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***Effective Public Education Policies:
Lessons from Massachusetts and New Jersey***

PROVIDENCE, RI, July 1, 2009 – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its latest *Issue Brief* entitled *Effective Public Education Policies: Lessons from Massachusetts and New Jersey*, at a policy roundtable with educators, state agencies, advocates, policymakers and community leaders. The event was held on **Wednesday, July 1, 2009 from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, One Union Station, Providence, RI.**

Education reform leaders including Paul Reville, Massachusetts Secretary of Education, and Kathleen D. Priestley, Consultant to the National Institute for Early Education Research and Association for Children of New Jersey, joined Rhode Island Commissioner of Education, Deborah Gist, to discuss key strategies to achieve a high-quality education system for all children. Speakers highlighted key aspects of education reform needed for high-performing schools, including standards and accountability, high quality pre-kindergarten programs, and opportunities offered by new federal investments in education.

At the policy roundtable, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released an *Issue Brief* that explores education policy decisions that have been made in Massachusetts and New Jersey, the two states that rank best in the country for key education outcomes, including fourth grade reading proficiency. These states are useful models to consider when building education policy in a diverse state like Rhode Island because they have achieved gains with a diverse student population. They also have a history of aggressive education reform agendas with strong results.

Citing data from the *Issue Brief*, Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT said, “Rhode Island’s child population is demographically similar to Massachusetts and New Jersey. Both of these states are racially and ethnically diverse and have significant percentages of children in poverty, English language learners and children in immigrant families. Yet, Rhode Island’s educational outcomes lag disproportionately behind those of Massachusetts and New Jersey.” Forty-nine percent (49%) of Massachusetts 4th graders and 43% of New Jersey 4th graders scored at or above the proficiency level in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), ranking them 1st and 2nd, respectively, in the nation. In contrast, Rhode Island places 32nd in the national rankings with only 31% of 4th graders reading at or above proficiency.

Secretary of Education Paul Reville spoke of the importance of aligning curricula and standards with assessment and accountability systems. He emphasized that it is critical to close the achievement gap that still exists between schools in low-income communities and schools in high-income communities, highlighting the need for longer school days. In 2004, Massachusetts launched the Expanded Learning time initiative. Participating schools add at least 25% more time to the school year.

Access to early care and education is essential to address the achievement gap, as research shows that children enter kindergarten with significant differences in the social, behavioral and cognitive skills needed to be successful in school. Children who participate in high-quality early education programs score higher on tests of skills and achievement and develop stronger cognitive, emotional and social skills. Ms. Priestley spoke about critical reforms and investments in New Jersey that led to high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-old children in Abbott districts (high-poverty school districts). She recognized Rhode Island for its current plan to pilot a high-quality preschool program that follows New Jersey’s Abbott preschool model of a diverse delivery system (child care, Head Start and public schools) with high quality standards.

Participants at the policy roundtable noted that Rhode Island is making progress in education system but as the data show, more work needs to be done to improve the educational outcomes for all children in the state. Commissioner Gist noted the new federal opportunities, the importance of high-quality early education and the need to close the education gap to ensure high quality education for all children.

The *Issue Brief* offers specific recommendations to improve state policies that lead to high-quality education opportunities for all children, access to early education, literacy interventions for struggling readers, and educational success for middle and high school students. Bryant said, “Our economic success relies on achieving a world-class education system for all of Rhode Island’s children. State policies that are designed to close the gaps in school achievement, that implement best-practices, and that hold schools, districts and the state accountable for student outcomes are essential. We must ensure that all students have access to a high-quality public education from pre-K through college.”

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