

# Best Practices:



**SUPPORTING PREGNANT AND PARENTING STUDENTS  
IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS AND HIGH SCHOOLS**



# About This Report

## **“SUPPORTING PREGNANT AND PARENTING STUDENTS IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS AND HIGH SCHOOLS,”**

is a series of reports analyzing state legal protections for pregnant and parenting students across 50 states and the District of Columbia. Young parents deserve access to a quality education just like their nonparenting peers. Yet too often this student population is overlooked, face stigma for being young parents, and they must navigate education systems that were not designed to address their unique needs. “Best Practices: Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Students in Middle Schools and High Schools,” is the third installment in this report series. It highlights programs, schools, and state policies that have positive outcomes for young parents. This report provides examples of the policies and practices that state and local policymakers can implement to foster better outcomes for young parents who are still enrolled in middle school and high school. It concludes with policy recommendations at the federal, state, and school level to better support young parents in completing their middle and high school education.

# Introduction

Every student deserves to learn in a nurturing school environment that supports them and prepares them for the future.

Pregnant and parenting students have specific needs, but they are often forced to navigate school systems that do not consider their responsibilities. To succeed in school, they need policies tailored to meet these needs. Young parents deserve to complete their education free from bias and harassment, but too often they are overlooked, face stigma, and are required to navigate education systems that aren't sufficiently accommodating.

Because school systems routinely neglect the needs of pregnant and parenting students, those students have a harder time completing their education. Only 51% of teenage mothers earn a high school diploma by age 22, compared to 84% of nonparenting girls,<sup>1</sup> and less than 2% of teen mothers graduate from college by age 30.<sup>2</sup> One third of Black teen mothers and 54% of Latina teen mothers never obtain a high school diploma or GED.<sup>3</sup>

**Only 51 percent of teenage mothers earn a high school diploma by age 22 compared to 84 percent of girls who do not parent as a teen.**

But these statistics do not paint the full picture. We know that pregnant and parenting students thrive when they receive the support necessary to complete their education. Becoming a parent is a strong motivator. In fact, student mothers typically report that pregnancy and parenthood gave them inspiration to succeed academically—even if they were previously disengaged in school.<sup>4</sup> With supportive policies and practices, such as flexible attendance policies, lactation accommodations, access to high-quality child care, and more, we can ensure better outcomes for student parents.

Moreover, young people across the country are experiencing greater limitations and threats to their reproductive rights. We are in a crisis moment for abortion access, and many youth have lost access to the full range of reproductive health care options available. The ability to decide whether and when to become pregnant and parent is crucial to determining one's own life's path, pursuing personal and professional goals, and safeguarding economic security. As fewer young people have complete agency over their reproductive futures, support for pregnant and parenting students is more crucial now than ever.

This resource is for educators, policymakers and advocates seeking to better support pregnant and parenting students in secondary schools. It is part of a series of reports issued by the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) surveying state laws and programs that impact pregnant and parenting students in high school and middle school. This report specifically addresses the best practices we have identified in programs, schools, and state policies to support and accommodate pregnant and parenting students. Our identified Bright Spots are instructional and serve as a standard for ensuring that pregnant and parenting students can continue their education and ultimately thrive.

# The Scope of Our Analysis

This report analyzes best practices NWLC has identified in programs, schools, and state policies. To determine best practices, NWLC evaluated programs from a wide range of organizations, schools, and direct service providers across the United States, looking for those that had positive measurable results for pregnant and parenting students in secondary schools. Next, we conducted outreach and informational interviews with leaders of these organizations to learn more about their programs and outcomes. The best practices and Bright Spots featured in this report, however, are not intended to present an exhaustive list of programs. Incorporating additional methods and programs are essential to the network of critical supports to educational equity for pregnant and parenting students.

Importantly, better data collection on pregnant and parenting students—especially at the secondary school level—is necessary both to better understand this population and their experiences, and to motivate school administrators and policymakers to improve policies and supports.

Data collection is also still evolving to include transgender, nonbinary, and intersex (TNI) youth. We know that not everyone who can become pregnant is a cisgender woman or girl<sup>5</sup> and that not all women or girls can become pregnant. We also know that many trans men and nonbinary people can lactate<sup>6</sup> and may prefer the term “chestfeeding” to “breastfeeding.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the experiences of TNI youth are underrepresented in data collection, and accordingly much of the data and research cited in this series is limited to the experiences of pregnant and parenting cisgender girls.

