



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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For Immediate Release

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Presents: *Woonsocket Data in Your Backyard*

Between 2005 and 2009, Woonsocket children showed significant gains in educational achievement, including improvements in fourth-grade math and reading proficiency.

Woonsocket's full-day kindergarten program, first offered in the 2003-2004 school year, was eliminated this year. Research shows that children enrolled in full-day kindergarten programs make greater academic gains in both reading and math than children in half-day programs.

Woonsocket, RI, September 16, 2010 - Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst, Stephanie Geller, presented data from the *2010 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* to an audience of community leaders, educators, parents and policy makers. The presentation included highlights of improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth in Woonsocket. A community discussion about the implications of the data and the opportunities to improve outcomes for children in the community followed the presentation. The presentation was held in partnership with Connecting for Children & Families and was held on **Thursday, September 16, 2010 from 9:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at the Chaplin-Perez Center, 37 Center Street, Woonsocket, RI.**

Woonsocket has one of the highest child poverty rates in the state with almost one in three children (32%) living in poverty. Elizabeth Burke Bryant noted, "We know that the most effective way to ameliorate the long-term effects of poverty is to provide a high-quality education that opens up opportunities for children and their families. It is essential that children have access to high quality learning opportunities in the early years. Early learning experiences in the preschool and kindergarten years are essential to build a strong foundation for ongoing school achievement and school success."

Education

Children in Woonsocket have limited access to Head Start (for preschoolers) and no access to Early Head Start services (for infants and toddlers). Only 38% of income-eligible three- and four-year-olds in Woonsocket are enrolled in the Head Start preschool program, due to limited state and federal funding for Head Start. In the 2009-2010 school year and continuing in 2010-2011, Woonsocket gained a new early education resource when Woonsocket Head Start was selected to be one of Rhode Island's seven Pre-Kindergarten demonstration sites. This program currently has the capacity to serve 18 children with a high-quality pre-K program, part of the state's new public Pre-K demonstration program. Over time, it is expected that the state will expand the program to serve additional children in Woonsocket and in high-need communities across the state. In addition, Connecting for Children and Families received a federal Early Reading First grant that will provide literacy support in child care classrooms in Woonsocket.

“While we are seeing some progress in expanded access to preschool and early literacy services in Woonsocket, there is cause for concern as children make the transition to school,” noted Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Beginning this fall, Woonsocket eliminated its full-day kindergarten program. Yet, there is a great deal of research indicating that full-day kindergarten programs are beneficial to children in low-income families when compared to half-day programs. Low-income children often enter kindergarten with significant gaps in cognitive and social-emotional skills, when compared with their more advantaged peers.” Last year, all six of the school districts in Rhode Island's core cities offered full-day kindergarten. Woonsocket is now the only core city (the six cities in Rhode Island with child poverty rates over 15%) that is not offering full-day kindergarten.

Between 2005 and 2009, Woonsocket made progress in improving academic achievement in fourth-grade reading, fourth-grade math and eighth-grade reading, yet continued to lag behind the state as a whole. Education highlights in Woonsocket include:

- The rate of fourth graders reading at or above proficiency increased from 46% in October 2005 to 54% in October 2009, but continued to be lower than the rate for the state as a whole (67%).
- The rate of eighth graders reading at or above proficiency increased even more dramatically from 28% in October 2005 to 51% in October 2009, but again continued to be lower than the rate for the state as a whole (70%).

- Between 2005 and 2009, the percentage of 4th grade students in Woonsocket public schools who were proficient in math increased from 41% to 53%, below the state rate of 62%.
- The percentage of 8th graders who were proficient in math stayed stable between 2005 and 2009 (29% to 30%). This rate remains far below the math proficiency rates for the 8th graders in the state as a whole which is 54%.
- Woonsocket's four-year high school graduation rate also increased from 54% in 2007 to 62% in 2009, but was still well below the state rate of 75%. Young adults who drop out of high school are almost four times as likely to be unemployed as those with a bachelor's degree and are more likely to earn lower wages than those with a high school diploma.

“While these trends are going in the right direction, they continue to lag behind the state as a whole. It is essential that Woonsocket children have access to a high-quality education from pre-K through college. Early education investments pay-off in the short-term by reducing remediation and special education costs and pay-off in the long-term by laying the foundation for a skilled and educated workforce,” remarked Ms. Geller.

