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Kids Count: Newport has sixth-highest rate in state of children who are living in poverty

By **Marcia Pobzeznik**
Correspondent

PROVIDENCE — Children living in poverty have other challenges that get in the way of being able to do their best in school: Having enough to eat and a place to call home takes precedence over “Can I do my ABCs?” said Newport School Superintendent Colleen Burns Jermain, who took part in a policy roundtable Thursday morning that coincided with the release of Rhode Island Kids Count’s report, “Child Poverty in Rhode Island.”

“Poverty comes into play because students may have other things on their mind besides going to school,” Jermain said.

Newport has the sixth-highest percentage of children in the state younger than 18 living in poverty, according to the report. According to the latest available census data, 1,267 children, or 24.4 percent of those in Newport, are living in poverty. Central Falls has the highest rate at 40.9 percent, followed by Providence at 40.5 percent.

Statewide, the child poverty rate is 21.5 percent, said Stephanie Geller, policy analyst with Rhode Island Kids Count.

“Now, more than one in five children is living in poverty in Rhode Island,” she said.

Rhode Island has more children living in poverty — a total

of 44,000 — than any other state in New England, she said.

Every city and town in the state is counted because there are children living in poverty in every one of the 39 communities in Rhode Island, Kids Count officials said.

According to the report, Middletown has 264, or 6.2 percent of its children living in poverty; Portsmouth has 118, or 2.8 percent; Tiverton has 92, or 2.8 percent; Jamestown has 17, or 1.4 percent; and Little Compton has 8, or 1 percent.

The 2013 federal poverty threshold level is \$18,769 for a

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family of three with two children, and \$23,624 for a family of four with two children.

“The good news about Newport is that people know who those children are and they come together to meet those needs,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island Kids Count.

Children living in poverty are more likely to have physical and behavioral health problems, live in households that don’t have enough food, have difficulty in school, become teen parents, earn less as adults, be unemployed as adults, and fall below the poverty line at least once later in their lives, according to the report.

Improving parental education levels is one way to start turning the tide, along

with continuing and improving upon programs that help families meet their basic needs, speakers said.

“Education is the most important lever for moving generations out of poverty,” said Susan Lusi, superintendent of Providence schools and former superintendent in Portsmouth. But poverty presents challenges to meeting educational benchmarks, she said.

The youngest years of a child’s life are “crucial to their outcomes,” Lusi said of the importance of pre-kindergarten programs.

“Their life is impacted very early in life,” said Doris De Los Santos, who is both a member of the Parole Board and executive director of partnership, development and community engagement for Providence public schools. In order to break the cycle of poverty, she said, “We need to increase opportunities for young people in the state.”

Pobzeznik@NewportRI.com

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STEPHANIE GELLER

policy analyst with Rhode Island Kids Count