



THE
NATIONAL
CAMPAIGN TO
PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY

Partners In Progress

*The Education Community
and Preventing
Teen Pregnancy*

Introduction

Because the relationship between academic failure and teen pregnancy is so strong, and because young people spend so much of their time in school, the education community and the teen pregnancy prevention community should see themselves as natural allies.¹ Too often, however, schools find themselves caught in the middle of community controversies over sex education, in particular, and the potential for schools to help reduce teen pregnancy gets lost. In response, this document offers simple ideas on ways the education community can help prevent teen pregnancy — most of which are not at all controversial — without sacrificing its core mission of education.

The Relationship Between Academic Failure and Teen Pregnancy.

Although all students are at risk for engaging in early sexual activity and childbearing, school failure is often the first sign of trouble that can end in teenage parenthood. In fact, half of teen mothers drop out of school before becoming pregnant.² Recent studies make clear that students who feel a strong connection to their school are much more likely to postpone sexual activity and other risky behaviors.³ Teenage parenthood is also a leading correlate of school failure — less than one third of teens who begin families before age 18 ever complete high school.⁴ All of which suggests that the most important role for schools in preventing teen pregnancy is to prevent school failure and drop-out and offer all students the opportunity to succeed and to become deeply engaged in their own education.

Is Teen Pregnancy Still a Concern?

Since the early 1990s, teen pregnancy and birth rates have declined nationwide, in all states, and among all age and racial/ethnic groups — the result of less sexual activity and better contraceptive use. This good news shows that efforts to prevent teen pregnancy are paying dividends. Despite these encouraging declines, the United States has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and birth among comparable nations. And it is still the case that four

out of ten girls in the U.S. become pregnant at least once before age 20.⁵

The Consequences of Teen Pregnancy.

Teen pregnancy and childbearing have adverse academic consequences for teen parents and their children. In addition to a higher drop-out rate for the young mothers and fathers, early parenting limits a young mother's likelihood of a getting the post-secondary education that is increasingly necessary to qualify for a well-paying job. Not surprisingly, limited educational achievement increases the chances that teen parents will live in poverty. Teen fathers tend to complete an average of one semester of school less than young men who delay fatherhood until at least age 21. The children of teen mothers are also at risk compared to those born to older parents. They are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade, they perform worse on standardized tests, and ultimately they are less likely to complete high school than if their mothers had delayed childbearing.⁶

Ways Schools Are Helping Prevent Teen Pregnancies.

Schools play a vital role in the lives of 50 million children each year.⁷ By promoting educational success, developing skills that help build a positive future, and by helping young people to feel a strong sense of purpose, schools can help strengthen young people's motivation to delay pregnancy and parenthood.⁸

Schools can — and should — also provide sexuality education, and clearly schools are doing so. Although curricula vary widely in both focus and intensity, nearly every teenager in the United States receives some form of comprehensive sex or abstinence education.⁹ For their part, parents have expressed consistent and strong support for school-based sex education that stresses abstinence as the first and best choice for youth and provides information about contraception. Parents also want schools to go beyond just the “birds and the bees” and address such issues as how to manage pressure to have sex and the emotional consequences of becoming sexually active.¹⁰ For those concerned that discussing sex and contraception with young people might have a negative impact, there is good news. The overwhelming weight of the evidence is that sex education that addresses both the benefits and limitations of contraception does not hasten the onset of sex, increase the frequency of sex, nor increase the number of sexual partners. In addition, several sex and HIV education curricula have now been shown to delay the onset of sex, reduce the frequency of sex, reduce the number of sexual partners among teens, and/or increase the use of contraception.¹¹

Two important caveats: (1) When it comes to preventing teen pregnancy, schools can do more than just offer sex education classes. For

instance, schools can host parent forums or can provide health clinic services. (2) Regardless of the type of sex education curriculum that schools offer, it is important to recognize that teens receive information and guidance about sex from a variety of sources — parents, television, the Internet, friends, and faith communities, to name just a few. Consequently, it is unreasonable to expect that the education community alone should shoulder the entire burden of the sexual education of young people or be responsible for putting all of the complex issues of love, sex, and relationships in just the context that each family prefers. Moreover, there is very strong agreement within the education community that schools alone cannot address the issue of adolescent pregnancy. While there are a variety of approaches for preventing teen pregnancy through schools, support from families, in particular, and the community in general, is essential if prevention programs are to work successfully.¹²

The following tips are designed primarily to help those in the education community strengthen their existing commitments to preventing teen pregnancy and to provide new ideas. It is our hope that these tips also provide some guidance to those outside of schools who are also concerned with how to reduce teen pregnancy but need new ideas for constructive partnerships with schools.

