

Pregnancy by teens has big costs

Written by Becky Gillette, The Cleveland Current Staff Writer



Carol Penick

The six schools districts in Bolivar County, along with school districts in the rest of the state, will soon be making decision on a serious and controversial issue. Legislation that goes into effect in 2012 mandates that public schools in Mississippi teach either abstinence only or abstinence plus sex education programs that teach methods of birth control and disease prevention.

A third of all Mississippi births are to teen mothers, and the rate of teen pregnancy in the state continues to increase. About 83 percent of teen pregnancies are unintended.

Most national studies have shown that abstinence only programs aren't effective for reducing unplanned teen pregnancies. Mississippi has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the country, and a recent study has shown that the cost of teen pregnancies to the taxpayers totals more than \$154.9 million per year. The cost to Bolivar County taxpayers is estimated at \$2.6 million per year. The county had 119 teen births the year studied, 2009.

The research shows abstinence only programs are not working, said Carol Penick, executive director of the Women's Fund of Mississippi, which conducted the teen pregnancy economic

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study.

“About 76 percent of youths graduating from high school report already having sex,” Penick said. “That is self-reporting, so we believe those figures are true. If you teach abstinence only, you are teaching to only 24 percent of students. We would prefer our teens are abstinent. But when they are not, they need to be fully-informed about how to prevent a pregnancy and how to prevent sexually transmitted disease. And we want the parents involved. Most of abstinence plus curricula have a great component of including parents. Teens report, believe it or not, that they still listen to parents when it comes to relationships, sex and health.”

Penick said sex education needs to be a partnership between schools and parents. School nurses are an important part of the school portion.

“We want children to learn medically-accurate and evidence-based information,” she said.

Penick said they decided to look at the economic impact of teen pregnancies as a way to keep emotion out of the debate on a controversial subject. She thinks it is important to look at how that money could be better spent elsewhere. The \$154.9 million could send almost all four-year-olds in the state to pre-kindergarten, send 31,000 people to college or pay the salaries of almost 5,000 firefighters every year.

It is not a problem that is insolvable. Programs in other states like South Carolina have found it is possible to reduce teen pregnancy rates. Penick said their recommendations are based on models from the other states.

There are four solutions they are going to focus on that have an economic impact on the state: 1. School sex education that is evidence-based and medically-accurate. 2. Youth-friendly health services that are affordable, accessible and non-judgmental. 3. Teenagers in Mississippi need to have some hope. They are less likely to engage in risky behaviors like sex at an early age if they are involved in something they really like to do, like playing a sport or being on a dance team. 4. Involvement of parents.

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There are high societal, as well as economic costs to teen pregnancy.

“If a girl gets pregnant in high school and drops out, her chances of getting a good job and making an income that sustains her family is very low,” Penick said. “She is paying less tax to the state and her children are generally going to be in the same situation. Sons of teen moms are more likely to be incarcerated and daughters of teen moms are more likely to become teen moms themselves. There is an increase in health care costs related to teen births, and the children of teen moms are sadly much more likely to end up in foster care.”

The author of the study, Sarah Welker, a policy analyst with the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, said considering the fact that Bolivar County is not a huge county (population), losses of \$2.6 million per year due to teen pregnancy are very significant.

Welker said there are three categories of taxpayer costs included in the calculations. In order from highest to lowest, they are:

- 1) Lost tax revenue from lower wages and consumption of teen mothers and fathers, and lost tax revenue from lower wages of children of teen mothers as adults.
- 2) Adverse consequences for children, which includes increased foster care costs and incarceration costs for children of teen mothers as adolescents and adults, and;
- 3) Finally, the lowest costs are costs associated with public assistance such as emergency food assistance, TANF and medical assistance.

“From this analysis we know that teen births and their economic costs impact all counties across our state regardless of whether they are in rural or urban areas,” Welker said. “Teen births also cross all demographic groups with teen birth rates among white and non-white populations in Mississippi exceeding national rates.”

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William Crockett, superintendent of education, Mound Bayou School District, said they will be making recommendations to the school board soon about whether to offer abstinence only or abstinence plus programs. For several years they had an abstinence only program funded by a grant. "I thought it was a really effective program," Crockett said. "They were doing a lot of things for students like field trips and surveys. In health classes, we have health, drug and sex education programs."

Crockett said he doesn't have any data to support which program would be most effective, and doesn't have an opinion at this time. But he would like to see less teen pregnancy.

Dr. Jackie Thigpen, superintendent with the Cleveland School District, said they have been offering abstinence only programs.

"But we have to be realistic," Thigpen said. "For those who already have a child, we have to stress abstinence plus. We have partnered with several agencies such as Delta State University and the Save a Life Foundation who come in and present information to our students. We also have two nurses who do training or assessment on abstinence."

Thigpen said unintended pregnancies aren't always detrimental. But if it stops a student from finishing school, she does think that is a detrimental effect. The Cleveland School District has a parent educator who works with students who become teen parents by providing them with supplies, teaching them parenting skills, and educating them so they will educate their children.

"Some teen parents do go on to finish high school and go to college," Thigpen said.