

Absenteeism still too high, officials say

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

NEWPORT — Chronic absenteeism at Rogers High School has been on a slight downward trend in recent years, but it is still too high, according to officials tracking students' attendance.

During the 2015-16 school year, 31 percent of students at Rogers High School were chronically absent, down from 32 percent the year before, according to Stephanie Geller, a senior policy analyst with Rhode Island Kids Count, a statewide policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of children.

Gellner was the keynote speaker at a joint meeting of representatives of Newport Partnership for Families and Kids Count held at Gurney's Newport Resort & Marina on Goat Island on Friday morning that was attended by more than 75 people.

The partnership is an association of many social service agencies, community organizations, educational institutions and businesses striving to strengthen the city by supporting the needs of children, families and individuals.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as the percentage of students who were enrolled at least 90 days and missed 18 days or more of school, which is 10 percent or more of the 180-day school year.

"Students who are

frequently absent from school miss critical academic and social learning opportunities and are at risk of disengagement from school, academic failure, and dropping out," Gellner said.

During the 2015-16 school year, 14 percent of Newport students in kindergarten through third grade also were chronically absent, up from 11 percent in the 2014-15 school year, according to data presented by Gellner.

Eighty percent of children who are chronically absent from school in the kindergarten through third-grade years will not be reading by the end of third grade, and they will be four times more likely to drop out of high school, according to Kids Count.

Robert Archer is chairman of the partnership's Chronic Early Absenteeism & Truancy Reduction Initiative and is vice president for program operations at Child & Family services. He talked about prevention and early intervention measures developed by the group to reduce absenteeism.

"We have had some impact, as shown by the data, but we have more work ahead of us," he said. "We have to be persistent and not give up."

Julie DiBari, CEO of the consultant firm The Capacity Group of Providence, was hired as an outside evaluator to monitor the absenteeism initiative of the partnership. The van Beuren Charitable

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Foundation awarded a \$275,000 grant to the partnership in

2015 to undertake the initiative.

DiBari said a significant number of students are stressed by the poverty they live with. About one-third of absent high school students say they missed school either because they were working or taking care of a family member.

Sixty-five percent of Newport students as of October 2016 were from low-income families, meaning they qualified for free or reduced-price meals at school, Gellner said. Only Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence and Woonsocket have higher percentages of low-income children in their public schools, she said.

When it comes to effective measures to persuade students to come to school regularly, calling students to the dean's office or issuing out-of-school suspensions do not work, DiBari said.

Many of the students need more adults in their lives, such as mentors, teachers or others, she said. Clinical support from professionals also is important, she said.

Some students feel that the school curriculum is not connected enough to real life, and adjustments can be made there to engage students, DiBari said.

Efforts in other areas have shown more success.

For example, Newport's high school graduation rate has improved significantly in the past four years, with 85 percent of students graduating in four years in 2015, compared to 67 percent in 2013, Gellner said.

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, representing the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, presented Newport with a National Pacesetter Award.

Newport was one of 48 communities across the nation recognized earlier this year as a Pacesetter for leading efforts to solve major challenges that can undermine early literacy. School officials worked hard to increase school readiness and

school attendance, as well as providing summer learning opportunities.

“It’s exciting to see the sense of urgency of Newport’s education and community leaders who have committed to working together to increase the percentage of children who read proficiently by the end of third grade,” said Bryant, who is also executive director of Kids Count. “Newport is a stellar example of teamwork for improved children’s outcomes.”