

Clearing The Path: Improving Educational and Life Outcomes for Pregnant and Parenting Students and Their Children

*Comments of Maura McInerney, Esq., Education Law Center
to the Policy Committee, Board of Education, School District of Philadelphia*

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Thank you for this opportunity to address the Policy Committee today. My name is Maura McInerney, and I am the Legal Director at the **Education Law Center-PA** (“ELC”), a nonprofit legal advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all of Pennsylvania’s children have access to a quality public education. My comments tonight focus on proposed policy recommendations to address the educational needs of pregnant and parenting students across the District.

It is well documented that pregnant and parenting students struggle academically: they are far less likely to graduate from high school and more likely to be unemployed. In 2010, one study estimated that **70 percent of teen mothers in Philadelphia dropped out of high school**.¹ It is estimated that teen pregnancy and parenting accounts for 30% of student dropouts.² National data indicates that only 2% of all teens who have a baby before age 18 enter college by age 30. Low educational attainment among teen mothers also affects earning potential in later years.³ Children born to teen mothers also lag behind their peers on early childhood and school readiness measures and fare far worse in school: a child born to teenage mother is more likely to repeat a grade, less likely to graduate from high school, and more likely to be unemployed. As an adult, the child

¹ “Pregnant and Parenting Teens in Philadelphia - Academic and Social Outcomes” February 2010 at <http://www.philaedfund.org/sites/default/files/Pregnant%20and%20Parenting%20Teens%20in%20Philadelphia--%20Academic%20and%20Social%20Outcomes.pdf>; See McCauley-Brown, C. “Pregnant and parenting youth: Do we know how they fare in school?” The Notebook, September 21, 2009.

² See Shuger, L. “Teen Pregnancy and High School Dropout: What Communities are Doing to Address These Issues.” The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and America’s Promise Alliance (2012).

³ “Not Making the Grade: Academic Achievement Difficult for Teen Parents,” National Conference of State Legislatures, June 17, 2013, available at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/teen-pregnancy-affects-graduation-rates-postcard.aspx>.

born to a teenage high school dropout is nine times more likely to be poor and on welfare and more likely to give birth as a teenager.⁴

Over the past two years, ELC has focused on understanding the educational needs and trajectories of pregnant and parenting students. Through surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews with youth, parents, school nurses, service providers, and ELECT staff we obtained information from stakeholders who work with approximately 900 pregnant and parenting students each year. These efforts culminated in the identification of several systemic barriers to school success and the development of specific policy recommendations to better support pregnant and parenting students across the School District of Philadelphia. In July, we issued this report and I wanted to share our findings and recommendations. Our findings include the following:

- *Students who become pregnant often experience significant absenteeism during their pregnancy and begin to withdraw from school during that time.*
- *Students typically are out of school from 4-6 weeks after giving birth and typically receive no academic instruction during that time. In fact, they often lack any connection to teachers or school.*
- *Students who return to school often find themselves lagging far behind their peers, unable to make up for the lost instruction time, tests, and projects.*
- *Students face challenges securing childcare, obtaining childcare subsidies, and obtaining transportation.*
- *Upon returning to school, in the absence of a formal reintegration process, students are unaware of the supports available to them in school, the credits needed to graduate, and unable to make informed decisions about school placement options or formulate a graduation plan.* Some students report being on waiting lists for accelerated programs with no educational programming while others report that the District's Educational Options Programs they attend lack sufficient academic support to meet their educational needs.

Based on our findings and comprehensive research of policies and practices from across the country, ELC urges the Committee to consider the following recommendations to support pregnant and parenting students through important revisions to the District's current policy, *Pregnant and Parenting Students, Policy 234*:

⁴ "Teenage Births: Outcomes for Young Parents and their Children," Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, December 2008. See Teen Pregnancy's High Cost, Philadelphia Inquirer, August 2012 at http://articles.philly.com/2012-08-30/news/33477284_1_teen-mothers-teen-pregnancy-rate-teen-births

- (1) **Make academic instruction available to all students on maternity leave and designate a point of contact at school to check in with students while they are on leave.** Under current policies, homebound instruction is only available to students *after 30 days*. By that time, many students have fallen far behind their peers and are unable to stay on track to graduate. We urge the District to offer academic support through homebound instruction, access to computer learning, and other options to all pregnant and parenting students during leave, regardless of its duration. In addition, students with disabilities who are pregnant or parenting are entitled to receive a free, appropriate, public education during this critical time period.
- (2) **Develop an individualized Academic Plan for each student prior to the youth's leave of absence** delineating the academic supports they will receive (*e.g.*, homebound instruction, cyber learning, etc.) and identifying a designated teacher or administrator who will be in contact with them while on leave.
- (3) **Establish a transition process to ensure that students returning from parenting leave receive specific accommodations including:** returning to their prior school or other school which may offer daycare, having grades frozen, not being penalized for missed assignments or tests; receiving a credit assessment, including credit waivers if appropriate, and additional time to make up for missed work or exams.
- (4) **Expand access to daycare:** Students often need additional support to secure childcare subsidies and access childcare options. In addition, parenting students should have the option to attend designated schools which offer on-site childcare options.
- (5) **Support breastfeeding students:** All schools with pregnant or parenting students must provide appropriate accommodations to any lactating student to express and store breast milk and breastfeed an infant child.

Based on our review of similar interventions in other jurisdictions, these changes would make a profound difference and support pregnant and parenting students to be successful. By ensuring that pregnant and parenting teens can overcome barriers to accessing a quality public education, engage in the full range of educational opportunities, and receive the accommodations they need to be successful, the District will improve the educational and life outcomes of two generations of students.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this important issue.