
SUPPORTING YOUNG FAMILIES: CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING CONTEMPORARY WELFARE POLICY

This brief was prepared to call attention to the challenges faced by states and communities in implementing the minor parent provisions of TANF. It suggests that investments in the creation of a provider system to support young families is necessary to achieve TANF's intent and desired outcomes; facilitating self-sufficiency among young parents.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act requires unmarried, custodial minor parents receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits to be in school and live in adult-supervised settings. These provisions, if appropriately implemented, can serve to facilitate self-sufficiency among young parents and the healthy growth and development of their children. ***However, obtaining these goals can only occur when there are strategies in place to provide minor parents with the resources they need to comply with these requirements; this includes access to safe, supportive housing and a range of educational options combined with educational supports to meet the varied needs of minor parents.***

Developing supportive environments and appropriate school environments requires new partnerships and coordinated efforts between systems that support young families. Key among these partnerships are those between welfare and schools and several recent works on the implementation of the TANF minor parent provisions highlight the importance of these institutions working together as well as in concert with other agencies. For example:

- a report published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on lessons learned about implementing TANF teen parent requirements suggests that many welfare agencies and schools have

not previously worked together. In addition, implementing strategies to enforce TANF provisions, like monitoring attendance, can further complicate these relationships (*Implementing Welfare Reform Requirements for Teenage Parents: Lessons from Experience in Four States*. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., October 1997);

- researchers monitoring Ohio's Learning, Earning and Parenting (LEAP) program, which aims to keep welfare-dependent teen parents in school, suggest that welfare departments should form partnerships with education providers. These relationships are necessary because welfare must count on school staff to implement TANF education provisions and the commitment of school administrators is necessary to provide a wide-range of educational options needed to meet the varied needs of minor parents (*Learnfare: How to Implement a Mandatory Stay-in-School Program for Teenage Parents on Welfare*. Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, September 1998); and
- participants at a 1996 convening on the impact of welfare reform on teen parents sponsored by the National Governor's Association strongly recommended that state leaders improve the effect of TANF on minor parents by creating incentives to bring stakeholders together to plan and implement new policy in this area. Meeting participants identified key stakeholders as state and local agency directors (education, health, human service, child welfare and housing, etc.), community-based providers, existing teen parent coalitions and young families themselves (*Serving Teen Parents in a Welfare Reform Environment*. National Governors Association, 1997).

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CAPD's work in this area confirms the need for bringing systems together in order to meet the challenge of implementing minor parent welfare policies. For example, our work on expanding school-based programs for teen parents suggests that educational systems that work with a multitude of public and non-profit providers can build comprehensive educational programs for this population. In addition, discussions with local welfare staff to explore the implementation of the TANF minor parent adult-supervised living requirement suggest that many implementation issues can occur as a result of the lack of coordination between systems. ***While there is wide-spread agreement on the need for welfare, schools and other teen parent providers to work together, there are barriers to doing so. Unless states and communities address these barriers, systems are prohibited from efficiently working together to support young families.*** For this reason, it is necessary to understand the major barriers to broad-scale system coordination; a good understanding of these issues is the first step to addressing them. Below is a summary of such issues as well as what it might take to overcome them in efforts to improve the lives of young parents as well as their children.

Barriers to System Coordination: Education and Welfare Interface Issues

Over the last three years, CAPD supported the coordination of welfare and educational staff in two communities - Portland, Oregon and Minneapolis - on the provision of comprehensive case management to in-school teen parents receiving cash assistance. As in most communities, welfare and school-based staff may be two of many organizations that provide case management support to young families. As such, these two communities are working to develop a more efficient system that clarifies roles and responsibilities of different staff and relies on the use of consistent forms and procedures. Throughout this experience, program leaders faced multiple challenges to working together - these challenges can stem from barriers within each system (education and welfare) that affect service provision as well as issues that hamper cross-system efforts and coordination. Several of these issues are discussed below.

Issues Internal to Education and Welfare Systems Affecting the Implementation of Minor Parent Welfare Provisions

Various policy and structural issues inherent to educational and welfare systems pose challenges to the implementation of the TANF minor parent provisions. For example, school districts and welfare agencies both face the following issues:

- institutional and/or individual staff discretion and autonomy that affect consistent implementation within the system.

In the educational arena, school-based management allows individual principals to set policy for their school. As one would expect, this can affect attempts to implement district-wide policy on minor parent issues. Issues of autonomy and staff discretion affect the welfare system as well. One example is the flexibility that welfare staff have during intake and eligibility processes - some staff may go further than others to help minor parents get the cash assistance they need.

- the small size of the minor parent population within a community.

