

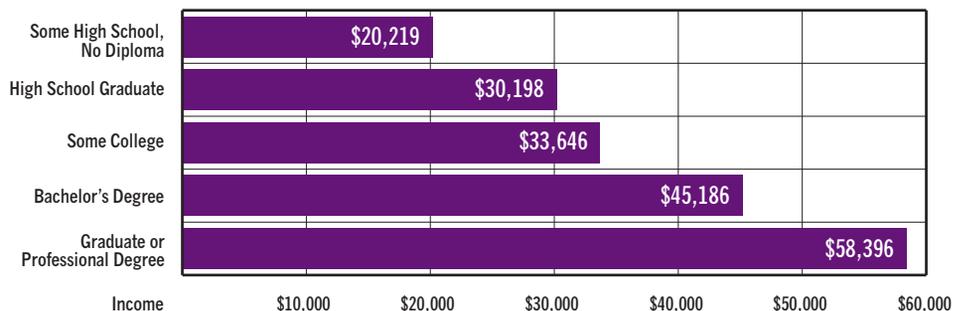
IMPROVING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES IN RHODE ISLAND

Education is essential preparation for adult life. Higher educational attainment increases the likelihood of individual success and leads to positive economic and social outcomes for families and communities. Given the link between educational attainment and family economic status, schools have a critical role to play in preparing children and youth for employment in a high-skills economy.

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.¹

Strategies that increase high school graduation rates and college attainment rates are important in reducing poverty and increasing family economic security. The positive impact of education on earnings holds true for men and women across all racial and ethnic groups.

MEDIAN INCOME BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, RHODE ISLAND 2005



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2005. Table S2001. Note that High School Graduate includes GED.

According to the Education Week Report *Quality Counts at 10*, “For every 100 American students who enter 9th grade, only 67 graduate from high school; 38 of those enter college, 26 are still enrolled after their sophomore year, and only 18 graduate with either an associate or baccalaureate degree within six years.”²

GRADUATION RATES AND DROPOUT RATES, RHODE ISLAND, 2006

SCHOOL DISTRICT	2006 GRADUATION RATE	2006 DROPOUT RATE
Providence	71%	29%
Newport	73%	27%
Central Falls	74%	26%
Woonsocket	75%	25%
Burrillville	75%	25%
Pawtucket	76%	24%
West Warwick	82%	18%
Johnston	83%	17%
Bristol-Warren	83%	17%
Warwick	86%	14%
Cumberland	87%	13%
Westerly	88%	12%
North Smithfield	88%	12%
Cranston	89%	11%
Scituate	91%	9%
North Providence	91%	9%
Narragansett	91%	9%
Middletown	91%	9%
East Providence	91%	9%
Coventry	91%	9%
Chariho	91%	9%
East Greenwich	92%	8%
Tiverton	93%	7%
South Kingstown	93%	7%
North Kingstown	93%	7%
Smithfield	94%	6%
Portsmouth	95%	5%
Lincoln	95%	5%
Foster-Glocester	97%	3%
Exeter-W. Greenwich	98%	2%
Barrington	98%	2%
New Shoreham	100%	0%
<i>Core Cities</i>	<i>74%</i>	<i>26%</i>
<i>Remainder of State</i>	<i>90%</i>	<i>10%</i>
<i>Rhode Island</i>	<i>85%</i>	<i>15%</i>

Source: Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2005-2006 school year. Note: Core cities are Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick, and Woonsocket.

CHARTER SCHOOLS	2006 GRADUATION RATE	2006 DROPOUT RATE
Beacon	77%	23%
Blackstone Academy	89%	11%
New England Laborer's Career Academy	93%	7%
Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy	95%	5%
Times 2 Academy	100%	0%
STATE OPERATED SCHOOLS		
MET Career & Technical Academy	90%	10%
Davies Career and Technical Center	92%	8%
DCYF Alternative Education Program	100%	0%
Rhode Island School for the Deaf	NA	NA

REDUCING POVERTY AND INCREASING ECONOMIC SECURITY

◆ Education has an impact on the likelihood of finding and maintaining employment. People who drop out of high school in the United States are almost twice as likely to be unemployed as those who attain a high school degree or equivalent, and are almost four times as likely to be unemployed as those who receive a Bachelor's degree.³