While not addressed in this report, we remain committed to advocating for more comprehensive and intersectional data collection systems that can better capture the experiences of the diverse communities for which we advocate.<sup>8</sup>

## DISCLAIMER

**While text, citations, and data are, to the best of the authors' knowledge, current as of the date the report was prepared, there may well be subsequent developments, including legislative actions and court decisions, that could alter the information provided herein. This report does not constitute legal advice; individuals and organizations considering legal action should consult with their own counsel.**

# The Current Education System Is Failing Pregnant and Parenting Students

For young parents, completing their education is essential to their ability to provide financially for their families. Yet they are forced to navigate education systems that do not consider their unique needs or support their desire to finish school. As a result, only half of teenage mothers earn a high school diploma by age 22, compared to 89% of nonparenting girls, and one-third of young mothers never obtain a high school diploma or general education development (GED).<sup>9</sup> In turn, less than 2% of teen mothers graduate from college by age 30.<sup>10</sup>

Completing secondary education or an equivalent is an important prerequisite for accessing post-secondary education or preparing for the workforce. Finishing more years of high school, and especially earning a diploma, increases employment prospects and one's lifelong earning potential.<sup>11</sup> Workers with a high school diploma earn approximately 25% more than their counterparts without one.<sup>12</sup> Earning potential is especially important for student parents who are responsible for children in addition to themselves.

Ensuring that pregnant and parenting students in middle and high schools can continue their education is a matter of **gender, racial, and economic justice**. Pregnant and parenting students face discrimination and harmful policies that create barriers to succeeding in school.

These challenges can be exacerbated for youth based upon their intersecting identities which includes their race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, gender identity, and disability status.<sup>13</sup>

There is no official data collection for pregnant and parenting students in secondary schools, but available data sources indicate that most teen parents identify as people of color.<sup>14</sup> American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Black youth have higher rates of teen pregnancy from ages 15 to 19.<sup>15</sup> Black teen mothers are more likely than their white and Hispanic peers to earn either a high school diploma or GED; 67% of Black teen mothers earn either a high school diploma or GED versus only 55% of white teen mothers and 46% of Hispanic teen mothers.<sup>16</sup>

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Additionally, research indicates that some LGBTQI+ youth are more likely to become pregnant than their non-LGBTQI+ peers. For example, bisexual girls are more likely than straight teen girls to become pregnant before age 20, and studies have found transgender youth are just as likely to become pregnant as cisgender youth.<sup>17</sup>

Our secondary education system is currently failing pregnant and parenting students. Students who are pregnant or parenting often encounter multiple barriers to completing their education and do not receive adequate support from teachers, administrators, and peers, which pushes them out of school.

Rigid attendance policies and lack of accommodations punish pregnant and parenting students who must miss class for medical appointments, childbirth and recovery, lactation, or when they or their children are ill. Lack of access to affordable and reliable child care, unstable housing, food insecurity, and a lack of mental health supports all create significant barriers to graduation for young parents.

It does not have to be this way. With supportive measures, accommodations, and inclusive policies, we can ensure that pregnant and parenting students are able to complete their secondary education. The Bright Spots in this report are illuminating examples of best practices for supporting pregnant and parenting students.

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# Featured Programs

## Colorado Florence Crittenton Services

At [Colorado Florence Crittenton Services](#), a Denver-based nonprofit, young moms and their children are empowered through education, health and wellness, post-secondary preparation, basic needs, and emergency support. Colorado Florence Crittenton Services partners with Denver Public Schools to provide a high school campus that is also a full-service family resource center with an early childhood education center and a health center. For lactation support, their childhood center has a breastfeeding nook, and moms are given pagers so that when their child needs to eat they can be easily reached. Their campus programming offers services for young families year-round.

## Lumen High School

In Spokane, Washington, public charter school [Lumen High School](#) is committed to empowering teen parents by providing high academic standards, a specialized early learning center, and wraparound supports to meet their layered needs. Lumen High School prioritizes flexibility for their students, with a core belief that the unique learning experiences of being a student and a parent do not need to be at odds. They have on-site medical and dental services, a full-time social worker to help students make and complete appointments with benefits agencies, and flexible spaces for appointments with case workers and therapy teams. They also employ a restorative justice model incorporating staff mentors and offer a student-created peace room for regulation and rest as well as supportive interventions.

## Maryland Department of Education

After the Maryland state legislature passed a statute to safeguard the rights of pregnant and parenting students, the Maryland Department of Education issued a [Model Policy to Support the Educational and Parenting Goals and Improve the Educational Outcomes of Pregnant and Parenting Students](#) to implement the law. This model policy requires that local schools' policies include a section incorporating procedures around attendance and lawful absences, make-up work, lactation, support for students, training for staff, and publication of the policy to students, teachers, and administrators.