Acknowledgements

This pamphlet is the result of collaboration between the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and the Joint Work Group on School-Based Teen Pregnancy Prevention. Comprised of eight national non-governmental organizations, the Joint Work Group is dedicated to exploring and strengthening the role that state and local education and health policymakers can play in preventing teen pregnancy. Members of the Joint Work Group include the American School Health Association, the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Education Association, and the National School Boards Association.

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Tips for Success

Set High Academic Standards for all Students.

Students respond best to a strong education program that is stimulating, establishes expectations for all students, and clearly articulates what each student should know and be able to accomplish.¹³

- Set demanding standards in reading, writing, math, social studies and science, as well as in health education and the fine arts.
- Adopt policies that clearly articulate education goals and high expectations for students.
- Express confidence in each student's ability to achieve academically.
- Offer tutoring and mentoring programs.
- Provide students with challenging opportunities for them to excel.
- Link students' academic instruction to concrete future goals and career plans.

Involve Parents.

Teens consistently cite parents as having the most influence over their sexual decision-making.¹⁴ A solid relationship between a teen and his or her parents is positively related to healthy emotional development and self-esteem. Ongoing, sustained communication between parents and their teens can help prevent teen pregnancy, as well as a host of other risky behaviors. Involving parents and other adults in school-based efforts to prevent teen pregnancy makes good common sense and can be a beneficial experience for all involved.¹⁵

- Make it convenient for parents to participate in programs and meetings.
- Promote the value of parent-child communication.
- Reassure parents that communicating with their children on topics as sensitive as sexuality is important, if not always easy, and

suggest specific ways to make it easier. Provide good materials to help.

- Recognize that teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, school nurses, and others can play a significant role in helping young people make responsible decisions about their future. As such, they are important supplements to the central role of parents.

Involve Youth.

Giving young people meaningful roles in developing and running a teen pregnancy prevention program is critical to the success of such efforts. Their input helps ensure that a program is relevant and that messages, products and methods reach their intended audience.¹⁶

- Recruit youth to serve on advisory boards.
- Train teens to become peer educators and counselors.
- Hold youth forums, summits, or town hall meetings on teen pregnancy and related topics.
- Use youth groups to provide guidance on program development.

Forge Partnerships.

When working in the education community, there are many bases to touch. The education community is comprised of a variety of players. State education agencies, state and local school board members, school administrators, teachers, and support staff all have essential roles in promoting student success and preventing pregnancies.¹⁷ Involve them all, as appropriate.

- Involve principals. Because the principal is the school's primary gatekeeper, school-based programs to help reduce teen pregnancy should not proceed without his or her support.
- Think broadly. State education policymakers may consider including comprehensive school health education, including sex

education, into state standards, assessments, and systems of accountability.

- Include teachers. Be sure to ask teachers, in particular, about how best to work with students in a particular school. They know them well.
- Reach out for help. Schools are accountable for student success like never before. Community-based organizations and government agencies can lend critical support to the overall school environment.
- Maximize your role as a mentor. Students admire and respect their teachers. Encourage students daily to make safe and healthy decisions.

Do Your Homework.

Become and stay informed about teen pregnancy and about promising interventions. Gather data on the need for pregnancy prevention in your community — make the issue local.

- Seek out and use local data on teen pregnancy to support the need for prevention programs that involve schools. For example, local health departments can often provide information on adolescent sexual activity and birth rates by zip code.
- Hold meetings with experts to gather information on the range of prevention programs available, and on which programs have been successful.
- Pay especially close attention to programs that are research-based and have been shown to be effective in delaying sexual activity or increasing contraceptive use. Evaluations of many sex and HIV education programs strongly support the conclusion that well-developed curricula do not increase sexual intercourse and that some, but not all, programs can delay and reduce sexual activity.
- Find out what is currently being done in your schools to prevent teen pregnancy

and how existing work might be expanded or improved.