◆ High school graduation is also the minimum requisite for college and most employment. Higher education is fast becoming a necessity for the majority of workers in the growing high-tech economy. In fact, according to U.S. Department of Labor projections, about 90% of the fastest-growing jobs in the United States will require some post-secondary education or training.⁴

◆ High school dropouts are more likely to have a range of negative social outcomes as compared to people who graduate from high school, including: living in poverty, receiving public assistance, being a teen parent, incarceration, having poor health, being divorced, and being single parents of children who also drop out of school.⁵

In Rhode Island in 2006, 85% of students statewide graduated from high school. With a dropout rate of 15%, this means that 1,704 students dropped out of Rhode Island high schools between 9th and 12th grades.⁶

CALCULATING GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES: CURRENT METHODOLOGY

◆ In the past five years, Rhode Island has greatly improved its methodology for calculating graduation rates and dropout rates. Starting with the class of 2002 graduates, the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) adopted a direct cohort estimation formula for calculating graduation rates, conforming to standards and definitions set by the National Center for Education Statistics. Based on this methodology the dropout rate is calculated as “100% minus the Graduation Rate.”

The formula currently being used, applied to the 2006 graduating cohort, is:

$$\text{2006 Graduation Rate} = \frac{\# \text{ of Graduates in June 2006} \times 100}{\# \text{ of Graduates in 2006} + \# \text{ of Grade 9 Dropouts in 2002-03} + \# \text{ of Grade 10 Dropouts in 2003-04} + \# \text{ of Grade 11 Dropouts in 2004-05} + \# \text{ of Grade 12 Dropouts in 2005-06}}$$

◆ Dropout numbers are collected from Rhode Island public school administrators. These administrators report the number of non-graduated students who were enrolled during the previous academic year, but who were not enrolled in school the following September and who met certain criteria (such as “discontinued schooling” or “transferred to an accredited post-secondary institution prior to his or her graduation from high school”).

Source: Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2005-2006 school year.



CALCULATING GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES: MOVING TO BEST PRACTICE METHODOLOGY

- ◆ Currently, there is a national controversy over the best data to use to measure high school completion and dropout rates. The problem stems largely from imperfections in the data that are used for these calculations, as well as conflicting definitions of “graduation.” These inconsistencies make it difficult to compare graduation and dropout rates across states and with the national numbers.
- ◆ Rhode Island is one of 45 states and 12 national organizations that signed on to the National Governor’s Association (NGA) agreement to transition to a new method of data collection and calculation of graduation rates that is considered best practice and enables data to be compared across states.⁷
- ◆ Use of the NGA best practice methodology in Rhode Island will begin with the graduating class of 2007. Starting in 2007, Rhode Island will be reporting graduation rates using a student roster tracking method based on unique student identifier data.⁸
- ◆ The new system will enable Rhode Island to track a greater number of sub-populations for whom data have not been available in the past (such as English language learners). The 2007 graduating cohort and future cohort data will not be directly comparable to the data available now, but this change reflects a very important improvement in the reliability of Rhode Island’s education data.



YOUTH AT GREATEST RISK FOR DROPPING OUT

High school graduation rates are one achievement measure that can help us to see how well our schools and communities are doing in educating the next generation. In Rhode Island, as in the nation, students in the following sub-populations are completing high school at lower rates than many of their peers.



LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

- ◆ Poverty is strongly linked to likelihood of dropping out. Nationally, low-income students are six times more likely to drop out than high-income students.⁹
- ◆ The core cities have an overall graduation rate of 74% compared with 90% in the remainder of the state.¹⁰ In Rhode Island, almost three quarters of children under age 18 living in poverty reside in the six core cities (Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick and Woonsocket).¹¹
- ◆ 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, excellent teachers, and a rigorous and engaging school curriculum.^{12,13}



MINORITY STUDENTS

- ◆ There are serious racial disparities in high school graduation rates. Minority students are substantially more likely than white students to drop out of school. Socio-economic status is a key indicator of dropping out, not race and ethnicity. But the problem is worse in minority communities because of higher poverty rates and lower rates of educational attainment among adults.^{14,15}
- ◆ Sufficient resources that are targeted effectively can help close the minority graduation gap. According to research conducted by the Education Trust, successful schools implement structural and operational changes that focus on improving the school culture, offering a rigorous and engaging core curriculum, providing supports for students and teachers, increasing instruction time and effectively targeting resources to achieve goals.¹⁶