### New Mexico GRADS

Throughout New Mexico, the Graduation, Reality, and Dual-Role Skills (GRADS) program serves pregnant and parenting teens at 25 sites. [New Mexico GRADS](#) removes barriers and assists pregnant and parenting youth to complete their education in a supportive high school environment. New Mexico GRADS facilitates graduation and the pursuit of higher education and/or employment, provides case management, promotes multigenerational parenting skills, and fosters leadership. They offer child care centers on site at high schools and connect students to community resources. For students without transportation to school, they have funding to pay for their bus passes. They have a flexible attendance policy and provide direct support for access to services like Medicaid and home visiting services. They also have a health education program so students learn about their body and the growth and development of their child.

### New Moms

In Chicago, Illinois, [New Moms](#) builds on the strength, skills, and potential of young moms, partnering with them to remove systemic obstacles and expand their world of possibility. New Moms supports young families throughout Chicagoland with housing, homelessness support, job training and workforce development, educational success programs, doula support, financial coaching, mental health clinical services. These programs are designed specifically for young moms, with their input and goals in mind.

# Challenges and Solutions

In middle and high schools, pregnant and parenting students have repeatedly described<sup>18</sup> the following challenges as the greatest barriers to graduation:

- Unsupportive learning environments: stigma, discouragement, and discrimination
- Housing instability
- Food insecurity
- Lack of affordable and reliable child care
- Access to transportation
- Lack of mental health services
- Access to information and support

Addressing these challenges directly and holistically boosts attendance for pregnant and parenting students and keeps them on track to graduation. For these students, having these supports in one place is extremely helpful—and that is why so many of our identified Bright Spots offer **wraparound services** that touch on all or many of these best practices.

## BRIGHT SPOT:

**New Moms** partners with young moms to remove systemic obstacles through comprehensive programming, including by providing housing, paid job training, college success planning, and family support. The families that New Moms serves face many of the outlined challenges, and as Chief Program Officer Melanie Garrett notes, “It’s hard to think about persisting in college or advancing in a career when you’re worried about basic needs such as rent, food, and other immediate needs.” By addressing the foundational needs of the mothers in whom they invest, New Moms allows its participants to think long-term about education, careers, and the future.

## UNSUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: STIGMA, DISCOURAGEMENT, AND DISCRIMINATION

Pregnant and parenting students have historically faced a culture of silence, shame, and stigma from teachers, school administrators, and peers alike. Unsupportive comments from educators and peers, low expectations, academic punishment, and direct and indirect forms of harassment remain prevalent in schools.<sup>19</sup> This creates an environment of discouragement for young parents.<sup>20</sup>

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX) protects pregnant and parenting students from discrimination in schools that receive federal funding. Despite these protections, intended to ensure equal access to educational opportunities, pregnant and parenting students still commonly face discrimination, including lack of accommodations, punitive policies, and unfavorable treatment from educators and school administrators. These behaviors create a hostile environment that prevents pregnant and parenting students from fully participating in their educational programs and can lead to isolation and exclusion, feelings of failure, and pressure to leave school.<sup>21</sup>

Pregnant and parenting students continue to share stories of being excluded from classes or extracurricular activities, punished for excused medical absences, or pressured to switch to alternative schools.<sup>22</sup> Further, the existing stigma against pregnant and parenting students can be compounded by racial and socioeconomic stereotyping, leading to additional barriers to graduation for student parents of color.<sup>23</sup> Despite protections for pregnant and parenting students under Title IX, many school districts do not properly implement or communicate these protections, leaving many of these students unaware of their options and feeling unsupported.

**SOLUTIONS:** When it comes to challenging harmful narratives and policies that pregnant and parenting students face, knowledge is power. It is crucial that students be made aware of their rights; school administrators understand their responsibilities; and policymakers grasp the importance of supporting pregnant and parenting students across all levels of education. At the federal level, policymakers must uphold strong Title IX protections for pregnant and parenting students and provide guidance and training for schools to increase compliance with Title IX. In April 2024, the Biden-Harris administration published key updates to the Title IX regulations, providing greater clarity on pregnant and parenting students' rights and including affirmative steps that schools must take to ensure pregnant and parenting students are aware of their rights.<sup>24</sup>

Schools must be up to date about Title IX's protections and develop support structures that help young parents succeed in school. At the local level, states and school districts should develop strong nondiscrimination policies, train all employees, and designate an appropriate employee to publicize and inform pregnant and parenting students of their rights—including how to request accommodations. Policies should include a clear enforcement mechanism to report instances of discrimination and harassment. To ensure the best outcomes for pregnant and parenting students, educators and policymakers must be proactive in addressing the stigma that these students face.