Minor parents are just a subset of all adolescents in a community, a school district's student body and/or a localities' welfare caseload. Similarly, the children of young parents are just a small percentage of all children in a community. This makes it difficult to engage interest among a broad group of leaders and programs to act on their behalf. However, it is important to note that a large percentage of poor children under the age of six had an adolescent parent at birth.

- invisibility of minor parent population.

Minor parents are easily overlooked; often, they are not in school and there is growing consensus that many do not come forward to receive cash assistance that they are eligible for given some of the new TANF requirements.

- attitudes about young mothers and non-custodial fathers.

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Efforts to support the comprehensive needs of young families are often thwarted by opinions about young mothers and the fathers of their children. Teen moms are often viewed as bad and lazy. Fathers, who are often older and non-custodial are typically seen as predators and irresponsible. These issues affect the extent to which young parents and their children are supported as families.

Issues Affecting the Coordination of Efforts Between Education and Welfare Systems

In addition to challenges within key systems, major issues stand in the way of coordination between education and welfare. In order for this interaction to take place, communities must find solutions to the following barriers that hinder systems coordination:

- differences in language and terminology.

We live in a world of acronyms and new programs and terminology come and go. As such, there are basic issues of communication that affect broad system coordination.

- differences in responsibilities, outcomes and accountability.

As systems work together, one of the biggest issues affecting this work is the difference in mission and purpose between them. While it may seem that key agencies serving teen parents share common goals, they go about reaching them in very different ways.

- lack of awareness about system rules, policies and demands.

The provision of educational, cash support and other assistance comes with various system, funding and reporting requirements - these restraints are not widely known to those outside of the institution. To complicate matters, policies and system demands can change frequently. This can inhibit communications across key systems and, more importantly, lead to unrealistic expectations among partners.

- difficulty in accessing information from each other.

Colleagues struggle with getting information from each other - this can result from not knowing basic information like the location of certain offices and who to speak to within key agencies.

As these issues reflect, there are multiple challenges to the kind of coordination necessary to implement the TANF minor parent provisions. It is not clear that federal and state officials carefully considered these issues when crafting new policy. As a result, localities are often left with the task of making these systems work together to ensure that young families receive necessary supports.

There are, however, experiences in several communities which suggest that education, welfare and other major systems work well together. These communities are doing what it takes and illustrate the capacities required to carry out policies in a way that supports young mothers, fathers and their children. These are described below.

Building Support Systems for Young Families: Making Self-Sufficiency Policies Work

States, through TANF, are mandated to implement policies which aim to facilitate the health and well-being of minor parents. There is little disagreement that young parents should be in school and should live in safe, supervised settings. **However, more supports are necessary to help organize and strengthen the minor parent provider community in order for contemporary welfare policy to achieve its intended outcomes.** Such an organized "system" of providers creates the necessary collective leadership within and across key agencies that can tackle the barriers to coordination as described above. In addition, strong young-family networks can accomplish the following:

- recognize young mothers, fathers of their children and the children themselves as whole family units and address their comprehensive needs;
- develop a community-wide vision and action plans to support young families;

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- coordinate services and resources among and between key agencies including public sector education, welfare, child welfare, health and housing officials as well as community-based organizations;
- clarify roles and responsibilities among the provider community;
- invest in building staff capacity across key systems to work with young parents and their children; and
- build public will concerning young families to counter attitudes about teen mothers and non-custodial fathers.

Conveners for young families who bring all the major players to the table typically do not exist, and if they do, they are not well-supported (coordination requires resources and support). However, several states and communities are on their way to organizing young-family networks. For example:

- California's Adolescent Family Life Program (AFLP) provides case management services to pregnant and parenting adolescents in many locations around the state. AFLP is administered at the local level by community-based organizations, various county departments and, in a few instances, school districts. Program providers, supported by contracts

with funding from the State Department of Health, are required to develop service provider networks and establish agreements between various programs to ensure that young parents have access to a wide range of services;

- Rhode Island's Adolescent Self-Sufficiency Collaborative (ASSC) is a state-wide network of community organizations serving pregnant and parenting teens. Like AFLP, the program's primary purpose is to provide case management to young parents. ASSC is funded, coordinated and monitored by the Department of Human Services through local contractors - the program is funded in part by state TANF funds.

These two examples illustrate the kinds of incentives and supports states can provide to strengthen the minor parent community at the local level. These networks, perhaps with additional assistance, have the capability of moving beyond the coordination and provision of services, to address other issues and challenges affecting support to this population. As in the case of Rhode Island, states can use TANF funds as an incentive to build networks at the local level. With this type of support, communities have a better chance of attaining desired outcomes for our youngest families.