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Contact:

Raymonde Charles/rcharles@rikidscount.org

Day: (401) 351-9400, Ext. 22

Evening: (401) 954-3892

**Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Releases
Annual Factbook on the Status of Rhode Island's Children**

***High-quality education is critical for moving children and families
out of poverty.***

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Warwick, RI, March 26, 2007 – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its annual report on the well-being of Rhode Island's children today. In releasing the latest available statistics on 62 different aspects of children's lives, from birth through adolescence, the annual *2007 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* charts improvements and declines in the well-being of children across the state and in each of Rhode Island's 39 cities and towns. The Factbook indicators are grouped into five interrelated categories: family and community, economic well-being, health, safety and education.

Kati Haycock, Director of The Education Trust, focused her keynote address on the basic tenet of the Trust's work, "All children will learn at high levels if they are taught to high levels." The *2007 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook* shows wide disparities in education outcomes by race, ethnicity and family income. Ms. Haycock encouraged the audience of policy makers and community leaders to challenge themselves to rethink what is possible for low-income and minority students and high-poverty schools. She stated, "Demographics are not destiny, what schools do matters. We know about the corrosive effects of poverty on children, but we also know that schools that are squarely focused on instruction and that are relentless in their focus on growing the knowledge and skills of their students can enable even the poorest students to achieve at high levels."

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT

One Union Station
Providence, RI 02903
401/351-9400
401/351/1758

As an independent, non-profit policy research organization, The Education Trust highlights best-practice models that demonstrate how schools in high-risk communities close achievement gaps and ensure the academic success of all their students. Founded in 1992, The Education Trust works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, pre-kindergarten through college, and forever closing the achievement gaps that separate low-income students and students of color from other youth.

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, noted that the *2007 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook* highlights the need for more attention to the educational outcomes of students, especially in high-poverty schools across the state. “Across Rhode Island and across the country, we are losing too many poor children, minority students, youth in the foster care system and students with special needs or disabilities. These young people are at great risk for dropping out of school,” remarked Elizabeth Burke Bryant. “Yet we know that the graduation gap that exists for these young people can be eliminated. We know that investments in high-quality preschool programs, excellent teachers, high expectations, and rigorous and engaging curricula make a difference.” Data throughout the *2007 Factbook* show that educational attainment levels are linked to outcomes in all areas of child well-being, including economic well-being, safety and health. The research indicates that higher educational attainment leads to positive economic and social outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

Two New Indicators: Preterm Births and Eighth-Grade Reading Skills

The *2007 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* includes two new indicators: *Preterm Births* and *Eighth-Grade Reading Skills*. In addition, new data are presented for *Fourth-Grade Reading Skills* that were not available in the previous edition of the Factbook.

Preterm Births: Preterm birth is a major determinant of infant mortality and morbidity and is the leading cause of death among newborns during the first month of life. Infants born preterm have longer hospital stays than full-term infants and also experience learning difficulties, lower cognitive test scores and more behavioral problems. In 2005, 12.8% of infants born were preterm, an increase from 11.6% in 2003.

Eighth-Grade Reading Skills: Low reading ability in eighth grade has long-term implications for students. Reading disabilities persist over time and even some successful early readers

develop substantial difficulties with reading at older ages. In 2006, 58% of Rhode Island eighth graders scored at or above proficiency in reading, an increase from 56% in 2005. In the core cities just over one-third (36%) of eighth graders were proficient in reading, well below the eighth-grade reading proficiency rate of 70% in the remainder of the state.

Fourth-Grade Reading, Fourth-Grade Math and Eighth-Grade Math: Proficiency in reading and math are basic academic competencies and are essential to educational success. New this year, the fourth and eighth grade reading and math proficiency scores are derived from the *New England Common Assessment Program* (NECAP) test, a new statewide assessment administered beginning in October 2005. According to the NECAP in 2006, 63% of Rhode Island fourth graders scored at or above proficiency for reading, an increase from 60% in 2005. In 2006, 54% of Rhode Island fourth graders and 47% of eighth graders scored at or above proficiency in math.