## HOUSING INSTABILITY

Finding safe, stable, accessible, and affordable housing is a particular challenge for pregnant and parenting students who may be experiencing a lack of economic resources or instability in their living situation. A National Women's Law Center survey previously found that girls who are pregnant or parenting were more likely than girls overall to report instability in their living and housing situations.<sup>25</sup> Pregnant and parenting girls were less likely to live with their parents and more likely to report having been unhoused or living with another family.<sup>26</sup> Eviction is a common experience, and eviction during pregnancy can have a detrimental impact on infant health and development.<sup>27</sup>

Pregnant and parenting students may not be able to get placements at homeless shelters, where there are frequently a shortage of beds and few options that allow young families to stay together.<sup>28</sup>

It is often impossible for minors to rent housing directly. And programs designed to assist with emergency housing often are not available for people under the age of 18.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, child and family homelessness is often less visible than homelessness among other populations who more frequently live on the streets or in homelessness shelters. Families' homelessness commonly shows up as living "doubled-up" with family and friends temporarily, experiencing frequent moves (or "house hopping"), staying in hotels or motels, or having other transient, irregular, and inadequate living situations.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, pregnant and parenting youth in foster care experience unique challenges to finishing secondary school. Lack of stable and consistent housing, maltreatment from caregivers, and separation from their support systems can make it difficult to complete their education.<sup>31</sup>

**SOLUTIONS:** Pregnant and parenting students need safe, accessible, and affordable housing. Life outcomes, including success in school, are closely aligned with housing and neighborhood conditions.<sup>32</sup> Having stable, accessible, and affordable housing available increases opportunities for students to focus on their education and achieve educational success.<sup>33</sup> Frequent moves can lead to absenteeism, interruptions in learning, disruption of support networks, and environments that are not conducive to studying.<sup>34</sup>

States and localities can direct resources to address the needs of pregnant and parenting students experiencing housing instability or homelessness. State legislatures can pass bills to require Public Housing Authorities to develop and implement policies allowing housing for minors under age 18 and ensuring that pregnant and postpartum youth and families experiencing homelessness can stay together. States can also review licensing requirements to ensure they are inclusive of parents with more than one child, teen fathers, and parents who want to co-parent their child in supportive environments. Additionally, states can develop task forces to track the impact of housing efforts on this population, ensuring that data collection and measures of success for pregnant and parenting students are taken into consideration when evaluating efforts to address housing instability.

For organizations supporting pregnant and parenting students, the best way to address this challenge is by offering housing directly—especially because of the barriers to housing support for youth under age 18. Organizations can also set up programs that assist students with applying for housing choice vouchers or develop partnerships with local housing authorities for better access.<sup>35</sup>



## BRIGHT SPOT:

Acknowledging that young moms and children need stability to take the next steps forward, **New Moms** offers both transitional and permanent housing options to support young families.

**Colorado Florence Crittenton Services** has a unique campus that serves as a family resource center for teen families. Through their Student and Family Support Program (SFSP), Florence Crittenton Services assists their students in finding safe, affordable housing. They have secured housing vouchers for teen families and strategically used a special grant from the Colorado COVID Relief Fund to support students facing housing crises. They also partner with the Denver housing authority and work with a nonprofit that assists teen mothers who have graduated from high school.

## FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity affects 44 million people nationwide—most frequently, families with children.<sup>36</sup> A July 2024 report indicated that there has been a specific rise in the last two years of families in general experiencing difficulty accessing food.<sup>37</sup> Food-insecure children and teenagers have been shown to miss school more frequently and are more likely to repeat a grade than food-secure children. Further, food insecurity has been shown to reduce a child's chances of graduating from high school.<sup>38</sup> Being hungry affects focus: in one survey, the majority of children reported that hunger “makes school difficult,” and 12% reported being too distracted by hunger to complete homework in the evenings.<sup>39</sup>

Pregnant and parenting students face unique challenges related to food insecurity. For teenagers and young parents, there is stigma around hunger and embarrassment associated with food assistance in publicly visible settings.<sup>40</sup> Many teens are also unaware of assistance that is available to them; for example, some assume that food pantries are available only for adults. Food insecurity can interfere with healthy eating during pregnancy, and it is associated with certain risks and pregnancy complications.<sup>41</sup>

**SOLUTIONS:** Combating food insecurity is essential to support pregnant and parenting students. Hunger has a physical impact: nutritional deficiencies in the first years of a child's life can impact their cognitive, socio-emotional, motor, and physiological health.<sup>42</sup> In addition to the physical impact, food insecurity affects mental health and can cause stress, anxiety, and depression.<sup>43</sup> Early access to benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) among pregnant women can improve birth outcomes and long-term health as adults.<sup>44</sup>

To improve food security and assist young families struggling with hunger, organizations and schools can start a school food pantry, which can reduce barriers to access by being open to all students without requiring a referral and being in an easily accessible location. Pantries can be expansive in the items they offer, including diapers, wipes, menstrual hygiene products, clothing, and household items for students that may need them. Additionally,

programs should keep a directory of community resources and meal programs. Finally, organizations and schools can directly support students with awareness around eligibility and assistance enrolling in federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).<sup>45</sup>

## BRIGHT SPOT:

Through their Student and Family Support Program (SFSP), **Colorado Florence Crittenton Services** assists their students with enrolling in benefits to ease food insecurity, including SNAP, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and the Women, Infants and Children assistance program (WIC). They also have an on-site store that has diapers, wipes, clothing, school supplies, and other parenting and personal essentials.

