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## HELPING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM WORK FOR TEEN PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

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Even when enrolled and attending school, many teen parents often struggle to make progress and are unable to complete high school within the mainstream school environment. Others who are in special “stand-alone” programs for pregnant or parenting students do not have access to specialized or advanced courses. Making sure that all parenting students have the best opportunity to succeed in school and have access to the full range of educational options available in the district are challenges that school-based teen parent programs face.

### **The Challenges of Providing Quality, Appropriate Education to Parenting Students**

There are several reasons why making education programs work well for teen parents can be difficult. As noted in the previous section, except when in separate or stand-alone schools or programs, teen parents are invisible within the school system.

- Only a fraction of teen parents are in fact served in these programs and other teen parents are not identified in school records.<sup>1</sup>
- Few school districts estimate the number of teen parents who might be enrolled or who might be eligible for enrollment in the community (those of school-age who have not yet completed a high school diploma or equivalent).
- Site-based management has the effect of making pregnant and parenting students even less visible within the broader student population.

Also, many pregnant and parenting teens - whether they remain in school or return to school - have signif-

icant educational deficits and some may have undetected learning disabilities. There has been extensive research<sup>2</sup> pointing out the link between school failure - poor attendance, poor grades, school dropout - and teenage pregnancy and childbearing. Although teen parents are not the only group of students with these educational needs, the fact that they also have other needs (for child care, parenting education, case management, and the like) means that they present substantial challenges to the school system.

One solution is to place teen parents in stand-alone alternative or separate schools or programs. Very often these programs are designed to provide the special support services that teen parents need, but do not offer educational options comparable to those offered in comprehensive high schools. This limits the ability of some teen parents in these programs to develop their interests and competencies. At the same time, few districts have implemented strategies to provide support services for teen parents within comprehensive high schools.

Title IX protects teen parents from discrimination in the educational system based on gender, pregnancy, marital or parenting status. For example, under Title IX school districts cannot automatically assign pregnant or parenting students to separate schools or programs unless they have the same educational offerings and experiences available to other students. However, the rights of teen parents to have access to equal educational opportunities are not well known by students, school staff or parents. Parenting students' individual educational needs and goals may not be met.

<sup>1</sup> *Obviously, there are good reasons for this, to protect student confidentiality.*

<sup>2</sup> *See J. Dryfoos, “Youth At Risk: One in Four in Jeopardy.” Report submitted to the Carnegie Foundation, New York, NY, 1987, and Adolescents-at-Risk: Prevalence and Prevention, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990.*

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### Solutions from the Field

A number of strategies adopted by school districts to meet the educational needs of pregnant and parenting students address the challenges noted above.

One strategy addresses the issue of the invisibility of parenting students within the larger student population.

- When districts estimate the number of girls eligible to be served through school-based efforts<sup>3</sup> – such as was done in Minneapolis, Pittsburgh and Portland, OR for this Initiative, they usually find that, while they are serving a substantial number of parenting students, the number served is small in comparison to the number of young parents who are still eligible for school enrollment. Once the target number of teen parents is shown to be considerably larger than those currently identified, attention can be drawn to this population and its needs within the broader student population.

Knowing the actual number of parenting students can stimulate the placement of support services for teen parents into comprehensive high schools, rather than only looking at stand-alone alternatives.

- Providing these services within a mainstream school setting, rather than only in stand-alone programs, can be less costly, reach more students, and provide access to a greater array of educational options than relying on separate or alternative school settings for teen parents. Through the Initiative, all three sites (Minneapolis, Pittsburgh and Portland) successfully expanded the services available at comprehensive high schools – including case management, on-site child care or links to nested family day care, and health services.

Some districts recognize that the educational deficiencies of teen parents may be comparable to the educational needs of other at-risk students.

- For example, the Pittsburgh public school system is considering the development of alternatives that provide varied instructional methodologies for a broad group of at-risk students. Linking the educational needs of many parenting students with others should increase the economies of scale in developing and providing alternative approaches, whether these be computerized instruction, individual education plans, competency-based approaches, or others. This strategy would help address the educational needs of many teen parents, while increasing their access to a broader array of educational services.

Education and training on Title IX provisions can affect the educational opportunities available to teen parents.

- Simply handing out a one page pamphlet from the National Women's Law Center to students, parents, teachers, community advocates and front-line staff who work with teen parents can raise the issue of equal access to education. This in itself can begin an examination of implications for school policy and practice. Further, under site-based management, many schools are responsible for developing and promoting policies at the school-level, and with central administration support, can be asked to develop policies for pregnant and parenting teens that are consonant with Title IX.
- Even with all of these activities, however, experience suggests that it is important to have some centralized responsibility within the district for implementing Title IX protections and troubleshooting issues as they arise.

