



Issue Brief

Fostering Educational Success for Pregnant and Parenting Youth

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Pregnant and parenting youth face significant challenges as they work to succeed in life. Too often, the struggle to balance the demands of completing high school, caring for children, navigating their own adolescence and trying to forge a future in which they can provide a safe and healthy home can seem overwhelming. Support from family, friends, schools and the greater community is essential to the long-term success of pregnant and parenting youth, particularly in the educational setting.

The relationship between education, economic security, and family stability cannot be denied. Data published by the National Center for Children in Poverty shows that the vast majority—82%—of children whose parents have less than a high school diploma live in low income families.ⁱ Additionally, high school graduates earn approximately \$9,000 more a year than individuals who do not graduate. Over a lifetime, students who do not graduate earn an estimated \$516,000 less than those who do.ⁱⁱ Educational policies that discourage young parents from completing their education push them headlong into lifelong poverty, impacting not only their lives, but the lives of their children as well.

Pregnant and Parenting Youth in School:

Although teen birth rates in the United States are at an all time low, the Illinois Department of Public Health reports that, in 2003, nearly 10% of all Illinois births were among adolescent women.ⁱⁱⁱ Completing their education is a critical marker of success for young parents, yet this goal is difficult to achieve. The 2004 Report on Illinois Poverty published by the Illinois Poverty Institute made the following conclusions about the challenges faced by young parents seeking to complete their education:

- Almost 60% of teens with a school-age pregnancy drop out between 8th and 12th grades
- Only 64% of teen mothers complete their high school education or receive a GED
- Those teen parents who do complete high school are less likely to attend college than their peers without children^{iv}

While research and data on young parents in Illinois schools is limited, The Center for Impact Research found that 26% of pregnant and parenting youth in Chicago schools were encouraged to leave.^v This is consistent with national data from a U.S. Department of Education study released this year in which the authors interviewed high school dropouts to find out why they did not finish school. 31% reported their pregnancy as a reason for dropping out, and another 13% reported that they left school because they were already a parent.^{vi}

Adolescents who drop out are less likely to return to school or attain self-sufficiency, and their children also face decreased odds for success in school. Alternatively, young parents who do finish school benefit in many ways. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, girls who graduate or get a GED are less likely to have a subsequent pregnancy. In the same report, the Campaign indicated that some research shows low educational *expectations* to be associated with subsequent pregnancy.^{vii}

In a survey of young parents in Chicago conducted by young parents working with ICAH:

- 48% report having experienced discrimination because they are parents.
- 46% report having experienced discrimination because they were pregnant.

Recommendations for Change:

Crafting educational policies that promote rather than inhibit the academic success of pregnant and parenting youth is critical to their success. Educational systems must commit from the top to the bottom to ensure effective implementation of programs, services, and policies that meet the needs of this population. Unfortunately, too few school districts have taken a system-wide approach to this issue, leaving an inconsistent patchwork of support systems across the state.

Through research conducted on young parents in the 1990s, the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education compiled a list of recommendations for policy changes in school-based and school-linked programs as well as state governments. A summary of relevant points follows^{viii}:

School-Based and School-Linked Programs:

- Strengthen existing programs or implement new ones which educate teens about basic health and hygiene, nutrition, family planning, self-esteem and substance abuse
- Create flexible learning environments through alternative schools and programs as well as home schooling, in addition to fostering an educational climate which promotes a swift return to school after childbirth
- Foster a school environment which is sensitive to the issues affecting teen mothers by acknowledging connections between pregnancy, domestic violence and substance abuse while also discouraging teenage pregnancy
- Provide easily accessible health care services to pregnant and parenting teens as well as their children
- Build mentoring relationships with teens while they are still in school and develop effective case-management programs through existing organizations
- Provide on-site child care and make parenting resources available to teen mothers and fathers

State Governments:

- Fund on-site child care programs through the average daily attendance budget
- Make child care subsidies more available to teen parents and exempt teens enrolled in school from TANF time limits
- Develop guidelines on statutory rape to distinguish cases that require the attention of the criminal justice system as an alternative to mandatory reporting requirements
- Designate an authority on issues affecting pregnant and parenting teens and their children
- Support school-based programs encouraging positive health habits and discouraging pregnancy

What Works:

There are several successful models for supporting pregnant and parenting youth in schools. Although each is unique, they all have common elements, suggesting core program components necessary for an effective program. Included in these core components are:

- Intensive supportive services including case management, counseling, classes on child care and development and incentives for students who complete program components
- Flexible schedules and non-traditional educational options including online classes and independent study
- Dedicated staff focused on working both one-on-one and in groups with participants
- Dedicated space within a school setting in which participants can access information and attend classes or meetings

Employing these core components, three distinct models are used to serve pregnant and parenting youth in schools:

Comprehensive Home and School Support:

This type of program focuses on providing intensive services to pregnant and parenting youth in their own schools. Chicago Public Schools operated one such program, Cradle to Classroom, from 1997-2004. Cradle to Classroom is one of the only programs that has been researched and proven to improve graduation rates among young parents, and to ensure their children matriculate into pre-school. At its peak in 2002, this program served 2,500 young parents and 2,235 infants—approximately one-third of infants born to adolescents that year. The program budget was just over \$5 million per year at Chicago Public Schools, and nearly 75% of the costs were reimbursed by the state.^{ix}

Cradle to Classroom had a dual focus—to promote educational success among young parents it served and to promote the health and development of their children. An unexpected bonus was that the vast majority of participants did not get pregnant again before graduation. Research found that more than 90% of program participants graduated from high school.^x

Through this program, participating schools received funding for a staff position—a parent advocate who provided comprehensive coaching, mentoring and support to pregnant and parenting youth in the school. Those workers participated in a summer-long training course designed to help students navigate the complex array of services and challenges facing them, as well as give them advice on basic parenting. The parent advocates had small caseloads of eight to ten parents, and performed weekly home visits with their clients. These visits focused both on support for the young parent, and education on how to foster intellectual and emotional development with their children.

