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

***Woonsocket's child population declined 11%
between 2000 and 2010***

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***City's reading and math proficiency rates are improving slowly,
but more work needs to be done***

***Innovative programs can help improve graduation rate, which
along with Pawtucket, is the lowest in the state***

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**Woonsocket, RI (September 20, 2012)** – Today, community leaders, policy makers and parents learned about the well-being of children and families in Woonsocket and discussed opportunities to improve outcomes for children and youth in the city. Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, presented data from the 2012 *Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook*. The *Data in Your Backyard* presentation included highlights of improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth in Woonsocket. The event was held at the Chaplin-Perez Community Center and was co-sponsored by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and Connecting for Children and Families.

**Woonsocket has experienced demographic changes**

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of children living in Woonsocket declined 11%, from 11,155 to 9,888. The ethnic makeup of the city's children changed substantially during that same time period, with the percentage of Hispanic/Latino children growing from 18% to 27%.

While the median income for the state has increased slightly over the past decade, the median income of Woonsocket's families has decreased. From 2006-2010, Woonsocket's median family income

was \$35,850, down from \$45,099 in 2000, making it one of the lowest in the state.

### **City's teen birth rate remains high**

One challenge facing the city of Woonsocket is a high birth rate among teens. The birth rate among girls ages 15 to 17 in Woonsocket (37.6 per 1,000 teen girls in that age range) was twice as high as the Rhode Island rate (17.3 per 1,000 girls in that age group). The teen birth rate among teens ages 18 to 19 in Woonsocket was the second highest in the state at 132.0 per 1,000 teen girls in that age group, more than three and a half times higher than the state rate of 37.5 per 1,000 teen girls ages 18 to 19.

“Teen births present challenges for not only the teen parents, but also the child,” noted Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Teen mothers often have trouble finishing high school and continuing on to college, and they can have difficulty finding and keeping a job and escaping poverty. Children of teen parents are more likely to experience maltreatment and enter foster care. They score lower on measures of school readiness and on standardized tests, are more likely to repeat a grade and are less likely to finish high school.”

### **Infants in Woonsocket face health risks**

Woonsocket lags behind the rest of the state in many infant health indicators. In 2011, 8% of all babies born to mothers living in Woonsocket were born at highest risk, the second highest percentage in the state. “Infants born at highest risk” have a mother who is under age 20, not married, and does not have a high school diploma, three risk factors that best predict childhood poverty and poor educational outcomes.

In Woonsocket, more than one in six (17.4%) infants born between 2006 and 2010 were born to mothers who either received no prenatal care or did not begin care until the second or third trimester. Early prenatal care is important to identify and treat health problems and influence health behaviors that can hurt fetal development, and the health of the mother and baby. Between 2006 and 2010, 10.3% of the city's infants were born low birthweight, the highest percentage in the state, and Woonsocket's rate of preterm births (12.8%) was the second highest in the state, after Providence (13.7%).

Progress has been made in improving the city's infant mortality rate, which was 4.8 per 1,000 births from 2006 to 2010. The city's infant mortality rate was lower than the state infant mortality rate (6.5 per 1,000 births) and was the lowest among the four core cities (Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence and Woonsocket, the four communities in Rhode Island with the highest percentage of children living in poverty).

According to Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst for Rhode Island KIDS COUNT,

“Expanding access to high-quality, evidence-based family support programs can help mitigate the risks facing vulnerable infants and their families.”

### **Chronic absenteeism a problem among Woonsocket’s youngest children**

Chronic early absence is the percentage of children in kindergarten through third grade (K-3) who have missed at least 10% of the school year (18 days or more), including excused and unexcused absences. During the 2010-2011 school year, 26% of Woonsocket children (600 children) in grades K-3 were chronically absent, the highest rate of chronic early absenteeism in the state.

“Poverty, teenage parenting, and poor maternal health can affect school attendance, as can poor quality education, bullying, and disrupted classrooms,” noted Bryant. “Schools can reduce chronic absenteeism by introducing school-family-community partnerships that monitor attendance and connect with parents as soon as troubling attendance patterns appear.”

### **Slow but steady improvement in educational outcomes**

Woonsocket students are showing slow, but steady, progress in both reading and math. Between 2005 and 2011, the percentage of fourth grade students in Woonsocket public schools who were proficient in reading rose from 46% to 59%, although it was still lower than the state rate of 71%. Woonsocket’s eighth-grade reading proficiency rate more than doubled during the same time period, from 28% to 63%. The state rate was 77%.

Woonsocket’s fourth- and eighth-grade math proficiency rate also has improved considerably since 2005. Woonsocket’s fourth-grade math proficiency rate was 59% in 2011, up from 41% in 2005. The state fourth-grade math proficiency rate was 65% in 2011. The city’s eighth-grade math proficiency rate was 36% in 2011, up from 29% in 2005. In 2011, the state eighth-grade math proficiency rate was 58%.

“While the district still has among the lowest reading and math proficiency rates in the state, the district should be proud of the improvements it has demonstrated over the past six years,” said Geller.

### **Graduation rate among lowest in the state, but innovative programming may help improve rates down the road**

While Woonsocket’s high school graduation also is showing gradual improvement, it remains among the lowest in the state (tied with Pawtucket for the lowest rate in the state, at 63%). In 2011 in Woonsocket, 63% of students graduated from high school on

time. This is an improvement from 54% in 2007, however it is below the state rate of 77%.

“Schools can improve graduation rates by identifying at-risk students in elementary and middle school and by working to get them back on track for graduation,” added Bryant. “Improving the school climate, creating eighth to ninth grade transition programs, supporting personalized learning programs, using expanded learning time, and implementing rigorous and engaging curricula all can help improve school graduation rates and lead students on a path to success.”

Woonsocket has been leading the way in offering expanded learning opportunities outside of the traditional school day. The district’s *Chillin’ and Skillin’* program helps elementary school children learn in innovative and engaging ways over the summer and the *Woonsocket Expanded Learning Opportunities Initiative* allows high school students to participate in individualized student projects outside of the traditional classroom setting and earn credit for these experiences. “These afterschool and summer learning programs in Woonsocket reinforce classroom learning and keep students engaged, which could lead to improved achievement and increased high school graduation rates,” said Geller.

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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.*