- When developing teen pregnancy prevention programs, study other prevention programs already in schools, including drug education, smoking cessation, conflict resolution, and after-school activities for possible guidance.
- Figure out which teen pregnancy prevention programs have been tried before in your school and what the experience has been.
- Ask for help and resources. Several national organizations — such as the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy — can provide guidance and assistance to schools, families, and communities.

Prepare Teachers.

Students cite teachers and counselors as second only to their families as the most reliable sources of sex-related information.¹⁸

- Work with colleges and universities to revamp teacher education programs so that instruction and practice are aligned with the direction of current education reform initiatives. These teacher-training programs can require aspiring teachers and counselors to learn about child and adolescent development and about effective prevention and early intervention techniques.
- Offer professional staff development and technical assistance for teachers, school counselors, school administrators, and health staff on prevention and early intervention issues, how to respond to the media, effective health and sexuality curricula, and youth development models.

Use the Youth Development Framework.

Evidence increasingly supports the view that after-school activities, community service, and other youth development programs help to

foster self-esteem, “resiliency,” and academic achievement.¹⁹ In fact, current research suggests that programs that include community service by teens and structured time for preparation and reflection before, during, and after such service (e.g., group discussions, journal writing, and papers) may have the strongest evidence of any intervention that they actually reduce teen pregnancy rates while the youth are participating in the program.²⁰

- Enhance young people’s career skills and aspirations by exposing them to a wide array of work opportunities around them and ways to contribute to the community.
- Form partnerships with local agencies and businesses to help young people see the connection between academics and future work opportunities for students.
- Implement effective school-based community service programs into existing curricula.
- Many teen pregnancy prevention efforts have been stymied by controversy over what to tell young people about abstinence and contraception. It is important to note that some community service programs that do not mention sex at all have been shown to reduce teen pregnancy.²¹

Create an Environment for Success.

When designing and operating programs that address teen pregnancy, make sure to find friends and advocates outside the education community, such as state and local coalitions focused on preventing teen pregnancy.

- Seek help from others in securing adequate funding from public and private sources.
- Recognize that you may need medical and/or legal advice on some of the planned interventions.
- Elicit the views of the local faith community.

- Involve a trained evaluator when developing a program, if at all possible. And do so from the beginning.
- Seek input from community leaders and others who are engaged in helping youth.

Let Research Help Guide Your Efforts.

When designing, assessing, and evaluating policies and programs that address teen pregnancy, it is helpful to know that there exists an increasing body of science that can help guide your decisions and efforts.

- Enhance the health and health literacy of all young people by relying on programs that are developmentally appropriate and have shown evidence of success.
- Make sure that the policies and programs that are in place to prevent teen pregnancy are science-based and address both abstinence and contraception. Current research indicates that some curricula and programs that cover both topics can be successful in delaying the onset of sex, reducing the frequency of sex, or reduce the number of sexual partners.²²
- Support the eight components of the Coordinated School Health Model developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Division of Adolescent and School Health that include, “a documented, planned, and sequential program of health instruction for students in grades kindergarten through twelve; activities that help young people develop the skills they need to avoid sexual behaviors that results in HIV infection, and other STDs and unintended pregnancy, instruction from teachers who are trained to teach the subject, and periodic evaluation, updating, and improvement.”

Endnotes

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- 19 Greene, Brenda. (1998). What local school policymakers think about the role of schools. *Updating School Health Policies*, 29 (6). Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association.
- 20 Kirby, Douglas. (2001). *Emerging answers: Research findings on programs to reduce teen pregnancy*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.

Resources

National Campaign to Prevent
Teen Pregnancy
www.teenpregnancy.org
202-478-8500

American School Health Association
www.ashaweb.org
303-678-1601

Association of Maternal and
Child Health Programs
www.amchp.org
202-775-0436

Association of State and
Territorial Health Officials
www.astho.org
202-371-9090

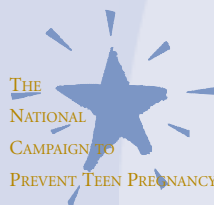
Council of Chief State
School Officers
www.ccsso.org
202-408-5505

National Association of
State Boards of Education
www.nasbe.org
703-684-4000

National Conference of
State Legislatures
www.ncsl.org
303-830-2200

National Education Association
www.nea.org
202-833-4000

National School Boards Association
www.nsba.org
703-838-6722



The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization supported almost entirely by private donations. The Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. The National Campaign's goal is to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by one-third between 1996 and 2005.

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