

## **Editorial: Mississippi's biggest problem**

### **Teen births: State lawmakers should heed outgoing Gov. Haley Barbour's concern about births to unwed teen mothers.**

Staff Reports

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Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour recently sat down with a writer for The Associated Press to reflect on his two terms as governor.

Asked if he could snap his fingers and solve one problem in Mississippi, what would it be, Barbour, who leaves office at noon on Jan. 10, said, "Illegitimacy."

In this day and time, "illegitimacy" is a term that has fallen out of favor because it stigmatizes a child born out of wedlock.

But whether it is called "illegitimacy" or "teen pregnancy," Barbour was on the money by tying the issue to many of the state's social ills.

"Nothing else is close," Barbour said.

The governor pointed out that 55 percent of the children born in Mississippi last year were born out of wedlock.

Some of those kids will have both parents providing support and nurturing. The vast majority, however, won't.

They will be reared by single mothers, who will need government assistance or will work in low-paying jobs.

As Barbour pointed out, these children are six times more likely to be raised in poverty, which spawns a host of other social ills, ranging from poor academic achievement to health issues stemming from inadequate diets. They are more likely to drop out of school or end up incarcerated.

All of these maladies end up costing taxpayers in the long term.

That's not to say that children who are raised by single mothers or grow up poor can't succeed. There are plenty of examples in which children raised in this type of situation have become successful.

But numerous studies have shown that the majority won't.

We've seen the stifling effects of out-of-wedlock births in Mississippi and Memphis,

where the rate is about 60 percent.

The resulting poverty, unemployment and underemployment, low academic achievement, health issues and crime are a continuous drag on efforts to make Mississippi and Memphis a state and city of choice.

As Barbour conceded in his interview, abstinence-only sex education programs don't work. Teenagers tend to be rebellious, and they like to experiment.

Too many teens, girls and boys, aren't having frank talks with their parents about sex and the consequences of having a child out of wedlock.

That is why comprehensive sex education in schools is important.

When the Mississippi Legislature convenes next month and new governor Phil Bryant takes the helm of state government, we can only hope they read Barbour's interview.

When they start determining legislative priorities, the out-of-wedlock issue should be on the list.



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