



RAISING EXPECTATIONS, RAISING HOPE

one in a series of 2013 fact sheets on adolescent sexual health
from Colorado Youth Matter

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SEXUAL HEALTH

Teen pregnancy and academic achievement are integrally linked, as research has shown, and specific strategies have been proven to address both outcomes simultaneously.

Among these strategies are programs, such as comprehensive sexuality education, that provide a young person with skills and competencies to help them make decisions, communicate clearly, negotiate, problem-solve, access and advocate for resources, and engage in other pro-social behaviors that help a young person prevent pregnancy, delay parenting, and thus achieve graduation and beyond.

While dropout rates and teen birth rates continue to decline, urgency to address these issues remains.

- Dropout rates for Colorado girls in grades 7-12 have decreased from 4.0% in the 2005-2006 academic year to 2.8% in the 2010-2011 academic year.¹
- Statewide, teen birth rates have declined 56% since 1991, however in 2012 every 2 hours a baby was born to a Colorado teen.²
- Over the last five years, there were over 27,000 babies born to teen parents.³
- Not accounting for repeat births, in 2012 there may have been as many as 10,000 teen moms in Colorado.³

The connection between teen pregnancy and dropping out of school is well-documented.

- 30% of young women who have dropped out of high school list pregnancy and/or parenthood as a primary reason, and
- Of those young parenting women who stay in school, only 38% achieve a high school diploma by age 22.⁴
- Approximately 53% of the Colorado young women who gave birth in 2011 did not finish high school or achieve a GED.⁵
- Children born to teens (15-19 years old) are more likely than their peers to score poorly on school math and reading tests.⁵

Beyond dropout and teen birth data, research shows the link between academic performance (such as grades) and risky health behaviors. Results from Denver's Healthy Kids Colorado Survey 2011 showed that teens who have better grades are more likely to not have sex; and among those who do engage in sex, teens with better grades are more likely to use a condom.⁶ Moreover, a significant number of Colorado's young parents are more likely than their peers to have fewer opportunities for academic, and later economic, success. Women with a high school diploma are also 20 percent less likely to live in poverty and more likely to find employment than those without a high school diploma.¹ Female students who drop out often have worse health conditions and less access to health insurance in comparison to their counterparts, leaving them more likely to rely on public assistance.¹ And while young women often bear the impact of pregnancy, young men and women alike need access to education, services and opportunities.

Academic achievement is about more than just dropout prevention. Similarly, sexual health is about more than teen pregnancy and prevention. In fact, we know that sexual health encompasses not just physical but also social and emotional health and related competencies. To have sexual health a young person must have certain skills and competencies that help them in their decision-making, communication, negotiation, problem solving, access and advocating for resources, and other pro-social behaviors. These competencies and pro-social behaviors are the same for other topic areas deemed critical for students—referred to as 21st Century Skills and Social Emotional Learning.

Students who are able to postpone pregnancy or parenting and have the skills to make healthy decisions about all aspects of their health will use these skills to make decisions about their future academic and economic wellbeing. So now, how do we advance the conversation, and the research behind it, to be about more than just prevention?

It's time to focus not just on dropout prevention or teen pregnancy prevention, but on the strategies and approaches that promote health and achievement.

Recommendations:

With dramatic success in reducing teen births in Colorado, teen pregnancy prevention is at a crossroads. Either funding continues, as does the success, or funding drops, risking the reversal of all these accomplishments.

To ensure progress continues, let's broaden our lens to invest in both elements of sexual health and achievement for all youth.

Top investments to improve both sexual health and academic achievement in Colorado:

1. Social-emotional learning in schools: addressing a young person's decision-making, communication, interpersonal skills and behavior can improve all outcomes, including graduation.
2. Equitable education, resources and services for pregnant/parenting teens to stay in school: keeping parenting students in school is critical to their success and that of their children (and since 1972, it has been the law: Title IX—requiring gender equity for girls and boys in schools).
3. Clinical services in schools: increasing access to school-based health centers, or ensuring referral systems from school nurses, offers teens the ability to obtain medical services autonomously.
4. Comprehensive sex education: it's the law (HB 07-1292—regarding content standards for the instruction of human sexuality), and it works to change sexual risk behaviors.
5. Community service learning: beyond just volunteering, service learning helps students engage in and reflect on the experience of contributing to the public good.
6. Career and post-secondary training opportunities: showing youth their future opportunities can help them set attainable goals for their future.
7. Youth leadership opportunities: youth will rule the world one day—they need experience leading, and learning, now.
8. Programs that keep youth busy, engaged, and safe: after school programs, Gay-Straight Alliances, mentoring, and sports are just some ways that help youth stay healthy, safe, active and connected to positive influences.
9. Family engagement and communication: the most influential teachers in their children's lives, parents can find the support, resources and skills they need to talk to their children about sex—and have a direct impact on their children's behavior.

With continued, coordinated investments in both youth sexual health and academic achievement, healthy students become healthy learners—and healthy young people make healthy adults that are able to learn better, work better, and thrive into the future. For more information or to learn how you can support informed, healthy youth, visit www.coloradoyouthmatter.org.

“Young people ARE the future. If we do not learn about the essentials—like sex education—then what kind of future can we expect for ourselves?”

- Scarlett, 18

References

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