
LINKING SCHOOLS WITH TANF SERVICES AND RESOURCES

The welfare reform legislation that created the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families to replace the open-ended entitlement system of AFDC recognizes the unique circumstances of teen parents in two important ways. First, it stipulates that federal TANF benefits may be provided only to teen parents living under adult supervision, usually with their parents or other adult relative, except in individual circumstances where that requirement has been waived by the state.¹ Second, it requires that teen parents receiving TANF benefits who are younger than 18 and who have not completed their high school education or equivalent be enrolled in and attend an educational program. It is the latter requirement that offers an opportunity, and presents special challenges, for communities.

The requirement that teen parents receiving TANF participate in educational programs brings schools to the forefront in efforts to reduce long-term welfare dependency. This requirement increases potential demand for school-based programs and services for teen parents, and evidence from earlier welfare reform efforts (such as the LEAP program in Ohio) indicates that this can be an effective strategy. TANF agencies are now looking to school districts to help them meet this requirement and there are clear benefits to coordinated planning and implementation between schools and public assistance agencies. However, these two institutions have not traditionally worked together and doing so raises a number of challenges.

This section highlights a number of the specific challenges inherent in attempts to link the educational and public assistance programs. Several examples of community efforts are described to illustrate ways in which these challenges can be overcome at the local level. Recommendations are then outlined for policy action that would help communities make more effective use of the TANF requirements. These policies would ensure that the goal of increasing economic self-sufficiency for teen parents is achieved and negative consequences for them and their children are avoided.

The Challenges of Linking Schools with TANF

The TANF requirement that teen parents receiving benefits participate in an educational program affects both those currently in school - who must be supported to continue to attend and make progress toward graduation - and parenting school dropouts - who are attempting to return to school to obtain or maintain benefits. Many teen parents in both groups of current TANF recipients face substantial obstacles to their successfully completing school. In addition, parenting teens not currently eligible for or receiving benefits now are at significant risk of becoming TANF recipients at some point in the future, especially those who have had poor attendance and low academic performance.² This situation is the backdrop to a number of organizational and institutional challenges to using schools as a vehicle for welfare reform.

¹ *The 1996 federal law establishing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) generally prohibits an unmarried, minor custodial parent from receiving federally-funded benefits, unless she is living with a parent, legal guardian, or adult relative. There are a number of exemptions permitted under the law, and in those instances states are required to provide or assist in locating an alternative "adult-supervised supportive living arrangement" unless it determines that the current living arrangement is appropriate. See M. Greenberg and S. Savner, "A Detailed Summary of Key Provisions of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Block Grant," Washington, DC: CLASP, 1996.*

² *The next section discusses the need to provide support services to parenting students who are not currently TANF recipients and strategies to create the resources to do so.*

Linking Schools with TANF Services and Resources (cont.)

TANF sets up high expectations for teen parent beneficiaries who are enrolled in school. School attendance is expected to move parenting teens toward economic self-sufficiency by providing them with the knowledge and skills needed to take their place in the work force. Yet TANF requirements do not fully take into account the educational deficits of many teen parents or the supports that are needed for them to successfully attain a solid education, while at the same time school systems often do not have the capacity to meet the needs of students who require not only remedial educational services, but also an array of other supports to stay in and succeed in school.

In practice, it appears that in implementing this TANF requirement most local and state public assistance agencies have assumed that requiring that teen parent beneficiaries enroll in school will have the desired results. Given what we know about the need to provide alternative educational options and an array of support services for many such students (described in earlier sections), it seems that a coordinated effort between school and TANF policies and practices will be desirable.

However, in most communities there has been little connection between the educational system and the public agencies responsible for administering economic assistance. The traditional separation of the work of these two systems is reinforced by a number of factors, including:

- Differences in terminology and staff training;
- Unfamiliarity with each other's rules, policies, reporting requirements, governing regulations, and basic operating information; and
- Legal, technical and organizational difficulties in accessing or sharing information from each other.

