

## Study puts cost of teen births at \$154.9M

### Proponents of sex-ed classes cite economic impact

By Emily Wagster Pettus, Associated Press

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JACKSON -- Groups pushing for comprehensive sex education classes in Mississippi schools say there's a good economic reason for what they're doing.

A new analysis shows births to teen or preteen mothers cost the state \$154.9 million in 2009.

That includes increased costs of foster care, social services and incarceration for young people born years ago to teen moms.

It also takes into account lost revenue from people who have lower levels of education and lower-paying jobs because they became parents when they were younger than 20.

The study was done by a nonprofit, nonpartisan group called the Mississippi Economic Policy Center and was sponsored by the Women's Fund of Mississippi.

It was also supported by Mississippi First, an advocacy group for health and education issues.

Carol Penick, executive director of the Women's Fund of Mississippi, said an evidence-based sex education curriculum that includes information about contraception, disease prevention and responsibility can help reduce the rates of teen and preteen pregnancies.

"This is not an unsolvable problem," Penick said.

Jamie Holcomb, director of programs for the Women's Fund, said parents also need information about how to talk to their children about sex. "Parents are part of the solution," she said.

Mississippi has long had one of the highest teenage birth rates in the country.

State Health Department statistics show that in 2009, there were 7,078 live births to mothers aged 10 to 19. That meant that for every 1,000 girls or women in that age group, 64.1 gave birth to a baby who lived. The rate for the U.S. was 39 live births among every 1,000 girls or women younger than 20.

The statistics do not include pregnancies that ended in stillbirths, miscarriages or abortions.

A new state law enacted this year requires school districts to teach some form of sex education. Parents must give permission for their children to take the classes.

Districts must choose between teaching abstinence-only or "abstinence-plus," which includes information about contraceptives and sexually transmitted diseases. Each district must adopt a policy by June 30, 2012. The state Department of Education will spend the next several months reviewing proposed courses before adopting a curriculum list for districts to use.

Under a previous law, Mississippi school districts were not required to teach either comprehensive sex education or abstinence. Districts were allowed to teach abstinence, but if they wanted to teach more than that, they needed local school board approval.

The new law requires classes to be separated by gender, and schools won't be allowed to demonstrate the use of condoms.

Rachel Canter, executive director of Mississippi First, said the teen pregnancy rate shows that an abstinence-only approach is not working. She said young people often will take pledges to abstain from sex until marriage, "but then they don't behave that way after the programs."

An effective, comprehensive sex education program starts with a base of abstinence but includes medically accurate information about contraceptives and health, Canter said.

Legislators who've objected to schools offering comprehensive sex education say it's a subject that parents, not government, should teach.

State Rep. Alyce Clarke, D-Jackson, pushed for years to enact a law that would allow comprehensive sex education to be taught in schools. She said Mississippi has an epidemic of "almost-babies having babies."

"It destroys so many lives," Clarke said. "Most young girls who get pregnant are going to slow down their education, if not drop out of school."

Clarke said when she taught home economics in Washington County in the 1970s, she took it upon herself to teach students about the health consequences of sex, and the responsibilities involved.

She said someone told her principal what she was doing, and she thought she'd get in trouble. Clarke recalled that the principal told her, "'Don't stop.'"

