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Initiative aims to cut school absentee rate

By Sean Flynn

Staff writer

NEWPORT — 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.

That statistic was cited by Julie DiBari, CEO of the consultant firm The Capacity Group of Newport, and one of the speakers at the 18th annual meeting of the Newport Partnership for Families held Friday morning at the Hyatt Regency Newport on Goat Island.

DiBari is the outside evaluator hired to monitor an initiative of the partnership and Newport School Department to reduce the number of chronically absent students in the city's public schools. Last year, the van Beuren Charitable Foundation awarded a \$275,000 grant to the partnership to undertake this initiative.

Robert B. Archer, chairman of the partnership's Chronic Early Absenteeism & Truancy Reduction Initiative, talked about a three-tier intervention and prevention model developed by the group.

School Superintendent Colleen Burns Jermain gave a PowerPoint presentation showing how detailed the data collection is for tracking the attendance of students at Rogers High School, Thompson Middle School and Pell Elementary School, and whether absences are excused or unexcused. Student tardiness is also tracked.

"Most schools monitor average daily attendance or unexcused absences, but few actively track chronic absenteeism," says the 2016 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook that was released this week.

That is not true for Newport: The principals of each school are responsible for a daily tabulation of all attendance and tardiness data.

"Schools, districts, and the state can nurture a culture of attendance by raising awareness among school and community personnel about the problem of chronic absence, using positive messaging to encourage parents to send their children to school on time and every day in the early grades, providing frequent reports on student absenteeism and identifying and inter-

vening with students with troubling absenteeism patterns," Kids Count, the nonprofit children's advocacy group, says in the 2016 Factbook.

Those are all elements of the initiative now taking place in the schools, as outlined by Jermain, Archer and DiBari at the meeting attended by more than 40 representatives of social service agencies, as well as elected officials.

Progress in the effort to reduce absenteeism is being made, but not nearly at the scale school officials are hoping for. The first year of the initiative largely was devoted to setting up procedures for collecting the data, so

that intervention can take place more effectively now, they said.

Slides compared data from the 2014-2015 school year with the current 2015-2016 school year. Absenteeism can now be compared by months and specific days for each year. For example, 32 percent of students at Rogers High School had unexcused absences as of April 13, 2015. That figure decreased to 23 percent as of April 12, 2016. At Thompson Middle School the decrease was 8 percent to 4 percent, while the figure at Pell Elementary School was 9 percent for each school year.

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.

The 2016 Factbook says 32 percent of students at Rogers High School were chronically absent in the 2014-2015 school year; 13 percent at Thompson Middle School; and 11 percent in grades K-3 at Pell. School officials are hoping for better results in the 2017 Factbook when it is released next April.

Christa Durand, president of Newport Hospital, was the keynote speaker at the annual meeting and outlined changes, renovations and improvements taking place at the hospital.

Twenty new physicians have been hired at the hospital over the past two years, Durand said, and she talked about changes coming as a result of the hospital's three-year strategic plan.

In the area of orthopedics, for example, the hospital needs a dedicated joint replacement center, she said.

"There is a growing need for new hips and knees," she said.

Carolyn Souza, chairwoman of the partnership's Child Abuse and Neglect Initiative, discussed what her group is doing. She is also

clinical supervisor of Looking Upwards Inc.

Carmella Geer, chairwoman of the partnership's Elder Isolation, Neglect and Abuse Subcommittee, outlined goals in that area for her group. She is the executive director of the Edward King House Senior Center.

The Newport Partnership for Families was founded in 1990 as a collective organization that would be able to coordinate efforts by various agencies, organizations and businesses in Newport County to reduce duplication.

Sharon K. Carter, the partnership's director; Keith Tavares, the partnership's chairman and vice president of institutional advancement at Child & Family; and Mayor Jeanne-Marie Napolitano all spoke at Friday's event.

Visit www.newportpartnership.org for a full list of the individual members of the partnership and the projects and initiatives now underway under its oversight.

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