Cradle to Classroom schools also dedicated permanent space to the program which housed the parent advocates and provided a place where young parents could receive support during the school day. During lunch or between classes, students could stop in the office for referrals on community-based resources or just talk to the staff. The program also built strong linkages with community-based providers of services to young parents and ensured that participants had access to as much information about available support as possible.

Systemic, System-wide Coordinated Services:

Taking a statewide approach, the State of Pennsylvania has worked both legislatively and administratively to address the educational challenges faced by pregnant and parenting youth. Through the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the state administers two different programs for teen parents: PPT (Pregnant and Parenting Teen) and ELECT (Education Leading to Employment and Career Training). These programs are designed to help teen parents stay in school, obtain a high school diploma or GED, have healthy babies, become capable parents and prepare to become self-sufficient adults.

ELECT programs are a joint effort sponsored and funded by both the Departments of Public Welfare and Education while PPT programs are funded solely with state monies through the Department of Education. Currently there are 27 ELECT and 43 PPT sites, which serve approximately 5,300 pregnant and parenting teen mothers and fathers across the state.^{xi} All ELECT and PPT programs are located in public local schools and provide teens with: pregnancy prevention information, individual and group counseling, day care and transportation help, health and nutrition instruction, and parent and child development education. The projects also work extensively with local community organizations to coordinate services and insure that teens and their children know where to turn after graduation. Program technical assistance is provided primarily through the Center for Schools and Communities, a non-profit organization.

Each aspect of the ELECT and PPT programs has been developed to facilitate implementation at the local level. Additionally, the Pennsylvania Department of Education has staff dedicated to each project that work to ensure success. In addressing educational success for pregnant and parenting youth, these programs focus on the following components:

- Alternative educational programming
- School attendance and retention
- Child care
- Case management and family support services
- School-to-Work programs
- Teen father services
- Pregnancy prevention
- School safety and violence prevention

Alternative Schools:

Many districts now have the option of creating charter or alternative schools that serve as a choice for pregnant and parenting students who, for whatever reason, can not or do not want to continue in their home school. Illinois does have charters available with public funds to support them.

Chicago was home to three schools for pregnant and parenting youth, but currently only one, Simpson Academy for Young Women, is still in operation. The mission of Simpson Academy for Young Women is to educate young women who are currently pregnant or parenting. With a curriculum that emphasizes reading and critical thinking, Simpson prepares students to succeed in a rapidly changing world. Special emphasis is also placed on prenatal education and parenting skills that enable students to achieve healthy pregnancy outcomes and become competent young mothers. Simpson Academy for Young Women does not graduate students. However, on average 70% to 80% of Simpson students go on to graduate from their home schools or receive their G.E.D. certificate.^{xii}

Another example is The Next Step located in Washington DC. This school is a model for other schools working with a diverse immigrant population. For many students, personal challenges such as becoming a teenage parent, the need to work to support themselves or their families, the lack of a stable home, have made it impossible for them to stay in public school. One third of The Next Step's current student body of 72 students are teen parents who need extra support and attention to overcome the obstacles that have prevented them from continuing their education.

The Next Step provides a full-time academic program that uses a flexible, practical, individualized curriculum designed around students' needs. The school has one teacher for every eight students, and computers for students' use in every classroom. Students attend five and a half hours of instruction a day in Basic Literacy, English, English as a Second Language, Math, GED preparation, Social Studies, Science, Life Skills, Computers, Parenting, and Reproductive Health. Additionally, all students receive comprehensive case management support to address the many issues in their lives that challenge their ability to attend school. The school maintains funds for emergency babysitting and stipends for teen parents to help defray the costs of childcare. The Next Step also works closely with the Teen Parent Support Program of the Latin American Youth Center to provide the social service case management and crisis counseling that many young people need to stay in school.^{xiii}

ⁱ National Center for Children in Poverty Fact Sheet: *Parents' Low Education Leads to Low Income, Despite Full-Time Employment*. September 2006

ⁱⁱ Illinois Office of the Governor Press Release. October 2, 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ Illinois Department of Public Health News Release. March 8, 2005

^{iv} Illinois Poverty Summit, *2004 Report on Illinois Poverty: Breaking the Cycle of Poverty for Illinois Teens*

^v Center for Impact Research, *Prepped for Success? Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Teens in Chicago Schools*. July 2003

^{vi} Civic Enterprises in association with Peter Hart Research Associates, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. March 2006

^{vii} <http://www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/research/reports.asp>, retrieved in March 2006

^{viii} National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education - <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ParentingTeens/recomm.html>, retrieved in March 2006

^{ix} Chicago Tribune, *Rocking the Cradle Over*. December 19, 2004

^x The Chicago Reporter, *Getting What They Need*. April/May 2004

^{xi} Pennsylvania Department of Education Website - http://www.pde.state.pa.us/svcs_students/cwp/view.asp?a=175&Q=48401&svcs_studentsNav=|3898|&svcs_studentsNav=|3898|, retrieved in March 2006

^{xii} Simpson Academy website - http://www.simpson.cps.k12.il.us/mission_statement.htm, retrieved in November 2006

^{xiii} The Next Step website - <http://www.layc-dc.org/charterschools/nextstep/default.html>, retrieved in March 2006