



Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
One Union Station
Providence, RI 02903
401/351-9400
401/351/1758

Embargoed for Release

Until 12:01 a.m., November 30, 2006

Contact:

Raymonde Charles, Communications Coordinator

Day: 401-351-9400, Ext. 22

Evening: 401-954-3892

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

In 2006, Rhode Island had an overall high school graduation rate of 85%. With a dropout rate of 15%, this means that 1,704 students dropped out of Rhode Island high schools between ninth and twelfth grades.

PROVIDENCE, RI, November 30, 2006 – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT will release its latest *Issue Brief* entitled *Improving High School Graduation Rates in Rhode Island* at a policy roundtable with educators, service providers, state agencies, advocates, and political and community leaders. The policy roundtable will be held on **Thursday, November 30, 2006 from 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.** at **Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, One Union Station, Providence, RI.**

According to *Diplomas Count*, an *Education Week* special report, 72% of Rhode Island students graduate from high school on time with a regular diploma. Rhode Island ranks 26th among the states on this measure, with 1st being best and 50th worst. In the U.S. as a whole, 70% of students graduate. *Diplomas Count* uses the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) method to calculate graduation rates. The CPI estimates the probability that an entering ninth grader will complete high school on time (i.e., in four years) with a regular diploma. The CPI is currently the best measure available for cross-state comparisons of graduation rates.

The *Issue Brief* includes a full explanation of the different methodologies that can be used to measure high school graduation rates. Inconsistent methodologies used in the states make it impossible to make cross-state or national comparisons using rates reported by state education departments.

There is a national movement to resolve this issue. In 2007, Rhode Island will begin using a best practice methodology agreed upon by 45 states and 12 national organizations as part of a National Governors Association agreement. The graduation rates reported by the Rhode Island Department of Education in 2006 for the state as a whole and for each district are used throughout the *Issue Brief*. The Rhode Island graduation rate of 85% reported by the Rhode Island Department of Education for 2006 is higher than the CPI rate in *Diplomas Count* because it uses a different methodology. Rhode Island uses different years of data and includes students who graduated in more than four years as well as some students who obtained a GED within a year of dropping out of high school.

Improving High School Graduation Rates as a Strategy to Reduce Poverty

The *Issue Brief* highlights the critical importance of a high school diploma for individual and community success. 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. Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, opened the meeting stating, “Strategies that increase high school graduation rates and college attainment rates are vital to our efforts to reduce poverty and increase family economic security. The positive impact of education on earnings holds true for men and women across all racial and ethnic groups. Improving educational attainment for this generation of young people is a key strategy to improve child development outcomes, literacy and educational success in future generations.”

Graduation rates and dropout rates for each of Rhode Island’s school districts, charter schools and state operated schools are reported in the brief. Graduation rates and drop out rates for each public school in Rhode Island will be available at the release event. In the core cities as a whole, more than one in four (26%) young people drop out of school between 9th and 12th grades. In the state as a whole, 15% of youth drop out of school. In the 2005 – 2006 school year, there were 50 Rhode Island students who dropped out of school in the 7th and 8th grade. Rhode Island’s “dropout age” is 18, though students are allowed to withdraw from school at age 16 with written consent from a parent or guardian.

There are serious racial and ethnic disparities in high school graduation rates. Minority students are substantially more likely than white students to drop out of school. Yet, it is critical to note that it is socio-economic status, not race and ethnicity, that is a key contributor to dropping out.

The drop-out problem is worse in minority communities because of the higher poverty rates and lower educational attainment of adults in the community. In Rhode Island in 2005, half of all Black children (48%), more than half of all Hispanic children (52%), and more than a third of all Asian children (38%) lived in families with income below the 2005 federal poverty level of \$15,735 for a family of three. In contrast, one in ten white children (11%) lived in poverty in 2005.

Of the variety of demographic factors that contribute to the risk for dropping out of school, the most significant is poverty. Nationally low-income students are six times more likely to drop out of high school than high-income students. Elaine Farber, Research Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT noted, "Research shows that students living in poverty can succeed in school when they have access to high quality early childhood programs, appropriate academic and social supports, high expectations for student achievement, highly qualified teachers and a rigorous and engaging school curriculum. We know what makes a difference in school achievement for children living in difficult economic circumstances."

Dropping Out is a Long Process Not a Sudden Event

A recent study of high school dropouts indicates that family responsibilities are an issue for many low-income youth across racial and ethnic groups. Many of the youth interviewed for a recent national report entitled *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, gave personal reasons for dropping out of school: 32% said they had to get a job and make money; 26% said they became a parent; and 22% said they had to care for a family member. Other primary factors the students raised included: Classes were uninteresting and they were bored or disengaged from school (47%); significant academic challenges (35%); missed too many days of school and could not catch up (43%); started high school poorly prepared by their earlier schooling (45%). Additional findings from this national report are included in the *Issue Brief*.

National research has also shown that certain groups of students are at greater risk for dropping out than their peers, including low-income students, minority students, youth in the foster care system, male students, English language learners, and students with special needs or disabilities. In addition to these characteristics, several risk factors contribute to and are warning signs of a students' decision to leave school. Students who are more likely to drop out of school have one or more of the following risk factors:

- Repeated one or more grades.

- Performing below grade level in 4th grade.
- Ongoing patterns of absenteeism or tardiness.
- Multiple suspensions.
- Poor grades and poor achievement on tests.
- Moved or changed schools one or more times.
- Lack of connection or disengagement in school.
- Failing one or more subjects in 9th grade.

The *Issue Brief* highlights critical dropout prevention strategies and offers a set of recommendations. Research-based strategies to improve high school graduation rates include providing immediate intervention for students who are falling behind in the early grades and middle school, intervening in ninth grade to provide intensive supports for students who are failing a course or not obtaining sufficient course credits in that crucial year, improving the school climate to foster meaningful connections between adults and youth, ensuring that all students have highly qualified teachers, and offering a rigorous and engaging curriculum to all students. Other recommendations include improving communication with parents, providing early childhood education, pre-K and full-day kindergarten to prevent the achievement gap early on, and offering high quality after school and summer enrichment and remediation programs in low-income schools and communities.

“There are many things that need to be done to improve the operations and structure of schools so that they better support learning among the most disadvantaged children,” stated Elizabeth Burke Bryant. “Unfortunately, the students at greatest risk for dropping out are those facing the highest barriers with the least access to well-designed, supportive interventions in their schools and communities. We need to heed the early warning signs that students exhibit as early as elementary school. We must ensure that every child - in every school in our state - has at least one caring, trusted adult at school that they can turn to for assistance and support. Those adult connections, combined with a rigorous and engaging academic curriculum, are essential to the success of our young people.”

##

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.

This *Issue Brief* is supported through grants from
The Women’s Fund of Rhode Island and CVS/pharmacy.