

# The Narragansett Times

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## Chronic absenteeism a statewide issue *New report looks at impact of absenteeism during early elementary school years*

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As part of National Attendance Awareness month, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, The Providence Plan, and the Rhode Island Data Sharing Project convened for a special event on Monday afternoon entitled 'The Importance of Reducing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades' to address issues of chronic absenteeism in schools throughout the state.

According to reports from the Rhode Island Data Sharing Project, 16 percent of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 12 percent of first graders, 10 percent of second graders, and 10 percent of third graders were chronically absent during the 2013-2014 school year. RI KIDS COUNT defines chronic absenteeism as a student missing 10 percent or more of the school year, which is roughly 18 or more days for a 180-day session. While chronic absence is a problem throughout all populations of students at various stages of their academic careers, the organization is particularly concerned with students in the early elementary school years, as this is a time during which children develop important skills and approaches to learning that are crucial to their later success in school. According to RI KIDS COUNT, students chronically absent from school run the risk of missing opportunities for learning and developing positive relationships with members of the school community.

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of RI KIDS COUNT, made opening remarks on the importance of regular school attendance as being an essential step for children to succeed both in school and in

their adult lives. Others in attendance included Rhode Island Commissioner of Education Deborah Gist, RI KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst Stephanie Geller, The Providence Plan's Information Group Director Rebecca Lee, and Consultant to The Providence Plan Julia Steiny.

"Chronic absence is a multifaceted issue that affects children in every city and town in Rhode Island," said Bryant. "Leaders and parents need to work together at the state and community level to address the root causes of chronic absenteeism, while paying particular attention to low-income children. We're excited to bring together educators, policy makers, and community leaders to discuss the problem of chronic absence, as well as how to implement policies and programs that will improve attendance – and outcomes – for younger children."

Statistical findings also indicated chronic absenteeism to be more common among low-income students versus those of a higher socioeconomic demographic. Specifically, the RI Data Sharing Project revealed that 19 percent of low-income K-3 students in the state were chronically absent during the 2013-2014 school year, compared to only five percent of higher-income K-3 students.

Statistics also showed that chronic absenteeism in the early years of school leads to worsening attendance problems at later grade levels. According to a press release issued by RI KIDS COUNT, 74 percent of kindergarteners during the 2004-2005 academic year who were chronically absent were also absent

for additional years of school later. Conversely, the 20 percent of kindergarteners who were not chronically absent during that year did not exhibit any attendance problems in later years. This suggests that patterns are established during the early school years that are likely to persist later in life. Reasons for such irregular attendance in the past have included chronic illness, lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation, lack of clean or appropriate clothing, lack of affordable housing, bullying, or ambivalence or alienation from school.

This issue is of particular concern to Narragansett schools. According to District Superintendent Katherine Sipala, last year's Narragansett Elementary School absenteeism rates were slightly higher than anticipated.

"Chronic absenteeism is a concern even in Narragansett," Sipala explained. "Although we do not approach the same levels as other communities, the state average for percent of students chronically absent in elementary school is 13 percent; in Narragansett it was 6 percent last year. That equals about 30 students at our elementary school last year, a number that is too high in our opinion. The number and percent of students with chronic absenteeism grows both statewide and in Narragansett."

With a growth in absentee rates at the elementary school level, it is not surprising that there are increasing percentages at the middle and high school levels as well. Sipala provided additional statistics on the Pier Middle School and Narragansett High School (NHS) absenteeism