

The Newport Daily News

Tuesday, April 29, 2014

OUR VIEW

Too many students fail to graduate

A report released Monday showed the high school graduation rate across the United States in 2012 was 80 percent, which researchers called a milestone in public education.

But that still means 20 percent of students — or one in five — are not earning a high school diploma. And despite the progress public schools have made in reducing the numbers of students who drop out, that still is far too many.

Rhode Island's overall high school graduation rate matches the national rate, according to the most recent Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook, which was released earlier this month. The state's four-year graduation rate of 80 percent for the Class of 2013 was up from 70 percent for the Class of 2007, according to the report.

Nationally, most of the growth has taken place since 2006, after decades of stagnation, according to the report released Monday.

The increases are significant, and in most local schools, the news is even better.

In Newport County, most schools were above the national and state averages, with Middletown and Portsmouth at 88 percent, Tiverton at 86 percent and North Kingstown, which is attended by students from Jamestown, at 90 percent. Only Rogers High School in Newport was below the national and state averages at 67 percent, the lowest rate in the state except for Woonsocket at 61 percent, according to the report.

It is clear more needs to be done to combat chronic absenteeism — and it needs to be done earlier in a student's life and educational career.

Newport has had success in reducing chronic absenteeism at Thompson Middle School. School officials said the percentage of chronically absent students at Thompson in the current school year is running at 8 percent — nearly half of what it was two years ago. We hope that trend will continue when those students attend Rogers High School.

Buoyed by the national report, researchers predicted a 90 percent high school graduation rate by 2020. It would be a very worthwhile goal for local school officials to aim even higher than that.

Not surprisingly, Rogers also had one of the highest percentage of students who are chronically absent — who missed school for 18 or more days during the school year — at 38 percent. Among local high schools, only Tiverton was higher at 48 percent — the highest rate in the state, with Central Falls right behind at 47 percent and Woonsocket at 46 percent, according to the Kids Count report. Middletown was at 7 percent and Portsmouth at 13 percent, as was North Kingstown. The state average was 24 percent.

Why is this so important? Higher rates of truancy and lower graduation rates go hand in hand.

"Research shows that chronic absenteeism is a strong predictor for dropping out," Robert Archer, a director of family care at Child & Family and chairman of a work group addressing chronic absenteeism in Newport, said during the annual meeting of the Newport Partnership for Families earlier this month.