



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

For Immediate Release

Contact: Raymonde Charles
401-351-9400, ext. 22 / rcharles@rikidscount.org

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Presents:
West Warwick Data in Your Backyard

West Warwick makes progress in providing a full-day kindergarten program, enrolling 100% of kindergarten children, up from 54% two years ago.

West Warwick child abuse and neglect rate is the second highest in the state.

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**West Warwick, RI, December 1, 2010** - Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst, Stephanie Geller, presented data from the *2010 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* to an audience of community leaders, educators, community providers and policy makers. The presentation included highlights of improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth in West Warwick. After the presentation, community members discussed opportunities to improve outcomes for children and youth in West Warwick. The presentation was co-sponsored by Tides Family Services and the West Warwick Police Department and was held on **Wednesday, December 1, 2010 from 3:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the West Warwick Youth Center**, 40 Factory Street, West Warwick, RI.

West Warwick has one of the highest child poverty rates in the state with more than one in six children (18%) living in poverty. “We know that children living in poverty are less likely to have the opportunities and resources they need to thrive. They are at greater risk for poor health and developmental outcomes,” stated Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “We know what works to ameliorate the negative, long-term effects of poverty. Key strategies include linking families to a network of supports (including child care, health care, and family support services), ensuring access to high-quality early learning opportunities, and providing a high-quality education that does what it takes to ensure that all children achieve at high levels.”

## **Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect**

“For more than a decade, West Warwick has consistently had one of the highest rates of child abuse and neglect in the state,” said Geller. In 2009, 144 children under age 18 in West Warwick were victims of child abuse and neglect up from 102 children in 2008. Between 2008 and 2009, the West Warwick rate of child abuse and neglect increased from 15.4 victims of child abuse and neglect per 1,000 children to 21.7 victims of child abuse and neglect per 1,000 children. This was almost double the state rate of 11.7 victims per 1,000 children under age 18 and the second highest child abuse and neglect rate in the state, after Woonsocket. Preventing child abuse and neglect is critical for helping children grow into strong, healthy, productive adults and good parents. “Local and state efforts are being implemented to help caregivers who may be overwhelmed by multiple stressors, including inadequate income to meet even basic needs and lack of strong social support networks,” noted Geller. “Research shows that high-quality, intensive family support programs during the first few years of life can reduce the risk of abuse and neglect, keep families from ending up in the child welfare system, and improve child outcomes. Providing a strong network of family support services, access to health care and affordable child care can help keep families from ending up in the child welfare system.”

## **Teen Pregnancy and Parenting**

Teen pregnancy and parenting can be an important risk factor for future involvement with the child welfare system. National research shows that 80% of families in the child welfare system had their first child as a teenager. Between 2004 and 2008, the rate of teen pregnancy among younger teens (ages 15-17) in West Warwick was 18.3 births per 1,000 teen girls ages 15-17, slightly lower than the state rate of 18.9 per 1,000 teen girls ages 15-17. Yet, the teen birth rate for older teens (ages 18-19) was the fourth highest in the state and continued to be significantly higher than the state rate. From 2004-2008, there were 69.7 births per 1,000 girls ages 18-19 in West Warwick, compared to 44.0 births per 1,000 girls ages 18-19 in Rhode Island.

Geller highlighted the need to prevent teen pregnancy and provide supports to teen parents, stating, “Teen pregnancy and parenting threaten the development of teen parents as well as their children. Older teen parents and their children are at almost as great a risk of negative outcomes as younger teen parents. Teen pregnancy prevention is best addressed by using multiple approaches that meet the developmental needs of teens, making sure that youth are engaged in school, providing opportunities for teens to build career and leadership skills, and offering accurate information about and increased access to reproductive health care services.”

## Education

While more children in West Warwick are able to benefit from the Early Head Start program than in the rest of the state, only 15% of eligible West Warwick children are enrolled in Early Head Start (compared to the state rate of 4%). Early Head Start is designed to support the healthy cognitive, social and emotional development of infants and toddlers and to support parents in their role as the child's first teacher. "There is a critical need for increased access to high-quality early learning opportunities for children from birth to kindergarten. Access to high-quality educational opportunities is a proven strategy for moving children out of poverty," stated Geller. "High-quality early learning programs are the starting point, building the foundation for children's social, behavioral and cognitive development." In West Warwick, 42% of children eligible for the Head Start preschool program are enrolled, comparable to the state rate of 40%. In the 2008-2009 school year, West Warwick began providing a full-day kindergarten program for 100% of children, up from 54% in 2007-2008 and 75% in 2008-2009. "Research shows that full-day kindergarten programs are especially beneficial for poor and minority children and can significantly contribute to closing academic achievement gaps that often exist at kindergarten entry," stated Geller.