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Graduation rates: Young adults who drop out of high school are almost four times as likely to be unemployed as those with a high school degree. High school dropouts are at greater risk of being unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, being a teen parent, being incarcerated, and having poor health. In 2006 in Rhode Island, 85% of all students graduated from high school, including 88% of White students, 80% of Asian students, 78% of Black students, 76% of Native American students, and 74% of Hispanic students.

“Far too many students are dropping out of high school. In today’s economy having at least a high school diploma is the bare minimum requirement for employment opportunities. Strategies that increase high school graduation rates and college attainment rates are vital to our efforts to reduce poverty and increase family economic security,” stated Ms. Bryant.

School attendance rates: An important aspect of students’ access to education is the amount of time actually spent in the classroom. In the 2005-2006 school year, over one out of five (22%) students in the core cities missed over 20 days of school, compared to nearly one out of ten (9%) students in the remainder of Rhode Island and one out of seven (14%) students statewide. Research shows that attendance rates can be increased when schools work to strengthen the relationships between teachers and students and between students and their peers. Successful

truancy prevention programs also work with students to overcome personal and family barriers to school attendance.

Suspensions: Students who are suspended are more likely to have a history of poor behavior, academic achievement below grade level, grade repetition, mobility between schools and attendance at schools with high rates of suspension. In Rhode Island in 2005-2006, 12% of the student population was suspended at least once. One-third (33%) of suspensions were for attendance-related offences.

Supports for working families ameliorate the worst effects of poverty and improve outcomes for children.

According to the *2005 American Community Survey* conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of children living in poverty in Rhode Island increased from 15.7% in 2000 to 19.5% in 2005. In 2005, 46,894 Rhode Island children lived below the poverty threshold. One third of these children (15,662) were under age 6. Nearly half (49%) of all children under age 18 who lived below the poverty threshold in 2005, lived in extreme poverty.

Families with income below 50% of the federal threshold level are considered to be living in extreme poverty. The extreme poverty level in 2006 was family income below \$8,121 for a family of three with two children and \$10,222 for a family of four with two children.

In 2005, of the 46,894 children living below the poverty threshold in Rhode Island, 49% lived in extreme poverty; in total, an estimated 23,000 (10%) of all children in Rhode Island lived in extreme poverty.

Nationally and in Rhode Island, poverty disproportionately affects minority children. In 2005 in Rhode Island, 53% of all Black children, 47% of Hispanic children and 43% of Native American children lived in poverty, compared to 15% of Asian children and 12% of White children.

Health Care: Despite rising poverty rates, Rhode Island's children are healthier today – on nearly all health measures – than when the first Factbook was released. As of 2005, 93.4% of Rhode Island's children under age 18 were insured, compared to 88.9% of children nationally. Research shows that insured children are more likely than uninsured children to receive preventive care or medical treatment for common conditions like asthma and ear infections, that

if left untreated can have life-long consequences and lead to more serious health problems. “Rhode Island’s continued investment in RItE Care has yielded positive improvements in children’s health. Rhode Island continues to be among the leaders in the country for providing insurance to low-income children. It is critical that we preserve the investments we have made in providing health insurance for Rhode Island’s children and that we work to reduce administrative barriers and policies that make it difficult for families to enroll eligible children,” noted Ms. Bryant.

Child Care Subsidies: Rhode Island’s investments in child care subsidies help low-income working families to afford the cost of child care. Child care subsidies broaden a family’s employment options and child care options, including improving access to higher quality care. As part of the Family Independence Act, child care subsidies guaranteed financial assistance for child care to low-income working families.

The number of children receiving child care subsidies increased steadily from 6,077 in December of 1996 to 14,333 in 2003 and has decreased to 12,267 in 2006.

