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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT releases new *Issue Brief*: *Improving High School Graduation Rates in Rhode Island*

Providence, RI (March 6, 2017): Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its newest publication, *Improving High School Graduation Rates in Rhode Island*, at a policy roundtable on **Monday, March 6, 2017, from 2:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.** at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, One Union Station, Providence, RI.

Featured speakers will include Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT; Ken Wagner, Commissioner of the Rhode Island Department of Education; and Victor Capellan, Superintendent of Central Falls School District. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Senior Policy Analyst Stephanie Geller will share the *Issue Brief* findings.

The *Issue Brief* presents detailed graduation and dropout rates for every school and district in Rhode Island, research on early warning signs and risk factors of dropping out, as well as key strategies for increasing student engagement, graduation rates, and college and career readiness.

Education is the Key to Economic Opportunity

High school graduation is the minimum requirement for college and most employment. In Rhode Island, adults without high school diplomas are more likely to be unemployed and have lower incomes than adults with high school degrees.

Rhode Island's four-year graduation rate has been steadily increasing from 70% in 2007 to 85% in 2016. However, graduation rates vary substantially by family income and by race and ethnicity. In 2016, 79% of low-income students graduated in four years, compared to 93% of higher-income students. There were similar disparities among different racial and ethnic student subgroups with 92% of Asian students, 88% of White students, 81% of Black students, 79% of Hispanic students, and 78% of Native American students graduating in four years.

“Increasing Rhode Island's overall high school graduation rate and closing unacceptably wide achievement gaps is vital to the future of our young people and our state's economy,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “The data we are releasing today shows steady progress that can be accelerated if we focus on what every student needs to successfully connect to college and careers.”

“High school graduation is an important indicator of future opportunities for our children and our state. The steady increase in Rhode Island’s graduation rate is good news and positions us to make long-term gains in our workforce and our economy. We cannot rest, however, until each of our students not only completes high school, but is truly prepared for a lifelong journey in college, careers, and beyond,” said Commissioner of Education Ken Wagner.

“The path towards graduation is not always linear. For some students, it is a journey that requires extra time, additional resources, resilience, and determination — but it is doable and worth every step. We’re proud of our students and teachers in Central Falls who work hard, together, to achieve success,” said Victor Capellan, Superintendent of Central Falls School District.

| | COHORT SIZE | DROPOUT RATE | % COMPLETED GED | % STILL IN SCHOOL | FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Female Students | 5,347 | 6% | 1% | 4% | 88% |
| Male Students | 5,437 | 10% | 2% | 5% | 83% |
| English Language Learners | 734 | 17% | <1% | 6% | 77% |
| Students With Disabilities | 1,676 | 18% | 2% | 17% | 63% |
| Students Without Disabilities | 9,108 | 7% | 1% | 3% | 89% |
| Low-Income Students | 5,700 | 13% | 2% | 7% | 79% |
| Higher-Income Students | 5,084 | 4% | 1% | 2% | 93% |
| White Students | 6,779 | 6% | 2% | 4% | 88% |
| Asian Students | 310 | 3% | 1% | 4% | 92% |
| Black Students | 936 | 10% | 1% | 8% | 81% |
| Hispanic Students | 2,390 | 13% | 1% | 6% | 79% |
| Native American Students | 85 | 13% | 1% | 8% | 78% |
| ALL STUDENTS | 10,784 | 8% | 2% | 5% | 85% |

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Class of 2016. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

For Rhode Island High School Graduation and Dropout Rates, Class of 2016 by **District and School**, please see pages 4 –5 of the Issue Brief.

Early Warning Signs and Dropout Prevention

Dropping out is almost always a long process rather than a sudden event. Early warning signs can begin as early as elementary school and include:

- **Not reading proficiently by the end of third grade:** Students who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade often struggle in the later grades and are four times more likely to drop out of high school than their proficient peers.

In 2016, 40% of Rhode Island third graders met expectations on the *Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)* English language arts assessment. Disparities exist among student subgroups: 25% of low-income third graders met these expectations, compared to 56% of higher-income third graders. For more information on student subgroups meeting *PARCC* expectations, please see page 6 of the *Issue Brief*.

- **Being chronically absent** (i.e., missing at least 10% of school days): Chronic absence in sixth grade is one of three early warning signs that a student is likely to drop out of high school, and by ninth grade, a student’s attendance is a better predictor of dropout risk than eighth grade achievement test scores.

In Rhode Island, during the 2015-2016 school year, the chronic absence rate among middle (25%) and high (42%) school students in the four core cities was more than twice as high as the rates among middle (11%) and high (19%) school students in the remainder of the state.

- **Two or more behavioral or disciplinary infractions:** Suspended students are more likely than their peers to experience academic failure and disengagement from school and to drop out of school. In fact, being suspended even once in ninth grade is associated with a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out.
- **Course failure in English or math in sixth through ninth grades**
- **Failure to earn on-time promotion to the tenth grade:** The transition from middle school to high school is a critical phase in students’ lives and academic careers when academic challenges and social demands are heightened. Unsuccessful transitions from middle to high school contribute to poor achievement rates in ninth grade, high dropout rates, and low on-time graduation rates.

Schools can decrease dropout rates by establishing early warning systems that use data on attendance, behavior, and course performance in middle and high school to identify students at risk of dropping out of high school. Providing appropriate personalized interventions can support each student on their path to graduation.

Student-Centered Learning

Adopting student-centered learning practices at the high school level can help students develop meaningful relationships with adults inside and outside of school, increase engagement and achievement for students from a variety of backgrounds and ensure that students graduate from high school with important social and emotional skills, including problem solving, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and strong work habits, that are essential for success in college and careers.

“We need to ensure that all students have meaningful relationships with adults in the school building and that these adults are knowledgeable about that student’s academic, career, and personal goals and can help that student navigate a path to achieving these goals,” said Stephanie Geller, Senior Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

There are four key principles of student-centered learning:

- (1) Learning that is personalized;
- (2) Learning that is competency-based;
- (3) Learning that happens anytime, anywhere; and
- (4) Learning that allows students to take ownership.

For more information on student-centered learning, and ways to implement the practices in schools, please see pages 9 –10 of the *Issue Brief*. (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT also published a series of 4 Student-Centered Learning Fact Sheets in 2016 – see them here: bit.ly/SCLFactSheets)

Recommendations to Improve Graduation Rates

The *Issue Brief* provides key recommendations for improving Rhode Island high school graduation rates. Please see page 11 for the full set of recommendations.

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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.