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Graduation rates at high schools throughout state increasing

By MARIA SHANAHAN

Rhode Island's four-year graduation rate has steadily increased in recent years, from 70 percent in 2007 to 77 percent in 2012, according to the latest issue brief released Monday by Rhode Island Kids Count.

The brief, entitled "Improving High School Graduation Rates in Rhode Island," found that while four-year graduation rates are improving in the state overall, disparities continue to exit in several sub-populations including English Language-Learners, students with disabilities and low-income students. Minority students are also more likely to drop out than Caucasian students.

The brief presents detailed graduation and drop out rates for every school and district in Rhode Island. It also includes research on warning signs and risk factors of dropping out and key strategies for dropout intervention and recovery, increased graduation rates and college readiness.

According to the brief, the lowest graduation rates are in the four core cities: Central Falls at 68 percent, Pawtucket at 67 percent, Providence at 65 percent, and Woonsocket at 65 percent.

While students in Rhode Island's "core cities" are more likely to drop out than students in the remainder of the state, progress has been made in increasing the graduation rate. The four-year graduation rate for the four core cities increased from 56 percent in 2007 to 66 percent in 2012, a steeper increase than in the remainder of the state's school districts, where the graduation rate increased from 79 percent in 2007 to 83 percent in 2012.

The two districts with the largest increases in graduation rates from 2007 to 2012 were both core city districts – Central Falls and Pawtucket.

"Keeping our students in school and on track to graduate is critical for their success," Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island Kids Count, said in a statement. "Education is the key to economic opportunity."

According to the brief, schools in South County typically had a higher four-year graduation rate than the state as a whole and a dropout rate less than the stage rate of 13 percent in 2012.

The 2012 graduation rate at Narragansett High School was 83 percent for a class of 137, with a 5 percent dropout rate.

South Kingstown High School had a larger class size than Narragansett at 287, with a graduation rate of 80 percent in 2012. The dropout rate at South Kingstown High School was 6 percent.

Chariho High School had a class size of 316 with an 86 percent graduation rate and a 6 percent dropout rate.

Exeter-West Greenwich had the highest graduation rate in South County at 90 percent with a class size of 148. The dropout rate at Exeter-West Greenwich was 3 percent in 2012.

North Kingstown High School had the largest class size in South County at 408 in 2012 with an 88 percent graduation rate. The dropout rate was 8 percent.

Westerly had a class size of 248 in 2012 with an 87 percent graduation rate and an 8 percent dropout rate.

The Rhode Island Kids Count brief includes warning signs for students at risk of dropping out. Those signs include reading below grade level at the end of third grade, poor course performance, ongoing patterns of absenteeism or tardiness, and multiple suspensions or behavior problems.

"It is crucial that school leaders set up early warning systems to identify students who are struggling in school and implement strategies to ensure that students get the support they need to succeed in school," Stephanie Gellar, Rhode Island Kids Count policy analyst, said in a statement. "There are a few key indicators that can be observed, measured and monitored as students go through school, and they should be part of any effective early warning system."

The brief also includes a host of recommendations to improve graduation rates including increasing access to high-quality early childhood programs, helping students transition from middle school to high school, providing multiple pathways to graduation for all students who need them, ensuring that school leaders have high expectations, focusing on closing achievement gaps, ensuring that all students have effective teachers, and offering students a rigorous and engaging curriculum.