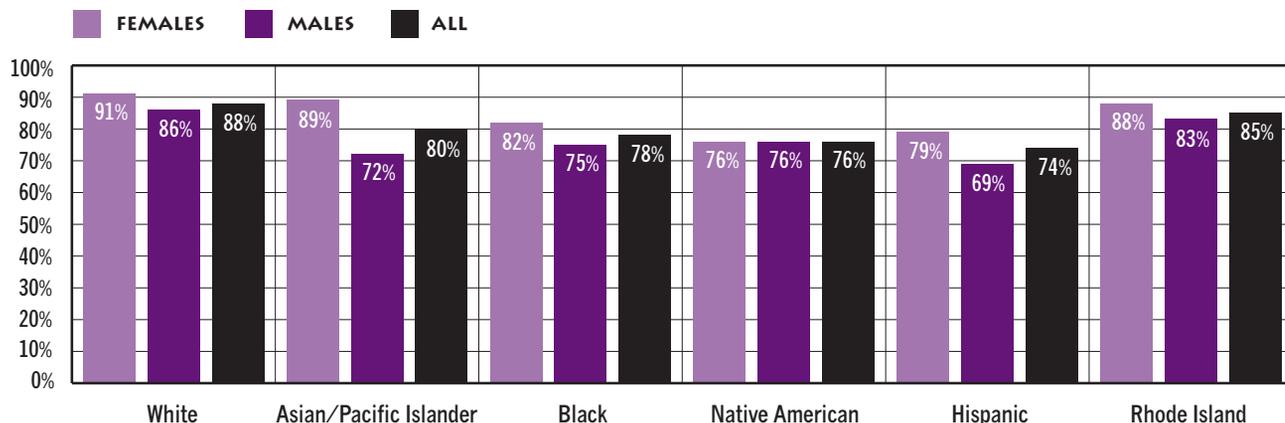


YOUTH IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

- ◆ Nationally, there is a 20 percentage point difference between the high school graduation rates of foster youth and their peers.¹⁷ Youth in foster care also tend to have worse educational performance outcomes than their peers, which is partly a result of disruptions in education due to frequent moves and school placement, as well as high rates of tardiness, absence and truancy.¹⁸
- ◆ Currently, data are not available to track the high school graduation rates and college entry rates of youth in the care of the Rhode Island Department of Children Youth and Families.

Poor performing or disruptive students may find it difficult to get the help they need to stay in school. Some students report that they encounter little resistance from those around them when they are frequently absent or make the decision to drop out of school.^{19,20}

RHODE ISLAND HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES BY RACE, ETHNICITY AND GENDER, 2006



Source: Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2005-2006 school year.

MALE STUDENTS

- ◆ The 2006 Rhode Island graduation rate was 83% for males and 88% for females, with significant differences across racial and ethnic groups. Males have lower high school graduation rates than their female peers in every racial and ethnic group.²¹
- ◆ Nationally, female students drop out less often than males, but female dropouts are significantly more likely to live in poverty than male dropouts from the same racial and ethnic group.²²

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

- ◆ Research has shown that English language learners are at greater risk for dropping out than students in other minority groups.²³ English language learners who are older students often have greater difficulty learning English and studying the material required to graduate and go on to college than younger students.^{24,25}
- ◆ There are 8,180 English language learners in Rhode Island public schools. Of these, 18% (1,496) are in high school.²⁶ Graduation rates for Rhode Island's English language learners enrolled in public schools will be available for the first time in 2007.

STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS OR DISABILITIES

- ◆ Despite steady national increases in the graduation rate for students with disabilities, they achieve at significantly lower levels and are more likely to drop out of school than their non-disabled peers.²⁷ In Rhode Island, the 2005 graduation rate for students with disabilities was 73%, compared to 85% for all students.²⁸



WARNING SIGNS FOR STUDENTS AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT

- ◆ Dropping out is almost always a long process rather than a sudden event. In addition to demographic characteristics, several risk factors contribute to and are warning signs of a student’s decision to leave school.
- ◆ Students who are more likely to drop out of school have one or more of the following risk factors:^{29,30,31,32}
 - 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

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.

