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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Releases New Issue Brief: *Improving High School Graduation Rates in Rhode Island*

Rhode Island's four-year graduation rate has increased from 70% in 2007 to 76% in 2010. Core city districts have increased by the largest margin but continue to have much lower graduation rates than other districts.

Developing early warning systems that identify and intervene with students who are struggling in school in 4th grade, 6th grade and 9th grade is a proven strategy to increase graduation rates.

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Providence, RI (June 27, 2011) – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its latest Issue Brief – *Improving High School Graduation Rates in Rhode Island* – at a policy roundtable attended by educators, advocates, lawmakers and community leaders. The event was held on **Monday, June 27, 2011 from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, One Union Station in Providence**. Speakers included Senator Hanna M. Gallo, Chairperson of the Senate Committee on Education, Representative Joseph M. McNamara, Chairperson of the House Committee on Health, Education and Welfare, and Rhode Island Commissioner of Education Deborah Gist. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst Stephanie Geller presented findings from the *Issue Brief*.

High school graduation is the minimum requisite for college and most employment. Post-secondary education is fast becoming a requirement for an increasing number of workers. In fact, a recent analysis by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce predicts that by 2018, almost two-thirds (61%) of jobs in Rhode Island will require some postsecondary education.

During the 2009-2010 school year, there were 2,148 Rhode Island students who dropped out of high school between 9th and 12th grade. "Dropping out of high school in this current economic climate is a prescription for poverty," said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. "At the very least, Rhode Island's young people need a high school education to succeed in today's workforce. The data in this *Issue Brief* proves that we need to continue to work hard to engage and support our students so they remain on track for graduation."

According to *Diplomas Count 2011*, an *Education Week* report, 70% of Rhode Island students from the class of 2008 graduated from high school on time with a regular diploma. That number is up slightly from 1998 when 69% of students in Rhode Island graduated on time. Rhode Island ranked 35th among the states on this measure, with 1st being the best and 50th being the worst. In recent years, Rhode Island's graduation rate has increased more markedly, from 70% in 2007 to 76% in 2010. Core city district graduation rates have increased by the largest margin, increasing from 56% in 2007 to 65% in 2010, but continue to be much lower than other districts. Core city districts are Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick and Woonsocket.

Warning signs for students at risk

Dropping out of school is almost always a long process rather than a sudden event. Researchers have identified a number of factors or "early warning signs" that can predict students at risk for dropping out.

- Repeating one or more grades
- Poor grades and poor achievement on tests
- Reading below grade level at the end of 3rd grade
- Performing below grade level in 6th grade (or earlier)
- Failing one or more subjects, particularly in 9th grade (especially English or mathematics)
- Ongoing patterns of absenteeism or tardiness
- Lack of connection or engagement in school
- Multiple suspensions or other behavior problems

"It is crucial that school leaders set up early warning systems to identify students who are struggling in school and implement strategies to ensure that students remain in school," stated Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. "There are a few key indicators of attendance, behavior and academic performance that can be measured and monitored as students progress through school."

Research shows that reading at grade level by the end of 3rd grade, 6th grade attendance, behavior and course performance, and 9th grade course taking and course

failure can be tracked and monitored to successfully identify and intervene with students who are most at risk of dropping out.

Youth at greatest risk of dropping out

In Rhode Island, students in several specific sub-populations are completing high school at lower rates than their peers. They include low-income students, minority students, students with special needs, male students, and English Language Learners.

Poverty is strongly linked to the likelihood of dropping out. Students in Rhode Island's core cities, which have a higher percentage of children living in poverty, are more than twice as likely to drop out as students in the remainder of the state. Minority students are also more likely than White students to drop out. Male students (16%) are more likely to drop out than female students (11%).

While Rhode Island data are not available, national data indicate that pregnant and parenting teens, youth in the foster care system, youth involved with the juvenile justice system and homeless youth are at increased risk for dropping out of school.

Recommendations for improving graduation rates

There are several steps school districts in Rhode Island can take to improve graduation rates. School districts can:

- Establish early warning and monitoring systems that identify students who are at risk of dropping out and implement multiple strategies to support each student on their path to graduation.

- Provide additional supports for struggling students, such as tutoring, credit-recovery programs and summer remediation programs.

- Offer access to high-quality early childhood programs, pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten to prevent the achievement gap early on.

- Improve truancy, attendance and discipline policies to increase student engagement and create safe and supportive school atmospheres.

- Ensure that all school leaders have high expectations for students and staff.

- Improve communications and partnerships with families, especially when children are falling behind academically.

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the economic well-being, health, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.