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

1 in 10 Woonsocket infants face multiple risks for healthy child development.

Woonsocket's students experience high rates of chronic early absence and school mobility.

Despite challenges, Woonsocket students are experiencing slow but steady gains in reading and math achievement.

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**Woonsocket, RI (September 28, 2011)** – Community leaders, policy makers and parents learned about the well-being of children and families in Woonsocket today. Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst for Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, presented data from the *2011 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook*. The *Data in Your Backyard* presentation, which took place at the Chaplin-Perez Community Center in Woonsocket, included highlights of improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth in Woonsocket. After the presentation, community members discussed opportunities to improve outcomes for Woonsocket children. The presentation was brought to the community in partnership with Connecting for Children and Families.

**Opportunities to improve outcomes for infants**

Research shows strong links between a parent's education level and a child's school readiness, health and the level of education that the child is likely to achieve. Between 2005 and 2009, 24% of new mothers in Woonsocket had less than a high school diploma, which is substantially higher than the state rate of 16%. In contrast, the percentage of new mothers with a bachelor's degree or above (14%) was much smaller in Woonsocket than in the state as a whole (35%).

Children born to mothers who are under age 20, unmarried, and

without a high school degree are more likely to grow up in poverty, more likely to suffer from abuse or neglect, less likely to be ready for school when entering kindergarten, less likely to perform well in school, and less likely to complete high school. In 2010, 10% of all babies born to mothers living in Woonsocket were born at the highest risk (with all three risk factors). This percentage remained constant between 2009 and 2010, and was the highest percentage in the state.

Teen pregnancy is also an issue of concern in Woonsocket. The teen birth rate was among the highest in the state with 66.6 teen births between 2005 and 2009 for every 1,000 teens ages 15 to 19, more than double the state rate of 30.1 per 1,000 teen girls. Only Central Falls had a higher teen birth rate. Teen pregnancy and parenting threaten the development of teen parents as well as their children. Teen mothers are less likely to have the financial resources, social supports and parenting skills needed for healthy child development. Teen parenting is also closely associated with poverty and other family disadvantages. Reducing teen pregnancies would improve outcomes both for teen mothers and their children.

“Providing young mothers with evidence-based support programs is critical to improving birth outcomes, fostering the development of healthy families and ensuring that high risk children are not left behind,” stated Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Research shows that these programs can increase the time between births, reduce child abuse and neglect and play a key role in closing the achievement gap early on so children are set on a path to succeed.”

In Woonsocket between 2005 and 2009, the percentage of infants born low birthweight was the highest in the state at 10.3%. Woonsocket’s rate of preterm births was 13.2%, second only to Providence at 13.7%. Despite these challenges, Woonsocket’s infant mortality rate has been dropping steadily in recent years. The city’s current infant mortality rate (4.8 per 1,000 births) is lower than Rhode Island as a whole (6.3 per 1,000 births) and was the second lowest among the core cities.

### **Children facing educational challenges, but some progress is being made**

According to the 2000 Census, of the 537 Woonsocket children ages three to four who were eligible for enrollment in the Head Start program, 204 (38%) were enrolled. Woonsocket Head Start was one of Rhode Island’s seven original Pre-K demonstration sites, but the agency did not receive funding for the continuation of the program for the current school year.

“Research shows that children who attend high-quality early learning and preschool programs and who learn to read on grade level in elementary school are more likely to graduate high school,” said Bryant. “That’s why it’s critical that these programs continue to be funded at the local, state and federal level.”

Full-day kindergarten is another area where the city has fallen behind. Woonsocket eliminated all but one full-day kindergarten classroom for the 2010-2011 school year and is now the only core city without full-day public kindergarten for all students. According to Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, “Children benefit from participating in a full-day kindergarten program in many ways. The learning gains that students make in full-day kindergarten programs translate to a month of additional schooling over the course of a school year when compared to children in half-day programs. Full-day kindergarten programs can be especially beneficial to poor and minority children and can contribute significantly to closing the achievement gap.”

Children who miss a great deal of school or who enter or leave the classroom in the middle of the year miss opportunities to learn and can disrupt the entire classroom. In Woonsocket, more than 1 in 5 students (21%) changed school mid-year, a considerably higher percentage than in the state as a whole (14%). Children who change schools frequently are more likely to have lower math and reading skills, repeat a grade and be suspended than their peers who do not change schools. High student mobility rates affect all children because when a student enters the school mid-year, teachers must slow down and repeat lessons.

Woonsocket also has the highest chronic early absence rate in the state with almost 1 in 4 (23%) of students in grades K-3 missing 18 or more days of school (10% of the school year). “Children who miss a lot of school in the early grades show lower math and reading achievement in later grades. Schools can monitor attendance, work with parents to identify barriers to attendance, such as transportation problems, and develop partnerships with families and the community to find solutions,” said Geller.

Despite all of these challenges, children in Woonsocket have been making slow but steady progress in reading and math. Between 2005 and 2010, the percentage of fourth grade students in Woonsocket public schools who were proficient in reading rose from 46% to 59%, while eighth-grade proficiency increased even more dramatically from 28% to 60%. Woonsocket students have seen improvements in fourth and eighth grade math proficiency as well. In 2005, the fourth grade math proficiency rate was 41% and in 2010 it was 56%. Among eighth graders, the proficiency rate was 29% in 2005 and 33% in 2010. Despite these gains, Woonsocket’s math proficiency rates continue to be among the lowest in the state.

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