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HEALTH CARE

Study documents tie between high lead levels, poor reading skills

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PROVIDENCE – A long-awaited study measuring the relationship between elevated blood lead levels and the lack of reading readiness in public kindergarten students in Providence was published in the May issue of Pediatrics.

The study found that elevated blood lead levels were associated with lower reading readiness at kindergarten entry, an early marker of school performance.

Overall, 3,406 students were studied. “The high prevalence of elevated blood lead levels warrants additional investigation in other high-risk populations,” the study concluded. The study results suggested that there was a need for additional collaboration between health and educational leaders to address the problem.

In Providence, 20.6 percent of children entering kindergarten in the fall of 2014 were found to have elevated lead levels in their blood, according to Rhode Island Kids Count.

In turn, every dollar invested in lead paint hazard control is estimated to have a return of \$17 to \$221 in reduced health and education costs, according to Rhode Island Kids Count.

“We no longer see large numbers of children hospitalized with life-threatening lead levels, said Roberta Hazen Aaronson, director of the R.I. Childhood Lead Action Project. “But even now, a shocking one in five current kindergarteners in Rhode Island have a history of lead poisoning. The poisoning levels we see most typically today are still creating a huge, preventable burden on families and our education system. Last year, Rhode Island spent an estimated \$17 million in additional special education costs due to the effects of lead poisoning on students.”

Aaronson commended the House Finance Committee for including funding in its proposed FY 2014 budget for the R.I. Department of Health’s Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, which would have otherwise been faced with a shutdown due to federal funding cuts.