freshmen, much higher than any other grade.

That is a difficult year for students, she said, but there may be circumstances that have to be reviewed. For example, she said students in the high school's alternative learning program might be carried over as freshmen, and thus enrolled as freshmen for two or more years.

"We must focus more on how to keep freshmen and sophomores in school when they are most susceptible to dropping out," Jermain said.

As a comparison, the average daily absentee rate among seniors in the current school year is 8 percent so far.

The lowest average daily absentee rates are among students in grades 4-8, at about 5 percent so far in the current school year, according to a spreadsheet passed out by Jermain.

"We have made great strides in the past year, especially at the elementary and middle school levels," Jermain said. "We almost had perfect attendance one day at Thompson Middle School."

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COLEEN BURNS JERMAIN

Newport school superintendent