

Rhode Island



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**Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Presents:
*Providence Data in Your Backyard***

More than 1 in 3 Providence children living in poverty

***Despite high rates of absenteeism and student mobility,
education outcomes improving in Providence***

***Mayor's Children and Youth Cabinet focusing on improving
attendance, third grade reading proficiency and high school
graduation rates***

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**Providence, RI (June 22, 2012)** – Community leaders, parents and policy makers, including members of the Mayor's Children and Youth Cabinet, discussed opportunities for improving the well-being of children and youth in Providence. Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst for Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, presented data from the *2012 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook*, focusing on improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth in Providence. After the presentation, community members discussed opportunities to improve outcomes for Providence children and youth. The presentation took place on **Friday, June 22, 2012, from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. at Central High School, 70 Fricker Street, Providence, RI.** The event was sponsored in partnership with the Mayor's Children and Youth Cabinet, an advisory group that brings together representatives from the City, Providence Public Schools and community-based agencies to work on improving outcomes for Providence children and youth.

**Children in poverty and extreme poverty**

Between 2006 and 2010, more than one in three children in Providence (35.6% or 14,921 children) lived in families with incomes below the federal poverty level (\$18,123 for a family of three with two

children and \$22,811 for a family of four with two children). During that same time period, one in six children in Providence (16.8% or 7,054 children) lived in families in extreme poverty, with incomes less than one-half the federal poverty level (\$9,062 for a family of three with two children and \$11,406 for a family of four with two children).

“Poverty exists in every community in Rhode Island, but Providence and the other core cities – Central Falls, Pawtucket and Woonsocket – warrant special attention because they have the highest child poverty rates in the state,” stated Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Children living in poverty face many challenges. They are more likely to have health and behavioral problems, experience difficulty in school and become teen parents than children in higher-income families.”

### **Poor infant health puts children at risk**

Communities with high poverty rates, like Providence, tend to have poorer infant health outcomes than more advantaged communities. In fact, Providence has the highest percentage of women receiving delayed prenatal care in the state. The percentage of mothers receiving delayed prenatal care or no prenatal care has increased from 12.0% in 2001-2005 to 22.9% in 2006-2010. Providence also has the highest preterm birth rate in the state, and higher low birthweight and infant mortality rates than the state as a whole.

“Early prenatal care is important to identify and treat health problems and influence health behaviors that can hurt infant and maternal health,” noted Bryant. “Increasing access to health insurance can help improve outcomes for mothers and their babies. Low-income women with Medicaid coverage are more likely to have timely prenatal care than women who are uninsured, so it is important to continue to maintain and protect programs like RIte Care, the state’s Medicaid managed care health program, which provides access to health care for Rhode Island’s children and families.”

### **Mobility, chronic absenteeism high among Providence students**

A higher percentage of Providence school children changed schools during the 2010-2011 school year than any other district in the state. During that time period, one in four (25%) Providence children changed schools, compared to the state rate of 14%.

According to Geller, “Children who change schools often miss learning critical concepts and skills and therefore are likely to have lower math and reading skills than children who do not change schools. Entire schools are also affected, because when large numbers of students move in and out of classrooms, teachers must slow down their teaching and address changing classroom dynamics and student needs.”

Providence also has a very high rate of chronic early absence, the percentage of children in kindergarten through third grade who have missed at least 10% of the school year (i.e. 18 days or more). During the 2010-2011 school year, more than one in five (22%) Providence children in grades K-3 were chronically absent, almost twice the state rate of 12% and the second highest rate of chronic absenteeism in Rhode Island.

“Chronic absenteeism is often caused by a combination of factors – including poverty, teenage parenting, poor maternal health, poor quality education, bullying and disruptive classrooms. It can be reduced through school, family and community partnerships that use an ongoing and intentional approach for monitoring attendance and by contacting parents as soon as troubling patterns of attendance appear,” said Bryant.

The Mayor’s Children and Youth Cabinet is focusing on improving attendance, and the City has already launched a campaign to help parents understand the importance of having their children attend school regularly, especially in the early grades.

### **Providence school breakfast program a success**

Providence is one of five school districts in Rhode Island with a Universal School Breakfast Program, which offers free breakfast to all children regardless of income. Providence also recently began offering breakfast in the classroom, a proven strategy for increasing participation. In October 2011, an average of 9,817 (51%) low-income children in Providence participated in the program each day out of 19,162 low-income children who were eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch.

“Students who eat breakfast have significantly higher math and reading scores, fewer absences, improved attentiveness and lower incidences of social and emotional problems,” added Bryant. “Providence should be commended for taking steps to ensure that the district’s children have access to a healthy breakfast.”

### **City seeing increases in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading proficiency but more progress is needed**

Reading proficiency is critical to the development of academic and basic life skills. When children have difficulty reading beyond the third grade, they often fall behind their peers and need intensive intervention to catch up. Between 2005 and 2011 in Providence, the percentage of fourth grade students who were proficient in reading has increased from 31% to 46%, but progress has slowed since 2008. More improvement has been seen among eighth grade students. Between 2005 and 2011 in Providence, the percentage of eighth grade students reading proficiently increased from 25% to 52%.

“Providence is focusing on key strategies for increasing early reading proficiency. The Mayor is leading an important effort to improve reading proficiency by the end of third grade. This initiative is working to ensure that more children enter kindergarten ready to learn and prepared for school, increasing access to high-quality summer learning opportunities and increasing attendance in the early grades,” stated Bryant.

### **High school graduation rate continues to improve**

The City of Providence continues to see steady improvement in its high school graduation rate. In Providence in 2011, 66% of students graduated from high school on time, continuing an upward trend from 58% in 2007. Providence’s four-year high school graduation rate is higher than the core city rate of 65%, but lower than the state rate of 77%.

“Providence can continue to improve its high school graduation rate by implementing early warning systems to identify and provide supports to students at-risk of dropping out and by providing a rigorous and engaging curriculum where school success is clearly connected to career pathways,” said Geller.

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