**Lumen High School** also has extensive on-campus support, including a food bank and a “baby boutique” that has clothing, diapers, formula, strollers, and more—all free of charge. Lumen partners with health officials and reserves spaces where government food programs can do visits. For example, national officials with WIC do appointments on site at the school.

## LACK OF AFFORDABLE AND RELIABLE CHILD CARE

A National Women's Law Center survey found that over half (52%) of the pregnant or parenting student respondents reported that not having access to child care was a barrier to going to school.<sup>46</sup> Finding and maintaining affordable, accessible, and reliable child care continues to pose a key challenge for student parents. They may need to balance school along with work to provide for their child, which means that many student parents need child care outside of normal hours. As a result, students generally cobble together various forms of child care in order to provide the necessary coverage. A 2016 study found that around 50% of low-income student parents with children ages 5 or younger primarily relied upon family members to care for their children.<sup>47</sup>

While informal child care systems made up of support by friends and family are incredibly helpful for student parents, they can often be unreliable due to general conflicts, illness, or work schedules, and these family and friend caregivers often lack supports from the federal and state child care programs and resources that are available. These arrangements can also be very difficult on familial relationships, with student parents reporting that they feel guilt for their reliance on family members for child care coverage.<sup>48</sup>

Traditional child care centers, while sometimes more reliable, generally maintain more rigid hours, have long waitlists, and may not share the language and culture of the student parent and her child. For example, only 8% of child care centers offer care before 7:00 a.m. or after 6:00 p.m. Additionally, the cost of these centers can be out of reach for many student parents. On average, the annual cost of full-time care for one child ranges from around \$5,700 to \$25,500, depending on the age of the child, the type of care, and the state in which they reside.<sup>49</sup> Such high costs are prohibitive for student parents, and most can only afford these child care options with assistance. However, whether a parent qualifies for child care assistance varies from state to state,

depending on the state's income eligibility limit, how a state determines a family's income, and whether the income of other family members living with the young parent will be included.<sup>50</sup> Understanding and navigating governmental assistance programs can also be complicated and very time consuming for student parents who already have limited time.<sup>51</sup>

When quality child care options are not accessible to student parents, they are forced to make concessions on the quality of care for their children, while sacrificing their financial stability, academic success, and personal well-being. The resulting stress can take its toll on student parents and the family as a whole.

**SOLUTIONS:** Lawmakers on a federal and state level can pass legislation that significantly increases funding for child care supports, reduces families' child care costs nationwide, and establishes fair compensation for child care providers. While some states have expanded funding and eligibility for child care assistance over the past few years, other states continue to fall behind in funding approvals or policy changes to improve child care.<sup>52</sup> Understanding and meeting parenting students' caregiving needs is crucial to improving their livelihoods and educational outcomes. Comprehensive data collection about student parents and their caregiving needs will help policymakers address the existing gaps in support.

## BRIGHT SPOT:

The **Maryland Department of Education** provides various child care supports to pregnant and parenting students across the state. Certain high schools have child care centers on-site that are available for both students and staff at the school. Additionally, the Child Care Scholarship Program helps provide subsidies for high-quality child care. This program has a fast-track review process so that parents can get approval and funding quickly.

**Colorado Florence Crittenton Services** partners with an Early Childhood Education (ECE) Center to provide child care for their parenting students. Pregnant students are given previews of the ECE Center before they give birth so they are familiar with the space in order to reduce postpartum stress related to sending their child to a care center.

**Lumen High School**, located in Spokane, Washington, is a public charter school designed by and for teen parents focused on a 2Gen approach. Lumen guarantees spots in the Early Learning center next door for its students, which allows for all-day child care on-site.

**New Mexico GRADS** understands that paying for child care is a major hurdle for young parents, so having free child care for students is game-changing. Their programming guarantees free state-licensed child care for students attending participating schools. As of 2024, 14 of the 25 high schools in which they operate have on-site child care centers. Because New Mexico offers free child care state-wide for students, the centers are reimbursed at no cost to the young parent.