Further, TANF had to be put in place relatively quickly, calling for considerable changes within the public assistance program. While regulations and procedures were still being developed, it was difficult for TANF agencies to bring schools into a conversation about

how welfare reform would impact schools and how schools might become more of a partner in helping teen parents move toward self-sufficiency. Schools, not engaged in local planning for and unsure of the implications of TANF implementation, generally did not take active steps or have the resources to build their capacity to meet the educational and support needs of parenting students.³ In most communities, the lack of a forum for communication and joint planning hampered work to prepare to make best use of the TANF educational requirement to improve educational outcomes for teen parents.

Solutions from the Field

In some states, strategies have been developed to encourage school-TANF linkages.

- The ELECT program in Pennsylvania uses TANF funds to help local districts offer services to teen parents enrolled in school. This program has established ongoing relationships between school districts and local TANF agencies. In Pittsburgh, for example, there was joint training between school-based teen parent advocates and Department of Public Welfare staff about available subsidized child care for parenting students. This relationship has also offered advocates opportunities to connect individual teens with community-based support services. In addition, support for the advocates had made it possible for them to engage in pregnancy prevention education for students in the early grades as a welfare prevention measure.
- In the District of Columbia, teen parents under 20 without a high school diploma are automatically referred to the schools and the district receives funds from the TANF block grant to provide educational and related services to these students.
- Ohio's welfare reform effort, LEAP, implemented a set of strategies to improve school attendance and completion for teen parents receiving public assistance. These included providing case management services by social service agency staff and supporting child care on site at schools.

³ *This is not surprising, given that there was little coordination on welfare reform policies at the federal level between the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services.*

Linking Schools with TANF Services and Resources (cont.)

There have also been local efforts at school-TANF collaboration.

- In Minneapolis, virtually all teen parents enrolled in school are eligible for child care subsidy for either on-site or in special family day care homes. The school district has been responsible for providing the county economic assistance unit with regular reports on school attendance by eligible teen parents. During the early implementation of federal welfare reform, the county and the school district jointly reviewed attendance policies and reporting requirements and have worked, together with community-based home visiting programs for young families, to develop a coordinated approach to attendance tracking and early intervention with teen parents whose attendance is poor.
- In Portland, the welfare agency has provided funding for case management services for TANF-eligible parenting students in the city's schools. These services are provided through contract with a community-based program that works closely with the teen parent liaisons in the schools. Schools, the service provider, and the county economic assistance agency have collaborated to develop a case management system that stretches TANF funds and existing community resources to support all teen parents in school.

Policy Recommendations

State and local planning and implementation of TANF offers many opportunities to strengthen school-based programs for teen parents, but certain policies must be promoted to ensure that these opportunities are realized.

Federal and state TANF agencies should require that **plans for the implementation of TANF address the special needs and circumstances of parenting teen recipients.** Particularly in light of the requirements for school attendance, developing and

monitoring these plans should actively involve local school districts and other providers of educational services. These plans should address issues related to the educational deficits of many teen parent TANF recipients. In particular, given these deficits, it may be likely that some will be unable to complete regular high school education requirements prior to age 18 when they are required to begin meeting work requirements. Therefore, such a plan may need to consider support for a broader range of educational alternatives for parenting teens in the community.

Local TANF agencies and school districts should develop **joint procedures for identifying parenting teen TANF recipients and referring them to appropriate educational programs.** These procedures should ensure that the educational and other needs of teen parents and their children are assessed and that placements are available to provide them with both appropriate educational programs and with the necessary support services. In addition, these procedures should provide for tracking and responding to attendance problems in a timely way and for monitoring progress toward successful school completion.

TANF funds should be used to **support the development of school capacity to effectively educate** teen parents. These funds could be used to develop appropriate options (including curriculum and staff development) for parenting students with significant educational deficits as well as support case management services for these students and their children. States should target some of their surplus TANF funds to extend these support services to parenting students who are not currently TANF recipients, but who may become welfare eligible if they do not complete their education. TANF funds should also be used to support the development of school-based teen parent programs that provide supports to parenting students and link both teen parents and their children with community services.