



If You Really Care about Educational Equity, You Should Care about Reproductive Justice!

What is Reproductive Justice?

The Reproductive Justice (RJ) movement places reproductive health and rights within a social justice framework.¹ The movement supports the right of individuals to have the children they want, raise the children they have, and plan their families through safe, legal access to abortion and contraception. In order to make these rights a reality, the movement recognizes that RJ will only be achieved when all people have the resources, as well as the economic, social, and political power, to make healthy decisions about their bodies, sexuality, and reproduction.²

Advancing RJ will help to eliminate pervasive racial disparities in educational attainment by valuing the talents and abilities of those students who chose to become parents. Improving educational opportunities, especially for those in under-funded schools in marginalized neighborhoods, will also make parenting less desirable for teens whose odds of escaping poverty are not made any worse by having a child.³

Why is Reproductive Justice an Education Issue?

Reproductive Justice demands that schools provide comprehensive sexuality education, which helps students prevent unintended pregnancies and increases their chances of graduating.

Social injustices have created long-standing disparities in education access and quality. Schools in high-poverty districts receive significantly less funding than their higher income counterparts,⁴ reducing the chances of students in these districts to receive a quality education. High-poverty districts also often have more students who identify as People of Color.⁵ These educational inequities are also seen in the sexuality education provided to students. In 2002, only one out of three Black men and fewer than half of Black women had received instruction about contraception before the first time they had sex.⁶ When age-appropriate, scientifically-based sexuality education can reduce rates of both teen pregnancy and high school dropout – it becomes obvious how much education is a matter of Reproductive Justice.

With the current state of sexuality education in the United States, 53% percent of Latina teens and 51% of African-American teens will become pregnant before age 20.⁷ Higher rates of teen pregnancy among students of color contribute to racial disparities in graduation rates. Teen pregnancy is linked to dropout rates, as pregnancy and parenting responsibilities significantly affect girls' likelihood of graduating. In a recent survey, close to one-half of female dropouts surveyed said that becoming a parent was a factor in their decisions to leave school.⁸

Reproductive Justice requires that pregnant and parenting teens be given adequate support to help them achieve their educational goals and to help their children thrive.

Despite the federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in education, including discrimination based on pregnancy and related conditions,⁹ pregnant and parenting teens face many barriers to staying in school. Such barriers include: insufficient time to recover after giving birth; not being allowed to make up missed work; being forbidden from receiving student recognition or participating in extracurricular activities; no child care or transportation; and stigmatization.¹⁰ When parents are unable to surmount these barriers, their children are also less likely to reach their full educational potential, contributing to intergenerational poverty.¹¹

How You Can Support Educational Equity and Reproductive Justice

If you are a social justice advocate who is concerned with education access and equity, you are probably already working to remedy the serious historical social inequalities that pervade the education system. While these efforts advance RJ, we can do more to work together to support our common goals:

- Fight for comprehensive sexuality education¹², including education on the use of contraception. This is essential to reducing teen pregnancy rates and will go a long way toward improving high school graduation rates.
- Improve access to birth control counseling and services for teens.¹³ This includes opposing efforts to require teens to get their parent or guardian's permission for birth control, encouraging state children's health programs (SCHIP) to cover birth control for teens, and advocating for birth control access within school-based health centers.
- Urge schools to provide appropriate support for pregnant and parenting teens in order to keep them on track towards graduating. Such efforts include on-site child care, transportation, counseling, social service and health referrals, individualized graduation plans, flexible scheduling, and homebound instruction for extended absences. Schools should also maintain rigorous and relevant curricula that foster student engagement and prepare students for careers and post-secondary education. These efforts will make a difference by helping girls stay in school and to prevent subsequent unplanned pregnancies.¹⁴

¹ Sistersong, What is Reproductive Justice?, http://www.sistersong.net/reproductive_justice.html (last visited June 25, 2009).

² Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, Mission and Vision, <http://www.reproductivejustice.org/mission-vision.html> (last visited June 25, 2009).

³ Teens living in poverty are more likely to get pregnant, but for teens in economically depressed communities, not giving birth does not substantially change their economic opportunities. Frank F. Furstenberg, *Teen Pregnancy and Poverty: 30-Year-Study Confirms That Living in Economically-Depressed Neighborhoods, Not Teen Motherhood, Perpetuates Poverty* (Council on Contemporary Families, Chicago, IL), Jan. 23, 2008, available at <http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org/economic-issues/teen.html>.

⁴ KEVIN CAREY, THE EDUCATION TRUST, THE FUNDING GAP 2004: MANY STATES STILL SHORTCHANGE LOW-INCOME AND MINORITY STUDENTS 1 (2004) <http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/funding2004.pdf> (finding that in 2004, 36 states had a funding gap, with a nationwide disparity between high-poverty and low-poverty districts of \$1,348 per student).

⁵ For example, in 2003, Black and Hispanic students were much more likely than White students to be in high-poverty schools. See National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2004*, 6 EDUC. STAT. Q. (2005), available at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/quarterly/vol_6/1_2/7_1.asp.

⁶ Laura Duberstein Lindberg et al., *Changes in Formal Sex Education: 1995–2002*, 38 PERSP. ON SEXUAL AND REPROD. HEALTH 182 (2006).

⁷ See THE NAT'L CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN AND UNPLANNED PREGNANCY, POLICY BRIEF: RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN TEEN PREGNANCY 1 (2008), available at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/Briefly_PolicyBrief_RacialEthnicDisparities.pdf.

⁸ Additionally, over one-third of female dropouts said that becoming a parent played a *major* role in their decisions. See PETER D. HART RESEARCH ASSOCS., THE SILENT EPIDEMIC: PERSPECTIVES OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS 6 (2006), available at <http://www.civcenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf> [hereinafter THE SILENT EPIDEMIC].

⁹ Title IX, the law prohibiting discrimination in education, contains basic non-discrimination principles—namely, that schools cannot discriminate on the basis of pregnancy and must treat pregnancy and all related conditions like any other temporary disability. Title IX also creates some requirements specific to pregnant and parenting students. See 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (1972); 34 C.F.R. § 106.40 (2010).

¹⁰ NAT'L WOMEN'S LAW CTR., WHEN GIRLS DON'T GRADUATE, WE ALL FAIL: A CALL TO IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES FOR GIRLS 14 (2007), available at http://action.nwlc.org/site/PageNavigator/Dropout_Report_Intermediary_Request.

¹¹ THE NAT'L CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN AND UNPLANNED PREGNANCY, WHY IT MATTERS: TEEN PREGNANCY, POVERTY AND INCOME DISPARITY, available at <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/why-it-matters/pdf/poverty.pdf> (last visited July 20, 2009).

¹² For information on federal legislation to require comprehensive sex education, see NAT'L WOMEN'S LAW CTR, FACT SHEET, INVEST IN COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION: SUPPORT THE RESPONSIBLE EDUCATION ABOUT LIFE (REAL) Act, available at <http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/realact09.pdf>.

¹³ Visit Advocates for Youth at www.advocatesforyouth.org to get the facts on access to contraceptives and sexuality education in your state.

¹⁴ In a recent survey of dropouts, those who left school to care for a family member or child were, more than any other group of dropouts, “most likely to say they would have worked harder if their schools had demanded more of them and provided the necessary support.” See THE SILENT EPIDEMIC, *supra* note 3, at 6.