THE PERSPECTIVES OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

A recent report, *The Silent Epidemic*, provides information on dropouts in America collected through interviews and focus groups with public high school dropouts from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and a variety of locations, including large cities, suburbs and small towns.

Major findings include:

- ◆ Nearly half (47%) of the youth said that they dropped out because their classes were uninteresting and that they were bored or disengaged from school; 42% spent time with people who were not interested in school. These were among the top reasons selected by those with high GPAs and those who said they were motivated to work hard.
- ◆ 69% of respondents said that they were not motivated or inspired to do the work and 70% were confident that they could have graduated if they had tried. Even a majority of those with low GPAs thought they could have graduated if they had tried.
- ◆ Some dropouts, but not the majority, left school because of significant academic challenges: 35% said that “failing in school” was a major factor for dropping out.
- ◆ 43% said they missed too many days of school and could not catch up; and 45% said they started high school poorly prepared by their earlier schooling.
- ◆ Parental involvement was also low — almost 70% said that their parents only got involved when they were about to drop out. The majority of parents were “not aware” or “just somewhat aware” of their child’s grades or that they were about to leave school.
- ◆ In hindsight, over 80% of youth who dropped out said that they understood that graduation was important for success, and 74% said they would have stayed if they could do it over.

Source: Bridgeland, J., Dilulio, J., Jr., & Morison, K. (March 2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

TOWARD ECONOMIC SECURITY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF HISPANIC GIRLS

Hispanic girls face many educational barriers that lead to high dropout rates and low rates of college entry and completion. The 2006 high school graduation rate of Rhode Island's Hispanic students was 74%, the lowest of any racial or ethnic group in Rhode Island.³³ Nationally, Hispanics have the highest dropout rates of any racial and ethnic group.³⁴ In Rhode Island, Hispanic girls have the second lowest graduation rate of their female peers at 79%, slightly higher than Native American girls at 76% and lower than girls of other racial and ethnic groups including Black (82%), Asian (89%) and White (91%).³⁵

Hispanic girls drop out of high school for many of the same reasons other young people do, but there are some risk factors that are especially relevant to this group of young women:

◆ **Language Barriers:** Children who speak a language other than English at home and also report having difficulty speaking English face greater challenges progressing in school and face barriers in the workforce as adults. In the 2004-2005 school year, 83% of all English language learners in Rhode Island public schools lived in low-income families. Students who are English language learners are more likely to be concentrated in low-performing and under-resourced schools in urban communities.³⁶

◆ **Poverty:** In 2004, Hispanics made up 43% of Rhode Island's poor children, and 52% of Hispanic children in Rhode Island were living in poverty. Poverty is an important indicator of many negative social and educational outcomes, including dropping out of school.³⁷

◆ **Teen Pregnancy:** Teen pregnancy and parenting are also correlated with a young woman's decision to drop out of school. While half of teen mothers drop out of school before becoming pregnant, only one-third of teen mothers ever go on to receive their high school diplomas.³⁸ In Rhode Island, the birth rate for Hispanic women aged 15 to 17 is three times higher than the rate for their non-Hispanic White peers.³⁹