Educational institutions and policymakers should also provide student parents with on-campus child care options as part of a two-generation (2Gen) approach to programming. 2Gen approaches center the whole family, considering the needs of the children and adults to be interconnected and interdependent, while developing holistic and equity-focused solutions.<sup>53</sup> By centering a 2Gen approach, educators and policymakers can improve outcomes for the entire family.

## ACCESS TO TRANSPORTATION

Access to transportation for pregnant and parenting students means access to school, work, health care, and child care. Generally, the commute to and from school is only one piece of a parenting student's daily routine, as they must also coordinate transportation to child care, medical appointments, and work. In a National Women's Law Center survey, pregnant and parenting girls ranked lack of transportation among their top three challenges. The survey indicated that pregnant and parenting girls (66%) were more likely than girls overall (29%) to state that not having transportation to and from school made it hard for them to attend.<sup>54</sup>

Access to transportation differs drastically from community to community, with varying levels of reliability and affordability. A study by the Bureau of Transportation Statistics found that 70% of children from low-income families take a school bus to school.<sup>55</sup> For parenting students in middle and high school, they must consider if their school buses allow children under the age of 5 to ride, given that some have minimum height and weight requirements for safety reasons.

These restrictions, along with additional transportation needs, mean that pregnant and parenting students often must find options beyond the school bus system. For those young parents who can drive, the expense of a car, gas, and maintenance can be cost-prohibitive. While municipal buses can be a solid option, transit stops can be limited, commute times long, and costs add up. Paying for multiple lines of transit a day can easily be too expensive for students.

**SOLUTIONS:** Policymakers and school administrators must consider transportation infrastructure when creating policies and programs for their student parent population. Dedicated funding for the extension of bus lines, development of shuttle services, and reworking of transit schedules would help to improve pregnant and parenting student's access to transportation. Additionally, making transit free for students or providing transportation subsidies for pregnant and parenting students would help alleviate transportation barriers.

## BRIGHT SPOT:

**New Mexico GRADS** pays for bus passes when there aren't buses through schools. Additionally, the school district buses will install seat belts and provide car seats to transport infants and toddlers to the on-site child care centers. Similarly, **Colorado Florence Crittenton** ensures that their students have access to transportation to school, appointments, and work. At **Lumen High School**, many students take public transit, which is free for youth under 18, to the campus.

## MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

Parenting at a young age can come with significant environmental and social stressors. Teen mothers are at risk for a number of mental health concerns that can affect both them and their children.<sup>56</sup> Young parents often face anxiety, depression (including postpartum depression), substance abuse, and posttraumatic stress disorder due to prevalent stressors including basic needs insecurity and conflicts between their parenting and student responsibilities.<sup>57</sup>

Pregnant and parenting students are at a higher risk for community and interpersonal violence exposure. One study found that on average, teen mothers have experienced around five traumatic events in their lives, such as physical attacks by a partner, neglect, serious financial problems, abuse by a parent, incarceration, and traumatic loss.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, compared to adult mothers, teen mothers are up to three times more likely to experience violence by their partner, the father of their child, or a family member.<sup>59</sup>

Beyond facing unique mental health challenges, pregnant and parenting students also encounter unique barriers to seeking mental health services and treatment. Access to services in urban and rural communities is often insufficient, especially for families who depend on public services or community-based health care.<sup>60</sup> And lack of insurance, limited time, and transportation issues are especially salient for teen parents.<sup>61</sup>

**SOLUTIONS:** It is imperative to provide mental health support to pregnant and parenting students so that they can best care for themselves and their children. To start, it is important to fight against the stigma of seeking services for mental health care. Teenagers often name stigmatization as an obstacle to seeking treatment, including social attitudes equating mental illness to weakness and fearing how peers or family members will perceive them.<sup>62</sup>

### BRIGHT SPOT:

Many of the programs and schools that we interviewed offer holistic physical and mental health services. At **Colorado Florence Crittenton Services**, for example, the school offers maternity leave to students and a designated teacher to check on them and deliver schoolwork. During these check-ins, teachers are trained to observe for postpartum issues both mental and physical, and to provide additional connections for any necessary follow-up services.

Similarly, **New Mexico GRADS** does home visits for students and has therapists to do developmental screenings. **New Moms** has a Family Support program that offers services including doulas, who can provide physical and emotional support during pregnancy, childbirth, and post-partum; a prenatal support group; and home visiting, where moms are paired with coaches who can provide parenting resources, child development tips, and social connection and encouragement.

Next, young parents must be connected to mental health services that are accessible, affordable, and high quality. Often, such services can be provided in a primary care setting—this can reduce the stigma of seeking access to psychological and psychiatric care. Mental health services provided through schools, such as diagnostic mental health assessments, one-on-one counseling, and treatment services,<sup>63</sup> are another necessary support for pregnant and parenting students who may not have access to insurance or transportation to a secondary location to receive mental health care. In addition, support groups for pregnant and parenting students are an important way to connect families with other peers to share personal experiences, coping strategies, and have a wide network of support.

