

ESEA Reauthorization Must Address Access to Education for Pregnant and Parenting Students

Students are dropping out of high school at alarmingly high rates, particularly students of color, with severe short- and long-term economic and health consequences for them, their families, their communities, and our nation.¹ And the statistics on teen pregnancy in the U.S. are alarming. Overall, nearly 3 in 10 girls become pregnant at least once before age 20, and for girls of color the rates are higher: 52% of Latinas and 50% of African American girls get pregnant at least once by age 20.²

Pregnancy and parenting responsibilities significantly increase the risk of dropout. In a Gates Foundation survey, close to *one-half* of female dropouts said that becoming a parent played a role in their decisions to leave school, and 33% of female dropouts said it was a *major* factor.³ It affects males too; 24% of the male dropouts surveyed said that becoming a parent played a role in their decisions to leave school, and 19% of them said it was a major factor.⁴ Ensuring the success of pregnant and parenting students is critical, not only for them but also for their children, who will be more likely to eventually drop out if their parents have done so.

Pregnant and parenting students can face enormous barriers to graduation (including discrimination in violation of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972), yet states and local school districts rarely allocate resources to monitor schools' compliance with non-discrimination laws, let alone establish supportive programs to help pregnant and parenting students stay in school and succeed. Significantly, though, pregnant and parenting students often are highly motivated – in the same survey, those who left school to care for a family member or because they became a parent, more than any other group of dropouts, were “most likely to say they would have worked harder if their schools had demanded more of them and provided the necessary support.”⁵

For all of these reasons, policymakers and schools must make serious efforts to help pregnant and parenting students stay in school and graduate college and career ready. The ESEA reauthorization provides an opportunity to:

- Encourage more targeted use of existing funds. The reauthorized ESEA should clarify, among other things, that: (a) a wide range of academic and other support services that help to keep pregnant and parenting students in school and on track for success are allowable uses of Title I funds; (2) recognition of the needs and rights of pregnant and parenting students should be incorporated into State and school district plans; (3) early warning systems should include indicators for teen pregnancy and parenting; (4) menu of interventions for schools not able to make meaningful improvement should include a program that addresses push-out factors for pregnant and parenting students and provides academic and related services to those students; and (5) bases for rewards to successful

schools and districts should include demonstrating great success in improving the retention of and graduation rates for pregnant and parenting students.

- Require data collection and reporting. Currently, there are inadequate data on pregnant and parenting students; most schools do not track the number of pregnant and parenting students or their performance in school, and there is very minimal data on alternative schools and programs. To enable educators to address the unique barriers facing this vulnerable population, ESEA should require separate tracking and reporting of the enrollment numbers, graduation rates, and assessment results for pregnant and parenting students in both mainstream schools and alternative programs or school settings. Such non-personally identifiable data can be collected in a manner that does not compromise student privacy.
- Professional Development. States and districts should provide professional development materials and training to make school personnel aware of: (1) the rights of pregnant and parenting students under Title IX; (2) the nature and extent of barriers to educational access and success facing pregnant and parenting students in their geographic area; (3) ways to address and help eliminate those barriers; and (4) the identity of the staff member responsible for coordinating the provision of services, at the school, LEA, and State levels, as well as participating community partners.
- Authorize Pregnant and Parenting Students Access to Education Program. A new program should be established – such as that proposed in the Pregnant and Parenting Students Access to Education Act (H.R. 5894 in the 111th Congress) – that would provide grants to SEAs and LEAs to formulate policy and offer targeted assistance to pregnant and parenting students in enrolling, attending, and succeeding in secondary school, ensuring school completion, and preparing them for postsecondary opportunities.

Providing pregnant and parenting students with the supports they need to stay in school and succeed is an essential component of any serious effort to address poverty. And with the proper resources, it can be done – some schools have had much success taking affirmative steps to provide these students with the services and guidance they need while still giving them access to rigorous academic opportunities.

¹ National Women’s Law Center, *When Girls Don’t Graduate, We All Fail: A Call to Improve High School Graduation Rates for Girls* (2007), available at www.nwlc.org/dropout.

² The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, Policy Brief: Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Teen Pregnancy (June 2010), available at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/Briefly_PolicyBrief_RacialEthnicDisparities.pdf.

³ Peter D. Hart Research Associates, *Gates Foundation Dropouts Survey*, (Sep./Oct. 2005).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Bridgeland et al., *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts* 6 (Civic Enterprises, 2006).