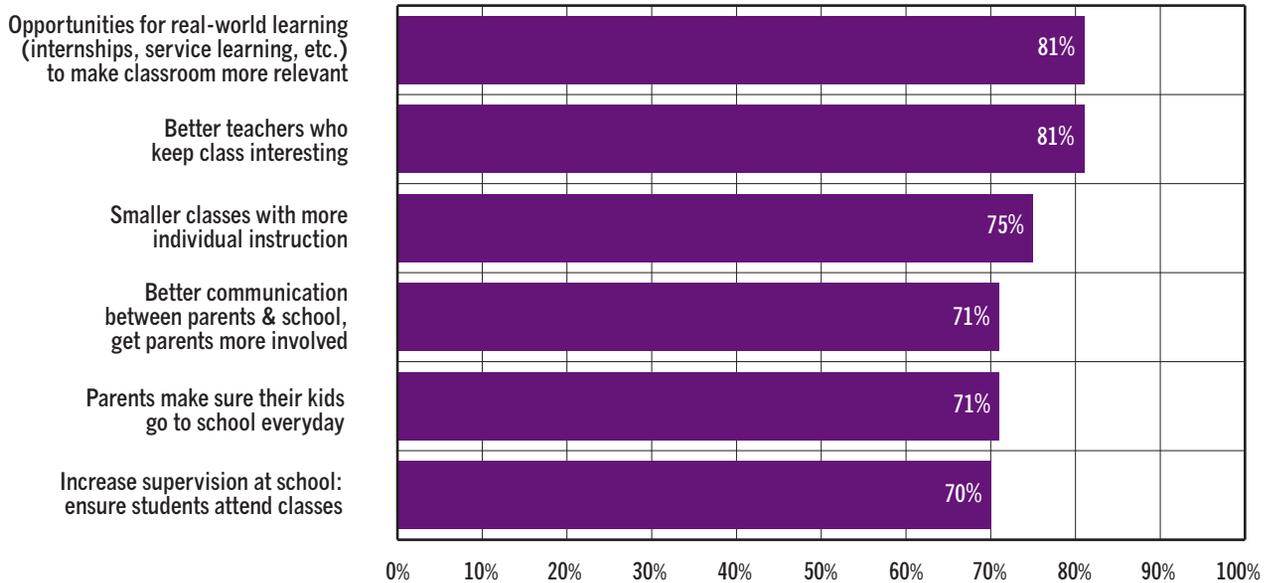
◆ **Family Responsibilities:** In some families, girls are asked to take on family responsibilities that supersede all other obligations, including school.⁴⁰ A recent study of high school dropouts indicates that family responsibilities are an issue for many youth across racial and ethnic groups. Many of the youth interviewed gave personal reasons for dropping out of high 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.⁴¹

HIGHER EDUCATION

Even if they graduate from high school, Rhode Island's Hispanic girls may not be as well prepared to pursue a higher education as other students. While Hispanic girls were more likely than Hispanic boys to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in the 2005-2006 school year (61% of Hispanics who took the test in Rhode Island were girls), their scores tended to be significantly lower on the math section of the SAT than their male Hispanic peers. In fact, Hispanic girls SAT scores in all sections were significantly lower than students who identified with other racial and ethnic groups.⁴²



WHAT DROPOUTS BELIEVE WOULD IMPROVE STUDENT'S CHANCES OF STAYING IN SCHOOL



Source: Bridgeland, J., Dilulio, J., Jr., & Morison, K. (March 2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

A positive school climate and connection with at least one caring, trusted adult at school are key elements of the learning process for adolescents. Student survey data suggest that small learning communities — groups of students who share the same group of core subject teachers — make students feel known and cared about by their teachers.⁴³



INTERVENING IN NINTH GRADE...OR EARLIER

- ◆ Nationally, more than one-third of the students who drop out of school fail to make the transition from 9th to 10th grade.⁴⁴ In Rhode Island in the 2005-2006 school year, 26% of the high school students who dropped out of school were in the 9th grade and 26% were in the 10th grade.⁴⁵
- ◆ A sufficient number of course credits and passing course grades by the end of freshman year are strong predictors that a student will ultimately graduate. Students can be considered on track to graduate if they have earned at least five full course credits and received no more than one F as a semester grade by the end of freshman year.⁴⁶
- ◆ There are a set of key indicators in 6th grade that can be used as early warnings of a student likely to drop out of high school, including: attended school less than 80% of the time, received a poor final grade in behavior, and failing either mathematics or English.⁴⁷
- ◆ Repeating a grade at any point in a student's school career is a strong predictor for dropping out.⁴⁸

During the 2005-06 school year, 50 students in grades 7 and 8 dropped out of school in Rhode Island. There were 1,995 students in grades 9-12 who dropped out during the same school year.⁴⁹

PUBLIC EDUCATION FINANCING

◆ During the 2004 legislative session, the Rhode Island legislature passed legislation creating a legislative committee to establish a permanent education funding formula. The findings of the Joint Legislative Committee to Establish a Permanent Education Foundation Aid Formula for Rhode Island are expected by March 15, 2007.⁵⁰

SOURCE OF TOTAL PUBLIC SCHOOL REVENUE, 2004-2005

	LOCAL	STATE	FEDERAL
U.S. Average	42.7%	48.6%	8.8%
Rhode Island	59.9%	36.7%	3.4%

Source: *How Rhode Island Schools Compare* (2005). Providence, RI: Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council.