<sup>3</sup> *As noted in a previous chapter, this target number is considerably greater than the annual number of births to women 18 and under. In fact, it is usually 2 to 3 times that number because many women who gave birth in their teens have still not reached their 19th birthday and some have multiple births while teenagers. One method for estimating the total number of teen parents in a community is described in CAPD's paper, *Assessing the Number of Eligible Teen Parents for School Based-Programs* which can be found on our web site at [www.capd.org/home/services/teenparents/teenparents.htm](http://www.capd.org/home/services/teenparents/teenparents.htm).*

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There are a number of specific school practices that can assist parenting students, and others at risk of school failure and dropout, succeed in and complete high school.<sup>4</sup>

- For example, attendance policies can be created that do not penalize teens who have given birth by treating their absences like any other absences due to medical conditions and allowing credits for home study.
- Granting partial credits for course work interrupted by delivery, scheduling to allow students to transport their children to child care at a reasonable hour and still reach class on time or to provide afternoon time for doctors' appointments and other parenting responsibilities, and the creative use of summers are also examples of approaches that encourage parenting teens to continue in and complete school.

### Policy Recommendations

There are a number of policy changes that would create an environment in which educational systems are more likely to implement practices that will promote the success of parenting students.

The protections that **Title IX** affords pregnant and parenting students needs to be more broadly **promoted as a matter of district policy**. Students, parents, community members, school staff, administrators and school board members all need to be aware of and committed to the implementation of Title IX. Districts and individual schools could undoubtedly benefit from technical assistance in this area, and federal monitoring and enforcement of Title IX provisions should be enhanced.

**School districts should ensure that there is centralized responsibility** for the development and implementation of policies to support the educational success of teen parents. This responsibility should include work in the areas of planning and evaluation, collaboration with community agencies involved with

teen parents, work with students to ensure appropriate educational assessment and placement, training and monitoring around Title IX, and the like. In addition, this responsibility should extend to the young children of teen parents, and link with the district's efforts in the area of early childhood development and school readiness.

Districts should seek to **balance resources and priorities between enhanced services for adolescent parents within comprehensive high schools and stand-alone alternatives**. No one option for parenting students will meet all students' educational needs and goals, and failing to offer a range of options is very likely to place the district in violation of Title IX. Further, the only way that it would be economically and administratively feasible for a district to serve the actual number of teen parents who are or could be in school is by expanding services beyond stand-alone alternatives.

Districts should commit core school district funds for the development and implementation of **alternative instruction methodologies and other innovative educational approaches** for at-risk students within mainstream schools. From an educational perspective, the needs of many teen parents and those of other at-risk students are similar and strategies to meet the educational needs of teen parents can be effective with these other students as well. It is important to note that promoting the educational success of at-risk students is likely to be an effective pregnancy prevention strategy, and pregnancy prevention and dropout prevention resources should be eligible to fund development and implementation of alternative educational approaches that will benefit a broad group of students, including teen parents.

**Replication packages and other information on alternative instructional methodologies** and other educational interventions appropriate for at-risk students should be made available so that local school districts have access to information on new

<sup>4</sup> For more details and examples of programs implementing these practices, see *School-Based Programs for Adolescent Parents and Their Young Children: Overcoming Barriers and Challenges to Implementing Comprehensive School-Based Services*. CAPD, Bala Cynwyd, PA, 1994.

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strategies for at-risk students. Special attention should be given to tailoring these models to students with attendance issues and other personal problems, including family responsibilities outside of school. Obviously, such a task is beyond the staff resources or financial capacity of individual districts. Therefore, this should be the responsibility of federal and state education departments. Within those departments, there should be designated units and positions with a focus on parenting students and a link to those units and positions supporting school readiness and early childhood education efforts.

At the same time, districts should balance the push for high school graduation for teen parents with **realistic assessment of both student educational needs and status and community options for GED completion**. Schools should not abdicate their responsibility for ensuring that all young people in their community are given the opportunity for acquiring educational skills and certification. Schools, therefore, should work closely with school- and community-based GED programs to find appropriate placements for those teen parents who are far behind in school, particularly those students who may run up against welfare time limits for education if they attempt a high school diploma.

In particular, **TANF resources should be used to support an array of educational options for teen parents** in the broader community. Options could include but not be limited to community colleges and other community-based educational programs.