### ADDITIONAL WRAPAROUND SERVICES:

In order to best serve pregnant and parenting students, many of our Bright Spot featured programs offer holistic sets of services that support young parents through every step of their pregnancies and parenting journeys. These wraparound supports include assistance with housing, food security, transportation, child care, and physical and mental health services, but *also* extend to various other needs.

#### Legal advice

Organizations can offer legal clinics or connections to pro bono attorneys to assist pregnant and parenting students with any issues that come up related to custody or interpersonal violence. Additionally, having flexible spaces where pregnant and parenting students can meet with lawyers, foster care liaisons, or other professionals is helpful.

#### College Success Programs

Pregnancy and parenthood do not require giving up one's academic dreams. Programs designed to prepare middle and high school students for college should be offered to pregnant and parenting students just as they are offered to all other students. There must also be an intentional investment in the achievement of young moms to eliminate barriers and address the systemic inequities that make it challenging for them to access higher education.

Providing support for students to achieve their academic goals requires developing individual plans for each student to identify challenges and set realistic goals and timelines. These students will also need assistance with finding and securing scholarships and funding. Students should be informed about all of their available options, which includes providing them with information about colleges, technical programs, community colleges, and universities that have child care options. They will also need to consider whether these programs are geographically close to their support systems, have affordable student housing, or have alternative class times or online options to accommodate a work schedule.

#### Job and Workforce Training

Programs that prepare students to enter the workforce are critical to young parents. Pregnant and parenting students deserve the opportunity to complete career path planning and think about their strengths, skills, and goals. Some services that assist with job training include career aptitude tests, resume writing, practice interviews, and working with coaches.

### Financial Literacy

Finally, access to financial literacy training is important to equip students with the knowledge to understand and effectively use various financial skills, including budgeting, managing personal finances and debt, and preparing for their family's future. This is especially important for pregnant and parenting students who are navigating finances for both themselves and their children. Students must be empowered to make informed financial decisions, and having greater knowledge about managing their finances leads to less financial stress.

#### BRIGHT SPOT:

**Colorado Florence Crittenton Services** offers a legal clinic that educates on rights and can help with custody or restraining orders.

**Lumen** connects students to paid internships in the field of study they are interested in, and students can also earn school credit simultaneously. Every student who graduates from Lumen has filled out and completed financial aid, applied to at least one college and often one tech school, and at least one scholarship program. More than half of Lumen students have an apprenticeship set up by graduation or have been accepted into a community college.

**New Moms** offers monthly cash stipends—supporting parents by allowing them to work fewer hours and focus on school and family.



# Policy Recommendations

The Bright Spots featured in this report serve as strong examples of the various programming that can support pregnant and parenting students in secondary schools. In addition to the best practices highlighted in this report, the policy recommendations featured below are included to help federal, state, and local policymakers with next steps on implementing these best practices.

## FEDERAL

### The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should:

- Reintroduce the Pregnancy Assistance Fund, a \$25 million per year grant program for states and tribes that served close to 110,000 pregnant and parenting teens, adult parents, and families before its funding expired in 2019;
- Expand and reform the Maternity Group Homes for Pregnant and Parenting Youth program,<sup>64</sup> and ensure that group homes are not tied to anti-abortion centers (also known as “crisis pregnancy centers”), which spread harmful disinformation about reproductive healthcare options and exist to deter pregnant people from getting abortions;<sup>65</sup> and
- Implement an informational campaign to ensure that students who need SNAP, WIC, and/or TANF support are aware of the programs and able to apply for it.

### The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development should:

- Analyze reforms to rental assistance programs, including public housing and project-based vouchers, to better support young parents who are experiencing housing instability;
- Include in its final Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rule the need for funding recipients to consider the needs of pregnant and parenting students as part of their fair housing analysis and action planning;
- Continue to provide assistance to youth aging out of foster care,<sup>66</sup> including by connecting them with stable housing and mitigating experiences of homelessness;
- Bolster the “Second Chance Homes”<sup>67</sup> program, which currently has six states with established commitments and local programs operating in approximately 25 other states; and
- Rename this program to “Fair Chance Homes,” as “Second Chance” is innately stigmatizing: it implies that everyone has access to the same opportunities in life and that individuals have squandered their first chance.<sup>68</sup>

### The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service should:

- Train employees, including regional staff, specifically on the needs of pregnant and parenting students; and
- Ensure that they have local partnerships with organizations that directly provide services to pregnant and parenting students so that programs such as WIC and SNAP are accessible.