◆ Rhode Island's state contribution to public education ranks 44th in the nation. In Rhode Island in 2004-2005, 37% of total funding for public education came from the state compared with a U.S. average of 49%.^{51, 52}

◆ Rhode Island's local contribution to public education ranks 3rd highest in the nation, with local districts funding 60% of all public education spending compared to a U.S. average of 43%.^{53, 54} Low-income districts continue to have disproportionately high property tax burdens, relative to tax capacity.⁵⁵

◆ Schools and communities with higher percentages of low-income students have much greater costs associated with student need due to poverty, English language learners, and outdated infrastructure.

BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL: ALL YOUTH READY FOR COLLEGE, WORK AND LIFE

For those students who do graduate from high school, many are not well-equipped for college or work, and too few of those who want to attend college get the support they need to enroll and to complete their studies.⁵⁶

◆ Research conducted by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research calculates college readiness rates using data on graduation rates, high school transcripts and NAEP reading scores. They report that nationally only 32% of all high school seniors are college ready, with significant differences by racial and ethnic groups.⁵⁷

◆ According to national studies, as many as one in three students take a remedial class during their college years.⁵⁸

◆ Up to a fourth of all students at four-year colleges do not return for their second year of school. African-American, Hispanic, and first-generation college students are particularly unlikely to complete their degrees.⁵⁹

◆ Many young people in low-income families, especially those who are first-generation college students, do not have access to information about the high school courses required for college entry, the college application process and sources of financial aid.⁶⁰

◆ The financial burden of full-time college opportunities in Rhode Island can be prohibitive for low-income students and financial aid is inadequate to meet need.⁶¹



RECOMMENDATIONS

STRONG SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

- ◆ Strong school leadership with high expectations for all students.
- ◆ Rigorous achievement standards, and curricula aligned to standards.

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS

- ◆ Teacher certification that includes rigorous content knowledge in order to be considered highly qualified in the subject taught. There is considerable evidence from the research that quality teachers are the foundation of student achievement.
- ◆ Support for professional development focused on effective instructional practice and differentiated teaching methods for a range of learning styles.

IMMEDIATE INTERVENTION FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE FALLING BEHIND

- ◆ Regular and early monitoring to ensure that all students are on course to grade-level achievement.
- ◆ Immediate additional assistance for those who are falling behind, including individualized help during the school day and ongoing communication with parents.
- ◆ Connect students with high quality tutoring programs, often available at no cost to the student through Supplemental Education Services in low-performing schools.
- ◆ Additional time for mastery of basic skills for students who are already behind, including before

and after school tutoring, summer remediation and enrichment, and credit recovery programs that help students "catch up" to grade level standards.

ENGAGING AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

- ◆ A supportive school environment including connections with trusted, caring adults, safe, well-maintained facilities, smaller schools and individualized learning opportunities.
- ◆ Challenging and rigorous courses for all students in middle school and high school including college prep, AP and honors courses.
- ◆ Curricula and internships linked to career options and opportunities for youth leadership in the school and community. Vocational, career and technical education that combines high-quality academics with rigorous applied learning.
- ◆ School advisories, which pair every high school student with an adult for purposes of establishing a trusting relationship, have been found to improve learning, safety and behavior. New Rhode Island Board of Regents regulations require such programs in every high school.

ADEQUATE FUNDING

- ◆ An adequate and predictable education funding formula that reflects the higher costs of educating low-income students, decreases reliance on local property taxes and increases the state share of education funding.

SCHOOL, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

- ◆ **Early childhood programs, pre-K and full-day kindergarten** that provide early learning opportunities for young children can help prevent or minimize the skills and knowledge gaps that exist before children even enter school. High-quality, adequate-intensity early childhood education programs that address health and developmental needs can reduce subsequent special education enrollment.
- ◆ **Involving parents**, including parents from diverse backgrounds, in their child's education improves outcomes. All parents need regular information and communication about their child's progress. This is especially important when children are falling behind academically.
- ◆ **After school and summer enrichment opportunities** for disadvantaged children and youth have positive impacts on school performance. Resources can be directed to improve the variety, quality and accessibility of enrichment and remediation programs during out-of-school time.



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RHODE ISLAND RESOURCES

Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Peter McWalters, Commissioner

www.ridoe.net --- (401) 222-4600

Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education

James A. DiPrete, Chairman (401)-222-8435

Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education

Jack Warner, Commissioner

www.ribghe.org --- (401) 222-6560

The Governor's PK-16 Council

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