

Friday, April 10, 2009

## The status of kids in Rhode Island

By JESSICA SELBY  
jselby@ricentral.com

Some good and some bad news for the Kent County area came out of a meeting held this week.

According to information released yesterday by officials from Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, the child abuse and neglect rate in West Warwick is actually higher than the state rate, although the percentage of children enrolled in full-day kindergarten programs in the same community is actually higher than the state's.

In Coventry, it appears that the teen birth rate in teens ages 15 to 17 has had a steady decline from 2005 to the present, while only two percent of children as compared to 58 percent at the state level are actually enrolled in a full-day kindergarten program.

This as well as a great deal of other information regarding the safety, education, economic well-being and health of children from around the state was detailed to the close to 500 representatives from around the state that had gathered at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Warwick to listen as officials from Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its 15th annual report on the well-being of Rhode Island's children.

According to Kids COUNT, the information in the fact book offers the latest available statistics on 63 different aspects of children's lives, from birth through adolescence. It "charts improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth across the state and in each of Rhode Island's 39 cities and towns."

"The 2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook shows areas of

progress and areas where we need to make improvements," Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT said. The purpose of the book is simple, she indicated.

"The recent economic crisis in our state and in our nation places children and families at risk as they struggle to pay the high costs of housing, food, heat, gas, and child care," she said. "We need to ensure that critical public policy investments in child care, early education, health care and adult education and training remain in place and are strengthened.

"There must be a safety net in place for families that lose their jobs and families that struggle to care for their children," she said. "Investments in children and families are more essential now than ever before and Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is committed to sustaining the gains we have made and to working together to make additional progress so that all children have what they need to thrive."

According to the information provided by the fact book, of the six schools in West Warwick only four met annual yearly progress rates.

Burke Bryant said that Masie E. Quinn, Wakefield Hills Schools, Greenbush and John Deering Middle were rated as having adequate yearly progress while West Warwick High School was said to have made insufficient progress. Horgan Elementary School was listed as having made adequate yearly progress, but with caution. Burke Bryant said that in the

case of Horgan, the school hit 13 of the 15 requirements.

"It is important to note that while these figures are what they are on their own, there is a balance on the other side that shows that we are starting to see some increased improvements in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math proficiency levels," she said.

One marked improvement in West Warwick that was revealed in the data was the percentage of children with elevated blood lead levels. In 2007 there were 3.7 percent of children in West Warwick that screened positive, while in 2008, that figure was down to 1.4 percent.

"Overall the state has been making major progress in reducing the number of children who are lead poisoned since we started doing work in this area in 1995," Burke Bryant said. "While this comes as wonderful, good news to see that decrease in West Warwick's numbers; it means that active citizens are getting the word out and we are happy about that because this is a completely preventable problem that really does affect children's ability to learn, but our job is not over until there are no more children testing positive."

Attendees applauded some of the information that was uncovered while discussing planning ideas for possible strategies to improve other collected data that was not as pleasantly received.

According to Burke Bryant, representatives and others from community and state agencies who receive this data work throughout the year to improve

on existing programs and implement others that may aid in bringing those numbers up to a more positive light.

These figures, she said, are not intended to serve any negative purposes, but rather continue the efforts to strengthen the quality of life for children in this state.