Economic Well-Being

Woonsocket has one of the highest child poverty rates in the state with almost one in three children (32%) living in poverty. In 2009, the federal poverty threshold was \$17,285 for a family of three. Almost one in five (19%) Woonsocket children live in extreme poverty – with incomes below half the poverty line (\$8,643 for a family of three). Families with limited financial resources need a safety net to help them provide for the basic needs of their families. Without this assistance, families will face severe hardship, hunger and homelessness. “Parents need access to adult education and training so this generation and the next can gain the knowledge and skills they need to obtain well-paying jobs to support themselves and their families,” remarked Bryant.

“In recent years, we have seen increases in the number of families accessing food programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and WIC, on behalf of their children,” said Ms. Geller. From 2005 to 2009, the number of children participating in the SNAP program has increased by 66% from 2,833 to 4,696. WIC participation has also increased from 72% of eligible women, infants and children participating in 2006 to 87% participating in 2009.

Woonsocket is also one of five school districts in Rhode Island that offers universal School Breakfast in all of its schools, so children can start the day off with a nutritious meal,” said Geller. “Woonsocket has shown leadership in enrolling families in SNAP and by offering universal School Breakfast in all schools throughout the district,” said Geller. Still, only 39% of income-eligible children participate in Woonsocket’s school breakfast program. “Strategies to further increase program participation School Breakfast include providing information on the importance of nutrition on school performance and offering breakfast in the classroom at the beginning of the school day.”

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect

“For more than a decade, Woonsocket has consistently had one of the highest rates of child abuse and neglect in the state,” said Geller. In 2009, there were 297 Woonsocket children who were victims of child abuse and neglect, a rate of 26.6 victims per 1,000 children ages birth to 18. The child abuse and neglect rate for Woonsocket was the highest in the state and more than double the state rate of 11.7 victims per 1,000 children; however, the rate is lower than last year when it was 28.2 victims per 1,000 children.

“Research shows that high-quality, intensive family support programs during the first few years of life can improve child outcomes and reduce the risk of neglect and abuse,” stated Geller. “Local and state efforts are being implemented to help caregivers who may be overwhelmed by multiple stressors, including inadequate income to meet even basic needs and lack of strong social support networks. Providing a strong network of family support services, access to health care and affordable child care can help keep families from ending up in the child welfare system.”

Teen Pregnancy and Parenting

Woonsocket had the second highest teen birth rate in the state at 65.2 births for every 1,000 girls ages 15-19, more than double the state rate of 30.7 births for every 1,000 girls ages 15-19. Ms. Geller noted, “It is important to recognize Woonsocket’s progress in reducing the rate of teen pregnancy and parenting among younger teens ages 15-17.” Woonsocket’s birth rate for minor teens ages 15-17 has decreased from 44.8 per 1,000 teen girls ages 15-17 between 2000 and 2004 to 31.6 births for every 1,000 girls ages 15-17 in the most recent data from 2004-2008. However, Woonsocket still has the fourth highest rate of teen births in the state for

younger teens and the rate is substantially higher than the state rate of 18.9 births per 1,000 girls ages 15-17.

Woonsocket's teen birth rate for older teens (18 and 19) was the second highest in the state at 115.6 births for every 1,000 girls ages 18-19, compared to 44.0 births for every 1,000 girls ages 18-19 for the state as a whole. "We must not be complacent about the increasing rate of childbearing among the older teens. Having a baby at ages 18 and 19 places young people at risk for not completing their education and low-paying jobs that are inadequate to meet basic needs. Teen pregnancy and parenting is also an important risk factor for future involvement with the child welfare system."

Health

The data from the *2010 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook* show that Woonsocket's infant mortality rate has improved and is now better than the state as a whole. However, Woonsocket has the highest low birthweight rate in the state and continues to lag behind in several early health indicators that have a negative impact on healthy child development, including:

- Between 2004 and 2008, 10.0% of Woonsocket infants were born low birthweight, the highest rate in the state and much higher than the state rate of 8.0% for the same period. Low birthweight is a major determinant of infant mortality and illness and is related to increased risk of cognitive difficulties and lower academic achievement. During that same period, 13.8% of Woonsocket births were preterm, making Woonsocket tied with Providence for the highest preterm birth rate in the state. Infants born preterm are at risk for a wide variety of health, behavioral, and learning problems.
- The infant mortality rate in Woonsocket between 2004 and 2008 was 5.1 infant deaths per every 1,000 live births, lower than the state rate of 6.2 per 1,000 live births and down considerably from Woonsocket's 2001 to 2005 rate of 8.8 infant deaths per 1,000 live births.
- Between 2004 and 2008, Woonsocket had the fourth highest rate of delayed prenatal care in the state (at a rate of 15.9%, compared to 14.0% for the state as a whole). Early prenatal care is important to identify and treat health problems and influence health behaviors that can compromise fetal development, infant health and maternal health.

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the economic well-being, health, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.