

Briefly...

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Policy Brief: Preventing Teen Pregnancy is Critical to School Completion

One of every three students (1.3 million annually) fails to graduate from high school in this country, and the crisis is even more severe among minority students.¹ Only about half of African American and Latino students graduate from high school and only 10 percent of minority students who enroll in college will graduate. Yet as federal, state, and local officials, community and business leaders, social entrepreneurs, and philanthropists develop strategies that will help reduce these alarming dropout rates, an important piece of the puzzle—too-early pregnancy and parenthood—is often neglected. Fully 30 percent of teen girls cite pregnancy or parenthood as a key reason for dropping out of high school; rates are even higher for African American and Latino girls.

As America's Promise Alliance Chair, Alma J. Powell, recently testified on Capitol Hill: *"[W]e all know a high school diploma is no longer enough in our global economy. Yet only about one-third of our high school graduates have enough of the skills required for success in college and the workforce. And only 10 percent of minority students who enroll in college will graduate. Just one in 10."*

Teen pregnancy/parenthood and school dropout are closely associated. Only 40 percent of teen moms finish high school and the crisis extends to postsecondary institutions as well. Less than two percent of teen moms finish college by age 30, and 61 percent of women who have children after enrolling in community college fail to finish their degree—a rate 65 percent higher than the rate for those who didn't have children.

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Compounding the issue even further are the lasting consequences for the next generation. Too-early pregnancy and parenthood not only makes it more difficult to complete education, career, and other life goals, but it also affects the future prospects of the children of teen parents. 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.

Teens parents who drop out and children of teen parents suffer the most direct impact. However, the impact of students leaving high school is also devastating to the economy. Over the course of a lifetime, a college graduate will earn, on average, \$1 million more than a high school dropout. Dropping out is literally a million-dollar mistake.² 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.³

Especially now, it is critical that policymakers, advocates, and interested parties from local school superintendents to state officials to business leaders and philanthropists highlight the connection between education and teen pregnancy and adopt action plans to address teen pregnancy as a key part of any school completion strategy. The impressive declines in teen pregnancy and childbearing over the last two decades have been one of the nation's greatest success stories: teen pregnancy rates have declined by one-third over the last decade. Unfortunately, two new sobering reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention make clear

that this tremendous progress is in peril of reversing. Teen pregnancy and birth rates have increased for the first time 15 years, and progress in teen sexual behavior—both declines in sexual activity and increases in teen contraceptive use—are leveling off. Failure to reverse these negative trends will not bode well for efforts to improve educational success.

Key Facts

- Nationwide nearly 1.3 million students drop out of high school each year—averaging 7,200 every school day.¹
- Fewer than four in 10 (38%) mothers who have a child before they turn 18 have a high school diploma.⁵
- Parenthood is a leading cause of school drop out among teen girls. Thirty percent of all teen girls cited pregnancy or parenthood as a reason for dropping out of high school, and the rate is higher for minority students: 36 percent of Hispanic girls and 38 percent of African American girls cite pregnancy or parenthood as a reason they dropped out.⁶
- Less than two percent of young teen mothers (those who have a baby before age 18) attain a college degree by age 30.⁷
- Children of teen mothers are more likely than mothers who gave birth at age 20-21 to drop out of high school. In fact, only about two-thirds of children born to teen mothers earned a high school diploma compared to 81 percent of children of later childbearers.⁷
- Children of teen mothers do worse in school than those born to older parents. They are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade, are less likely to complete high school than the children of older mothers, and have lower performance on standardized tests.⁸
- A child's chance of growing up in poverty is nine times greater if the parents were unmarried when the child was born, and if the mother did not receive a high school diploma than if none of these circumstances are present.⁹

Recommendations

Given the close connection between teen pregnancy and educational attainment, it is essential that teen pregnancy prevention and school completion initiatives are not addressed in silos. Simply put, preventing teen pregnancy helps young people succeed

The high school dropout crisis not only takes a toll on our children, but it also takes an enormous and unsustainable toll on our country. Consider the students from the class of 2009:

- If the entire class of 2009 graduated from high school, *our economy would gain more than \$320 billion* over their working lives because higher wages, greater consumer buying power, and increased tax contributions.
- Because high school dropouts on average have more health problems than graduates, it has been estimated that *our nation would save \$174 billion in healthcare costs*.⁴

in school. Below we have highlighted key areas that we believe should be addressed:

- Young people need information, motivation, skills, and services to delay pregnancy—whether in school or in the community. Parents, teachers, coaches, and other caretakers need encouragement and tools to communicate about this issue.
- Pregnant and parenting teens need support to complete their education and to ensure that they have the knowledge and resources to delay subsequent pregnancies that may further derail educational goals.
- Efforts should extend beyond K-12 to postsecondary institutions including community colleges.
- Leaders working on dropout prevention and educational completion at all levels should partner with those working to reduce teen pregnancy.

At the federal level, policymakers should consider these opportunities as work begins to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization. In addition, the Department of Education should include teen pregnancy as one of the issues considered in its guidance, leadership, and incentives related to reducing dropouts. There are also opportunities for greater collaboration between the teen pregnancy prevention initiative at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the dropout prevention and educational completion initiatives at the Department of Education. However, given that education systems are often locally controlled, efforts at the federal level are not enough; state and local elected officials must also work together to address

these issues in their communities. If we are collectively successful, school retention, 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.

About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the nation's largest partnership organization dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. Through the collective power of our partner network, we raise awareness, support communities, and engage in nonpartisan advocacy to ensure that young people receive more of the fundamental resources they need to graduate high school prepared for college, work, and life. Building on the legacy of our Founding Chairman General Colin Powell, the Alliance believes the success of our young people is grounded in the Five Promises—caring adults; safe places; a healthy start; an effective education; and opportunities to help others. For more information about America's Promise Alliance, visit www.americaspromise.org.

About The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors. To learn more about The National Campaign, please visit www.TheNationalCampaign.org.

Sources

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