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Chronic absenteeism among young students a concern for schools

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As part of National Attendance Awareness month, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, The Providence Plan, and the Rhode Island Data Sharing Project convened for a special event on Monday afternoon entitled 'The Importance of Reducing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades' to address issues of chronic absenteeism in schools throughout the state.

According to reports from the Rhode Island Data Sharing Project, 16 percent of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 12 percent of first graders, 10 percent of second graders, and 10 percent of third graders were chronically absent during the 2013-2014 school year.

RI KIDS COUNT defines chronic absenteeism as a student missing 10 percent or more of the school year, which is roughly 18 or more days for a 180-day session. While chronic absence is a problem throughout all populations of students at various stages of their academic careers, the organization is particularly concerned with students in the early elementary school years, a time during which children develop important skills and approaches to learning that are crucial to their later success in school.

"Chronic absence is a multifaceted issue that affects children in every city and town in Rhode Island," said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of RI KIDS COUNT. "We're excited to bring together educators, policy makers, and community leaders to discuss the problem of chronic absence, as well as how to implement

policies and programs that will improve attendance – and outcomes – for younger children," she added.

In North Kingstown, Assistant Superintendent Dr.

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Michele Humbyrd said that overall absenteeism throughout the school district has decreased, particularly in the categories of 6-10 and 10 or more absences.

"That is good news," she said.

Statistical findings also indicated chronic absenteeism to be more common among low-income students versus those of a higher socioeconomic demographic. The RI Data Sharing Project revealed that 19 percent of low-income K-3 students in the state were chronically absent during the 2013-2014 school year, compared to only five percent of higher-income K-3 students.

Humbyrd stated that, through data compiled by the Rhode Island Dept. of Education's Instructional Support System (ISS), approximately 40 percent, a five-year average, of economically disadvantaged students have 10 or more absences versus 20 percent for non-economically disadvantaged students. That data, however, reflects absenteeism district-wide.

RI KIDS COUNTS stresses the importance of stopping chronic absenteeism at as early of an age as possible, fearing that students who skip class early on will continue into later school years, and put themselves far behind peers from a learning standpoint. Reasons for such irregular attendance in the past have included chronic illness,

lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation, lack of clean or appropriate clothing, lack of affordable housing, bullying, or ambivalence or alienation from school.

Humbyrd said that, in North Kingstown, interventions are held with students and their families when skipping school becomes a frequent issue, policy which was reviewed by the district and school committee this past August.

"All the principals and their staff track attendance, and when they see students missing too many days, they notify the parents in writing and, many times, call them in and have a meeting," she said. "We will use support staff if it involves a possible medical concern, such as the nurse or a social worker, or school psychologist. They will try to meet with the parents to get at the root of what is causing the absenteeism."

The assistant superintendent further noted that the upcoming alternative learning program at the former Davisville Elementary School will be able to better address students' learning needs in a personalized setting, so that any absenteeism due to school struggles can be avoided.

In order to help economically disadvantaged students more successfully, Humbyrd said that obtaining Title I grant money, as well as increasing support staff, will be important in the future.

"We have more support staff at some of our schools that have greater need due to poverty levels," she said.

Noting the risks of chronic absenteeism in the early grade levels, other districts in Southern Rhode Island and throughout the state have begun meeting with RI KIDS COUNT policy analyst Stephanie Geller and the Washington County Coalition for Children to address with issue as a region.