College preparation and access also are critical to moving families out of poverty, yet many students either do not graduate from high school or graduate from high school unprepared for college entry. West Warwick's four-year high school graduation rate was 69% in 2009, lower than the state rate of 75%. In 2009, the dropout rate in West Warwick was 20%, compared to 14% for the state as a whole. "Dropping out is usually a long process rather than a sudden event. Rates of fourth grade reading proficiency are a critical indicator of future success in school and the likelihood that a child will graduate," noted Geller. The rate of West Warwick fourth graders reading at or above proficiency level decreased from 69% in 2008 to 60% in 2009 and is now lower than the rate for the state as a whole (67%). Geller continued, "Warning signs that a student may drop out include repeating one or more grades, failing one or more core subjects in the ninth grade, ongoing patterns of absenteeism or tardiness, suspensions, low academic achievement, high mobility, delinquent behavior and disengagement from school."

A new indicator on *College Preparation and Access* shows that Rhode Island youth are less likely to go on to college than youth in the U.S. as a whole. In 2006, just over half (55%) of Rhode Island seniors who graduated from high school went directly on to a two-year or four-year college, compared to 62% of seniors nationally. Rhode Island ranks 43<sup>rd</sup> on this measure

(1<sup>st</sup> is best). Low-income and first-generation college students are much more likely to go to college when they attend schools with strong “college-going cultures,” where teachers encourage students to go to college, work to make sure students are prepared, and help students with the college application process. In 2008, almost three in four (72%) West Warwick high school seniors reported planning to attend college, but only 45% took the SATs. While some colleges do not require the SATs for admission, students significantly limit their choice of colleges when they do not take the SAT exams.

Other education highlights include:

- The rate of eighth graders reading at or above proficiency level increased substantially from 59% in 2008 to 71% in 2009 and is now comparable with the state rate of 70%.
- In 2009, 62% of West Warwick eighth graders scored at or above proficiency for math, up from 55% in 2008 and higher than the rate for the state as a whole (54%).
- During the 2008-2009 school year, there were a total of 1,179 disciplinary actions taken against West Warwick students, down from 2,295 during the 2009-2010 school year. During that same period, the number of out-of-school suspensions decreased from 914 to 466 in West Warwick. Research shows that school discipline policies that work to re-engage students in school reduce dropouts and improve student outcomes.
- During the 2008-2009 school year, the West Warwick student mobility rate (24%) was substantially higher than the rate for the state as a whole (16%). Students who change schools in the middle of the year are more likely to be absent and are less likely to be academically successful than their peers.

A new indicator on *Youth Violence* showed that during the 2007-2008 school year, 12% of Rhode Island public high school students reported ever experiencing violence in schools and 13% reported ever bringing a weapon to school. In comparison, in West Warwick, 14% of students reported ever experiencing violence and 16% of students reported ever bringing a weapon to school. Violence in schools affects individual victims and also disrupts the functioning of entire schools. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, youth with disabilities and youth with low grades (Ds and Fs) in Rhode Island are more likely than their peers to report being threatened or injured at school and to miss school because they felt unsafe.

## **Infant Health Outcomes**

Data from the *2010 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook* show West Warwick has made progress in improving infant health outcomes but more work needs to be done to ensure that all West Warwick children grow up healthy. Between 2004 and 2008, West Warwick had the lowest rates of preterm births (10.9%) and infant mortality (4.0 per 1,000 births) of the core cities. West Warwick's rate of low birthweight infants between 2004 and 2008 was 7.0%, lower than the state rate of 8.0%. Between 2004 and 2008, 14.5% of West Warwick women received delayed prenatal care or no prenatal care, higher than the state rate of 14.0%. Early prenatal care is important to identify and treat health problems and influence health behaviors that can compromise fetal development, infant health and maternal health.

## **Food and Nutrition Programs**

Programs for working and unemployed families, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the School Breakfast program, help to prevent the worst effects of poverty on child development and learning. Adequate nutrition and access to healthy meals is critical for healthy child development. Children living in poverty are less likely than their peers to receive adequate nutrition which is critical to health and learning. SNAP helps low-income families obtain better nutrition through monthly benefits they can use to purchase food at retail stores and some farmers' markets. From 2005 to 2009, the number of West Warwick children receiving SNAP benefits increased by 73% from 851 children to 1,472. "However, during that same time period, from 2005 to 2009, West Warwick's School Breakfast participation rate has not experienced a similar increase despite the negative impact of the economic downturn on families' abilities to meet basic needs," remarked Geller. In October 2009, less than one in four (24%) low-income children eligible for free or reduced-price School Breakfast participated in the School Breakfast program, essentially the same as in 2005, when 26% of low-income children participated. Children who have access to food programs – such as SNAP and School Breakfast – are less likely to experience hunger and are more likely to have better nutrition, leading to improved educational performance. "Strategies to increase participation in school breakfast programs include instituting a Universal School Breakfast program, which provides free breakfasts to all children, regardless of their income and serving breakfast in classrooms," stated Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

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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.