



Keeping Pregnant and Parenting Students from Dropping Out: A Guide for Policymakers and Schools

Issue in Brief

Providing better support for pregnant and parenting students is a critical step for schools to take in their efforts to reduce dropout rates. Graduating from high school improves pregnant and parenting teens' chances of going on to further education and the workforce and avoiding poverty and/or the need to rely on public assistance. It also contributes to the health and development of their children.¹

Yet pregnant and parenting students often face challenges to graduating from high school because of a lack of system-wide supports.

- According to one source, seventy percent of female students who become pregnant drop out of high school.²
- One in three female dropouts who responded to a national survey said that pregnancy or becoming a parent was a significant factor in their decision to dropout.³
- Young fathers tend to complete an average of one semester of school less than young men who delay fatherhood until age 21 or later.⁴

Policymakers and schools can and must do more to keep this vulnerable population of students in school.

What the Law Says

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 guarantees access to equal educational opportunities in all publicly funded educational institutions for all students regardless of sex. The Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education is the primary federal agency that enforces Title IX.⁵

Under Title IX, schools are prohibited from discriminating against a student because of childbirth, false pregnancy, abortion, or recovery from these conditions, as well as based on marital status. Title IX contains basic nondiscrimination principles, including the fundamental requirement that schools treat pregnancy and all related conditions like any other temporary disability. The Title IX regulations⁶ also lay out some specific applications of these principles, including the following:

Access to School, Classes, and Extracurricular Activities

- A school may not exclude a student from classes or school because she is pregnant, has had a child, has had an abortion, or is recovering from any of these conditions.
- If a pregnant or parenting student enters an alternative school or program, the choice must be voluntary, and the school or program must be of comparable quality to that offered at a comprehensive high school.
- 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 or physical education classes 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/he held when the leave began.

Specialized Support

- If a school provides special services, such as at-home tutoring, for another student who must miss school because of a temporary disability, it must do the same for students who miss school because of pregnancy.

Recipients of federal education funding are required to designate Title IX coordinators to ensure that schools comply with the law. If a student suspects she has experienced treatment in violation of Title IX, she may want to contact her Title IX coordinator to determine how to proceed.

Youth Deserve Better: Recommendations for Policymakers

Investing in pregnant and parenting students is likely to yield results, as students who left school because they became a parent or to care for a family member were more likely than any other group of dropouts to say that "they would have worked harder if their schools had demanded more of them and provided the necessary support."⁷ Title IX provides critical protections for pregnant and parenting students, and educators and policymakers must ensure that schools comply with both Title IX and relevant state laws. In addition, more can and should be done to ensure that these students have the support necessary to stay in school.

Action is needed by policymakers and educational leaders at the federal, state, and local levels to enforce the provisions mandated under Title IX and to provide further support for pregnant and parenting students. Among appropriate accommodations are:

- Access to social services and child care; classes in parenting skills, prenatal care, and child development; and mentoring programs;
- Alternative scheduling and attendance arrangements, such as excusing medical or child care-related absences, providing at-home tutoring, etc;
- Physical accommodations, such as larger desks;
- Outreach efforts to re-enroll students who have already dropped out; and
- Monitoring the educational progress of pregnant and parenting students and providing individualized graduation plans for them.

For more information, please contact Healthy Teen Network at info@healthyteennetwork.org or the National Women's Law Center at info@nwlc.org.

¹ National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, (2002). *Title IX at 30: Report Card on Gender Equity*.

² National Association of State Boards of Education, (2000). *The Impact of Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood on Educational Achievement: A Blueprint for Education Policymakers' Involvement in Prevention Efforts*.

³ National Women's Law Center (2007). *When Girls Don't Graduate, We All Fail: A Call to Improve High School Graduation Rates for Girls*, 13.

⁴ National Association of State Boards of Education, (2000). *The Impact of Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood on Educational Achievement: A Blueprint for Education Policymakers' Involvement in Prevention Efforts*.

⁵ National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, (2002). *Title IX at 30: Report Card on Gender Equity*.

⁶ 34 C.F.R. § 106.40.

⁷ National Women's Law Center, *supra* note 3, at 14.