

Too many teen moms shunted aside by schools

By the Editorial
Board

Imagine this bleak scenario: You're a 15-year-old girl in Fresno. You're pregnant, unmarried and you're either from a low-income or immigrant family. Probably both, the statistics say. You may be a foster child.

The educational deck is stacked solidly against you. Your chance at high school graduation, and thus college and middle-class life, is severely diminished.

If you live in the Central Valley, the public schools charged with educating may well push you aside.

A new report by the ACLU of California found that depressing situation isn't just possible, it's happening in Fresno, Madera and Tulare counties – targeted by researchers because they have some of the highest teen pregnancy rates in California. National figures indicate that teens who have children have a dismal 30 percent graduation rate.

And with a fundamental shift in the way the state's public schools are funded – from using categoricals to pay for specific programs to a formula based on poverty levels and the number of English language learners – things could get even worse in future years.

That's why this report, "[Breaking Down Educational Barriers for California's Pregnant & Parenting Students](#)," is so important. Education policymakers and educators across the state ought to download the report, and read it.

Or, better yet, do something about it. The state's commitment to programs supporting pregnant and parenting teens, such as child care and parenting classes, has waned at a much faster rate than teen pregnancy has declined. That's the conclusion that the authors reached after examining 22 districts. They found that only seven have support programs for pregnant or parenting teenagers.

As a result, schools have been directly or indirectly funneling teen mothers into continuation high schools alongside students with severe behavioral issues, or into independent study. Neither offer the kind of academic support needed to make it college.

"We're hoping to use the report as an advocacy tool, recognizing that schools and students are not aware of rights and protections in Title IX and state law," said Angélica Salceda, co-author of the report and an Equal Justice Works fellow with the ACLU of Northern California.

Assemblywoman Cristina Garcia, D-Bell Gardens, is planning to introduce a bill to require schools to provide lactation accommodations if they have nursing mothers as students. That may sound like a luxury, but as the report points out, it is a very real barrier to teen mothers. It is one of the recommended actions the report advocates.

Other recommendations for the state Department of Education, legislators and school districts to adopt range from using Local Control Funding Formula money to develop support programs to loosening strict absence policies for teen mothers.

The teen pregnancy rates have, happily, declined nationwide, with California rates even lower. But there are [thousands of teen mothers in California](#) and, as the report notes, many schools are failing them. Having a baby isn't an academic problem any more than having a disability is, and it shouldn't be treated like one.