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New National Report Focuses on Early Attendance Gap

*Absenteeism in the early years contributes to
achievement gaps and high school dropout rates*

*Rhode Island's statewide efforts to track and address
chronic absenteeism highlighted as a best practice*

Providence, RI (September 1, 2015) – Disparities in school attendance rates starting as early as preschool and kindergarten are contributing to achievement gaps and high school dropout rates across the country, according to a new report released today by Attendance Works and the Healthy Schools Campaign.

Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting A Course for School Success documents that absenteeism disproportionately affects students in certain racial and ethnic groups, as well as students with disabilities. This isn't simply a matter of truancy or skipping school: Many of these absences, especially among the youngest students, are tied directly to health factors: asthma and dental problems, learning disabilities, and mental health issues related to trauma and community violence.

Chronic early absence is the percentage of children who missed 18 days or more of school, including excused and unexcused absences. During the 2013-2014 school year, 12% of Rhode Island children in grades K-3 were chronically absent. In the early grades, Kindergarten had the highest rate of chronic absence at 16%. While chronic early absence is a statewide issue that affects every school district, it is most prominent in the four core cities with more than 1 in 5 students (22%) in grades K-3 missing 18 or more days of school, compared to 12% in the remainder of the state.

“These early attendance gaps can turn into achievement gaps, which contribute to our graduation gaps,” said Hedy Chang, Director of Attendance Works and co-author of the report. “It’s not enough to say we have an absenteeism problem. We need to know who is missing too much school, when and where absences are mostly likely to occur and why students are chronically absent. This information is essential to targeting the right resources so we turn around poor attendance, especially for the students most at risk.”

“Above all else, we need to provide all school children with high-quality instruction and children need to attend school every day and be ready to learn – well-nourished, well-rested, and up to date on their classwork and homework,” said Ken Wagner, Commissioner of The Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE). “Because we recognize the importance of regular school attendance, Rhode Island is one of the few states to report publicly on rates of chronic absenteeism (students missing more than 10 percent of the school days). We strongly encourage our school leaders to reach out to families whose children are missing too many school days, especially in the early grades. Every day in school counts! Through strong partnerships between schools, families, and providers of social services, we can all work together to keep children in school and on track for success.”

“Regular attendance at school is an essential step for children to succeed academically and do well in life,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “We are proud to have committed leaders in Rhode Island who collaborate to track this issue closely across agencies and communities. Mapping and sharing data on chronic absence has allowed Rhode Island and its partners to identify children who are struggling, and develop policies and programs to improve attendance. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is glad to work in close partnership with RIDE and other agencies to reduce chronic absence.”

The report maps the nation’s attendance gaps using available national and state research, including a state-by-state analysis of testing data from the *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)* given in 2011 and 2013. It builds on 2014 research by Attendance Works that showed students who miss more school than their peers consistently score lower on standardized tests.

Key report findings reflected in Rhode Island data demonstrate why mapping and addressing the early attendance gap is essential. In the *NAEP* study, chronically absent fourth graders scored 18 points below their peers in Reading. For eighth graders, chronically absent students scored on average about 25 points lower than their peers in Math.

- **Health concerns – physical and mental – cause many of the absences in the early grades.** Asthma is a leading cause of absenteeism at all ages, accounting for 14 million missed days nationwide. Dental problems contribute two million more. Absences due to depression, anxiety and oppositional defiant disorder are harder to quantify but rob many students of valuable instructional time. Too many absences of any kind – excused, unexcused or disciplinary – can erode achievement.
- **Low-income students face an attendance gap that undermines achievement in every state.** Nationwide, the analysis of 2011 and 2013 *NAEP* data shows that 23 percent of low-income fourth graders missed three or more days in the month prior to the test, compared to 17 percent of their peers. In

Rhode Island during the 2011-2013 school year, 28% of low-income 4th grade students missed three or more days in the month prior to the *NAEP* test compared to 16% of higher-income 4th grade students. Weak attendance often reflects the challenges that accompany poverty, such as unstable housing, unreliable transportation and little access to quality health care. For all students – rich or poor – higher absenteeism correlates with lower test scores.

- **Children of color have higher overall rates of absenteeism than white students.** The national *NAEP* figures, bolstered by state studies, show the highest rates among American Indian/Alaska Native students nationwide. While the national data reflect smaller differences among Black, Hispanic and White students, large gaps emerge in some states. Even so, White students remain the majority of the students affected by chronic absence nationwide. In Rhode Island between 2011-2013, 19 percent of White fourth grade students missed 3 or more days of school in the month prior to the *NAEP* test, compared to 17 percent of Asian students, 23 percent of Black students, and 29 percent of Hispanic students.
- **Students identified for special education services are more likely to miss school than other students.** The national *NAEP* data show that students with disabilities are 25 to 40 percent more likely to have high rates of absenteeism than their peers. In Rhode Island between 2011-2013, 30 percent of 4th grade students and 30 percent of 8th grade students identified for special education services were absent 3 or more days in the month prior to the *NAEP* test. Some of these absences can be attributed to the health concerns of physically disabled students, but others occur because of inappropriate placements, bullying or school aversion that often affects learning-disabled children.

The report also highlights the power of states to tackle absenteeism by tapping key champions, using data to identify students and schools with high chronic absence rates, and learning from places that have improved attendance despite challenging conditions. It emphasizes how chronic absence can be turned around when school districts and community agencies, especially health providers, work together to partner with families to get students to class every day.

One part of Rhode Island's effort to address chronic absence is participating in the national Campaign For Grade-Level Reading's Advisory Committee on Ending Chronic Absence. This group, currently composed of seven state school chiefs or state agency designees, allows us to learn with our peers about how we can turn around attendance starting with our youngest children. Improving attendance in the early grades, along with increasing school readiness and reducing summer learning loss, are key components of the Campaign's comprehensive approach to increasing the number of low-income children reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade.

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Attendance Works is a national organization dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Contact Phyllis Jordan at 202-413-2247 or phyllis@attendanceworks.org

Healthy Schools Campaign is a nonprofit organization dedicated to making schools healthier places for all students. Contact Jeremy Borling at jeremy@healthyschoolscampaign.org.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.