### The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights should:

- Include pregnant and parenting students in the Civil Rights Data Collection; to better serve pregnant and parenting students in secondary school, we need better data to know where they are and allocate resources as needed;
- Update their guidance to include the 2024 Title IX regulations, which extend additional protections to pregnant and parenting students;
- Encourage schools to develop programs that support pregnant and parenting students, including by updating prior resources<sup>69</sup>; and
- Remind schools that Title I funding can be allocated to support the needs of pregnant and parenting students.

### Congress should:

- Increase funding for programs that support student parents, including basic needs programs like Medicaid, WIC, SNAP, TANF; housing supports; and child care programs like Head Start and the Child Care & Development Block Grant (CCDBG).
- Pass legislation to support pregnant and parenting students in a manner that also respects their reproductive autonomy and decisions. Legislation should reinforce Title IX protections, provide support for family planning services, require comprehensive sex education, provide students with a full range of reproductive health care options when they become pregnant including ensuring that they have a right and access to abortion, and provide a list of community-based and school-based resources when they become parents.



## STATE

### State policymakers should:

- Pass legislation to ensure that student parents have access to lactation accommodations and flexible school attendance policies. The 2024 Title IX regulations provide an excellent floor, and states should feel empowered to implement additional protections for pregnant and postpartum students.
- Invest in state programs providing direct services to teen parents with a positive measurable impact. This includes schools, programs that work directly with schools, and community-based organizations that support pregnant and parenting teens in a culturally competent manner.
- Enshrine in law the right to access and provide abortion and contraception. Require comprehensive sexual education that gives young people accurate information about their sexual and reproductive health.
- Convene a state working group to create a network of support for teen parents. This working group should include policymakers, community-based organizations, advocates, and teen parent representatives. The goal of this working group should be to create a network of social support for teen parents, conduct a state landscape analysis to find where there are gaps, and support new programming where there are currently unmet needs.
- Through the state education agency, begin collecting data on the number of teen parents in your state. This data is essential to determine where to allocate resources and to ensure that student parents have the support they need to graduate from high school. Collecting this information *must* come with appropriate privacy protections and should be collected *only* to better support young parents.<sup>70</sup>
- Provide funding to supplement federal funding for child care. Design child care assistance policies so that it is easier for student parents to qualify for assistance and to navigate the process of applying for and receiving assistance. Ensure that child care providers of all types receive sufficient resources to offer quality environments for children and ensure fair compensation for early educators.
- Increase investment in support programs, including affordable health care, food benefits, housing support, and transportation assistance, and ensure that these programs offer direct outreach to teen parents.
  - As evidenced by **Lumen High School** and **Florence Colorado Crittenton Services**, support programs can connect directly with students during the school day. This removes a potential barrier to access for student parents that may be unable to travel with their children to additional appointments.

## SCHOOLS

### School administrators should:

- Ensure that pregnant and postpartum students are aware of their rights under Title IX, and that all students know their Title IX Coordinator's name and contact information. This information should be visible and easily accessible on the school website and posted in various spaces where students convene, including cafeterias and locker rooms.
  - Train Title IX coordinators, educators, and other school staff specifically about the protections available for pregnant and postpartum students and about the bias teen parents experience. Title IX Coordinators should equip educators and staff with the necessary tools to be more supportive for pregnant and parenting students.
  - Implement lactation accommodations and flexible attendance policies that are aligned with Title IX and consider it the baseline for support. For example, the 2024 Title IX regulations require schools to provide a clean and private space that is not a bathroom where students can express breastmilk. Schools can provide additional support by ensuring the lactation room has a refrigerator to store milk, an outlet for breast pumps, and a sink where students can wash their hands.
  - Identify community-based organizations that can provide support for pregnant and parenting students. This may include organizations that provide housing, food and nutrition support, maternal health support, or mentorship. Compile a list of these organizations and give them to the Title IX Coordinator and school counselors.
  - Provide comprehensive sexual education to students as well as information about access to health care—including abortion, contraception, and maternity and pediatric health care.
  - Consider, if you have a large population of pregnant and parenting students, programs that can be offered at directly school, including child care services or visits from staff that work for benefits programs like WIC.
  - Support student parents by assigning them a counselor to work with them on a plan for their education. This will ensure that they feel supported by their school leaders, and they can set goals for achieving their diploma.



## Conclusion

Pregnant and parenting students deserve the opportunity to complete their education without unnecessary barriers that push them out of the classroom. Mirroring the best practices described in this report is critical to creating supportive learning environments.

With accommodations, student parents are better able to balance their health, the wellness of their families, and their educational pursuits, enabling their success and the success of their children.

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