

How to Keep Pregnant and Parenting Students from Dropping Out: A Primer for Schools

This fact sheet is part of a series of tools designed by the National Women's Law Center to help schools address the dropout crisis. Girls are dropping out of school at alarming rates, and providing better support for pregnant and parenting students – together with implementing effective pregnancy prevention measures – are critical steps for schools to take in their efforts to reduce those dropout rates. This is because while the reasons girls drop out are complex, it is clear that pregnancy and parenting responsibilities are a significant factor. In fact, almost one-half of female dropouts say that pregnancy or becoming a parent played a role in their decisions to leave school.ⁱ

Schools can, and must, do more both to prevent teen pregnancies from occurring and, if pregnancies do occur, to keep parenting teens in school. Such efforts are likely to pay off. According to a survey conducted by the Gates Foundation, 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.”ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, as well as its implementing regulations, bars discrimination on the basis of pregnancy and parental status. Title IX requires that schools treat pregnancy and all related conditions like any other temporary disability. Title IX also creates some requirements specific to pregnant and parenting students.

The following is a quick guide to some of the steps schools should take to meet their responsibilities under the law if their students do become pregnant and to provide the necessary support for pregnant and parenting students to stay in school.

Access to School

- A school may not exclude a student from classes or remove her from school because she is pregnant, has had a child, has had an abortion, or is recovering from any of these conditions.
- A school may offer special programs or schools for pregnant and parenting students, *but such programs must be voluntary*. A pregnant or parenting student must be allowed to remain in regular classes if s/he chooses to do so.
- Any voluntary activity or program specifically designed for pregnant students should offer opportunities that are equal to those offered for non-pregnant students, including academically rigorous courses and the same range of extracurricular and enrichment activities.
- Schools should create individualized graduation plans for pregnant and parenting students.

Extracurricular Activities

- A school may not exclude a student from extracurricular activities because she is pregnant, has given birth, has had an abortion, or is recovering from any of these conditions.

- A school may ask a pregnant student to obtain a doctor’s note stating that she is able to take part in school activities, but only if the school requires a doctor’s note from all students who have conditions that require medical care.

Absences

- If a student has to miss school for reasons related to pregnancy or childbirth, the time missed must be considered a justified leave of absence for as long as is deemed medically necessary by the student’s doctor. At the time the student returns to school, she must be reinstated to the status she held when the leave began.
- Schools should excuse absences due to the illness of or medical appointments for a student’s child if the student is the custodial parent of the child.
- For all excused absences, students should be allowed to complete all assignments and tests missed during the absence and receive full credit if the tasks are completed within a reasonable time.

Specialized support

- If a school provides special services, such as at-home tutoring, for students who miss school because they are temporarily disabled, it must do the same for students who miss school because of pregnancy. Regardless of what a school provides for students generally, it should consider providing at-home tutoring or other academic support for students with extended absences for reasons related to pregnancy and parenting.
- Schools should work cooperatively with social service agencies to ensure that students are educated about pregnancy prevention measures and that those students who are pregnant or parenting have access to services they need, such as social services and child care; classes in parenting skills, prenatal care, and child development; and/or support groups or mentoring programs. Enrollment in special classes must be voluntary and cannot come at the expense of core academic courses that all students must master.
- Schools should provide necessary physical accommodations for pregnant students, such as larger desks.
- Schools should conduct special outreach efforts to re-enroll students who drop out of school after becoming pregnant or parents.

Available research suggests that schools can make a difference in whether pregnant and parenting students drop out. A school that follows the above steps can increase the chances that pregnant and parenting students will remain in school. For more information on these issues, please contact the National Women’s Law Center at info@nwlc.org. To read the Center’s report, *When Girls Don’t Graduate, We All Fail: A Call to Improve High School Graduation Rates for Girls*, visit www.nwlc.org/dropout.

ⁱ Peter D. Hart Research Associates, *Gates Foundation Dropouts Survey* (Sept/Oct 2005); NELS:1988, NCES, “Dropout Rates in the United States: 1994.”

ⁱⁱ Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., Jr., & Morison, K. B., *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts. A report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates*, 2006, p. 6.