

# TEEN PREGNANCY & HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT

## WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES

### IN BRIEF

One in four U.S. public school students drop out of high school before graduation and nearly one-third of teen girls who have dropped out of high school cite early pregnancy or parenthood as a key reason. Clearly there is an urgent need for leaders focused on preventing school dropout and those focused on reducing teen pregnancy to work together. Although the federal government can provide some leadership, school and community leaders and state and local government agency officials must also work together to directly address these issues in their communities. If we are collectively successful, school completion and achievement will improve and more young men and women will have the preparation they need to get ahead in this 21st century economy.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy in collaboration with America's Promise Alliance present this new report, *Teen Pregnancy and High School Dropout: What Communities Can Do to Address These Issues* (<http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/resources/pdf/teen-preg-hs-dropout.pdf>), to help make the connection between teen pregnancy and school completion, a connection that is often overlooked. Because there is a close link between teen pregnancy and academic failure and because teen pregnancy affects the educational achievement of teens themselves as well as that of their children, those concerned about educating young people should also be concerned about preventing teen pregnancy. Moreover, given the increasing demands in schooling that are necessary to compete in the 21st century job market, it is more important than ever for teens to finish high school and attain postsecondary education when possible.

Notwithstanding the association between teen pregnancy and dropping out of high school, little research exists on the relationship between these two issues in school districts across the country. The primary focus of this report is to highlight innovative ways school systems—particularly persistently low-achieving school districts with high teen birth rates—and public agencies

and community-based organizations that oversee teen pregnancy prevention programs are working together with the common goal of helping students avoid too-early pregnancy and parenthood and complete their high school education. The report also provides examples of strategies for connecting efforts to prevent teen pregnancy and improve educational attainment that education, health, and community leaders around the country might find helpful as they work to reduce teen pregnancy and improve graduation rates.

### MAKING THE CASE

Fully thirty percent of teen girls who have dropped out of high school cite early pregnancy or parenthood as a key reason. Only 40 percent of teen moms finish high school, and less than two percent of teen mothers (those who have a baby before age 18) finish college by age 30. The high school dropout rate in this country continues to be a crisis; nearly one in four Americans overall and four in 10 minorities do not complete high school with their class. While the U.S. teen pregnancy rate has declined 42 percent from its peak in 1990 and is now close to a 40-year low, it is still the case that nearly three in 10 girls in the U.S. get pregnant by age 20. There has also been some progress with graduation rates. The national graduation rate increased by 3.5 percentage points between 2001 and 2009 (from 72 percent in 2001 to 75.5 percent in 2009) and the number of “dropout factories” (schools with graduation rates of 60 percent or less) is down from 1,634 in 2009 to 1,550 in 2010. In short, although there has been progress in reducing teen pregnancy and improving graduation rates, there is more work that needs to be done.

Teen parents who drop out of high school and children of teen parents often suffer serious educational challenges. Too-early pregnancy and parenthood not only makes it more difficult to complete education, career, and other life goals for teen parents, but it also affects the future prospects of their children. Research shows that children of teen mothers start school at a disadvantage and fare worse than those born to older parents. For example, children born to teen mothers begin kindergarten with

lower levels of school readiness (including lower math and reading scores, language and communication skills, social skills, and physical and social well-being), compared to children born to women in their twenties.

Students leaving high school frequently have devastating economic consequences. Over the course of a lifetime, a college graduate will earn, on average, \$1 million more than a high school dropout. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, it is estimated that over the course of his or her lifetime, a single high school dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity.

Even though improving educational attainment is a widespread goal, graduation rates vary greatly among schools and there has been particularly intense attention on the lowest performing schools and school districts. Twenty-five persistently low-achieving school districts (out of nearly 14,000) account for 20 percent of all high school dropouts in the United States. In 2008, these school districts saw a combined total of 225,374 non-graduates exit their school system. A new analysis by The National Campaign shows that in 2008, there were a total of 69,809 births to teens who lived in counties or cities where these 25 persistently low-achieving school districts are located. Furthermore, births to teens in these 25 school districts account for 16 percent of teen births in the United States, which underscores the close association between teen pregnancy and dropping out of high school.

Many struggling school districts have both high dropout rates and high numbers of teen births. A number of these school districts, state departments of education, and community-based organizations across the country have recognized the clear link between teen pregnancy and school dropout, and in response have initiated efforts to tackle these two high priority issues. In some instances school leaders are collaborating with state and local government agencies and community-based organizations that are receiving federally funded competitive teen pregnancy prevention grants and a few competitive grants are going directly to school districts. In some states, federally funded formula grants received by the state to address teen pregnancy are subcontracted to local schools or school districts, or to other agencies who offer programs in schools.

There are some exciting and innovative approaches that are currently in place that illustrate how the education and health sectors in communities with high teen birth

and dropout rates are working together to improve graduation rates by addressing teen pregnancy prevention. Our full report highlights the following examples:

- *Morris Heights Health Center and New York Public Schools—Bronx, NY*
- *The Prevention Research Center and Harris County Schools—Texas*
- *Health Research Association and Los Angeles Unified School District—California*
- *Girls Incorporated of Memphis and Memphis City Schools—Tennessee*
- *State Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Resources—West Virginia*
- *Roanoke City Public Schools and Planned Parenthood Health Systems—Virginia*

We identify a number of strategies that can be replicated elsewhere as individual schools, school districts and education agencies, health departments, and community organizations look for ways to address the link between teen pregnancy and educational achievement. Examples include: surveying parents about what they want for their children; educating community leaders and parents; providing access to professional development programs for school staff and teachers; reaching out to school administrators; and building relationships with new champions.

## CONCLUSION

High school completion and being college- and career-ready is critical to the success of individuals, families, and our nation's competitiveness in a global economy. Too-early pregnancy and parenthood often interferes with educational attainment. As educators strive to improve graduation rates and help students succeed academically, school leaders, local health departments, and other agencies can work together to leverage their expertise and resources to address both teen pregnancy and school completion. It is important to strengthen connections between school districts and after school programs focused on preventing teen pregnancy and youth development. It is also important that school districts, especially those that are not currently receiving federally-funded teen pregnancy prevention grants directly, are aware of the grantees in their communities so that they can link to or collaborate with them where appropriate. Put simply, those who are interested in improving graduation rates should also be interested in reducing teen pregnancy.