At the same time the as Child Care Assistance Program grew, between 1996 and 2006, the number of cash assistance recipients decreased by 51%. Access to child care has been a key factor in maintaining stable employment and reducing the welfare caseload.

The proposed cuts to roll back eligibility for child care subsidies from 225% to 150% of the federal poverty guidelines (or from \$37,350 to \$24,900 for a family of three) would place Rhode Island in the bottom third of all states nationally and below all other New England states for child care assistance eligibility levels.

Ms Bryant added, “The availability of affordable, quality child care provides a wide-range of significant benefits to the economy, families and children. Child care enables parents to work and high quality settings promote school readiness among children.”

Safety, Permanency and Well-being for Children in the Child Welfare System

Between 2000 and 2005, in Rhode Island, the total Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) caseload remained relatively constant at around 8,000 cases. In 2006, the number of children on the DCYF caseload increased to 9,414, a 19% increase from 2005. In 2006, 3,311

children under age 21 in the care of the DCYF were in out-of-home placement, an increase of 16% from last year when there were 2,865 children and youth in out-of-home placements.

Of the children in out-of-home placements, 50% (1,641) were in a foster care home, 12% (383) were in a residential facility, 11% (355) were in a group home, 6% (203) were in independent living or supervised apartment, 6% (202) were at the Rhode Island Training School for Youth, 4% (116) were in temporary shelter care, 102 (3%) were in a psychiatric hospital, medical hospital or substance abuse facility and 9% (301) were in other placements.

All children, particularly children who have been abused and neglected, need stability, permanency and safety in order to develop and flourish. Yet, Rhode Island children in out-of-home care frequently experience multiple placements, lose contact with family members and often have overlooked educational, physical and mental health needs.

Night-to-night placements: Children in the care of DCYF face significant barriers to achieving permanency. Night-to-night placements, which refer to the temporary nightly placement of children in the care of DCYF who are awaiting longer-term placements, increased from 50 children in 2005 to 234 children in 2006. Night-to-night placements were the subject of prolonged litigation between DCYF and the Office of the Child Advocate and had reached an all-time low in 2004, when only 13 children were placed in night-to-night.

Children awaiting adoption: In 2006, there were 260 children in the care of DCYF who were adopted in Rhode Island and 216 children in the care of DCYF who were awaiting adoption.

Older youth in the care of the child welfare system: In 2006 in Rhode, one in ten victims of child abuse and neglect were youth ages 16 and older (401 of the total 3,959 victims of abuse and neglect in 2006). In addition, there are approximately 850 youth are ages 18 and older in the care of DCYF who receive supportive services (e.g. independent living programs, health care, education or housing assistance).

Rhode Island currently provides services to older teens who are suffering abuse and neglect as well as supportive services to some older youth who remain in the care of DCYF between their 18th to the 21st birthdays. Research shows that youth who receive more training and services, have real work experience and have the opportunity to build a network of positive support

systems prior to exiting foster care experience better outcomes after exiting foster care. Youth who age out of state care without support services and without connections to a permanent family are less likely to complete high school and to pursue post-secondary education. They are more likely to have low-paying and unsteady employment, enroll in cash assistance programs, be homeless, lack health insurance and become involved in the criminal justice system.

In 2006, there were 100 youth who “aged out” of foster care without having a connection to a permanent family. Ms. Bryant commented, “We need to do a better job of ensuring a safe and permanent placement for the children and youth in the care of DCYF. Youth who experience multiple temporary placements and/or age out of foster care without the proper supports are at very high risk for social, behavioral and economic crises as young adults. Older youth in the care of DCYF need access to the health care, support services and social networks that they need to make an effective and productive transition to adulthood.”

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children’s policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children. The organization is one of fifty-three state and local level organizations that work in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to track the social condition of children at the state and local level across the country. The annual *Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* is produced by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT in partnership with The Rhode Island Foundation and the United Way of Rhode Island.