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The Challenge of Preventing Teen Pregnancy in Texas

Forrest L. Alton

SC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, falton@teenpregnancysc.org

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Perhaps more than with any other public health issue, teen pregnancy is inextricably connected to a host of personal, social, and economic costs. Therefore, it stands to reason, and is indeed well documented that a reduction in teen pregnancy and subsequent reduction in teen births correlates to myriad improvements in personal (e.g., high school completion, experience of abuse and neglect, etc); social (e.g., number of children in single parent families, life-long poverty, incarceration rates, etc); and economic (e.g., Medicaid costs, decreased tax revenue, etc) outcomes.

Fortunately, teen pregnancy rates in a number of states and the United States have decreased substantially in the past decade or so. Specifically, the teen pregnancy rate nationwide decreased 37% between 1988 and 2005.¹ Unfortunately, these decreases have not been as substantial in some states, including Texas.¹ Over the same time period, teen pregnancy rates in Texas decreased but only by about 25%. As a result, Texas currently has the 4th highest teen pregnancy rate in the country.² These data taken in conjunction with the large population size of the state, 7,621,714 youth under the age of 20 live in Texas³, obviously results in an extremely high number of teen pregnancies and teen births.² In fact, in 2005, more than 73,000 teen girls in Texas became pregnant resulting in 52,000 births to young women under 20 – the latter being a number higher than any other state. Teen pregnancies in Texas account for 10% of all teen pregnancies in the United States.²

If there is a serious interest in reducing teen pregnancy rates nationwide, then attention must be paid to Texas. Enter the development of the Texas Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, as described by Dr. Wiley in the current issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children*. In fairness, Texas is entering rarified air as currently only 17 other states have a statewide organization established to focus on the issue of teen pregnancy prevention.⁴ National organizations such as Advocates for Youth and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy have been actively working across the country to increase this number and strengthen existing programs. Given the severity of the issue, the troubling data in Texas, scattered efforts, challenged policies and limited investment, it stands to reason that formation of such an organization in Texas is long overdue.

As mentioned by the author, it is fair to assume and expect that there are excellent individual programs targeting teen pregnancy prevention underway in Texas. However successful these programs may be in a vacuum, the sad truth in Texas is that the efforts are uncoordinated and insufficient to make an impact on the overall state teen pregnancy

rate without a uniform voice and organization to provide structure. This is true across the country and was in South Carolina prior to the formation of the South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

It is worth noting that my experiences working to prevent teen pregnancy in South Carolina over the last decade lack very significant barriers that exist in the state of Texas – the vast landscape and volume of the population. Texas has 1,000 school districts to South Carolina's 86; 254 counties to South Carolina's 46; and a quick calculation of land mass suggests that more than eight South Carolinas would fit squarely inside the borders of Texas. Nonetheless, the issues and challenges facing each state specific to preventing teen pregnancy are quite similar.

The authors and founders of the Texas Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy are to be commended for the formation of a strategic plan that clearly outlines the work ahead. All of the presented goals and the specific steps that follow them in the article appear to be very appropriate for the task at hand and provide a good starting place for statewide efforts. Given limitations of time and resources, it will be challenging to “be all things for all people” from day one, necessitating the need for prioritization and focus.

This of course begs the question “what to do first?” From our experiences in South Carolina, I am offering three critical need areas of focus. First, the importance of hiring the *right* person (Executive Director) is emphasized by the authors, supported by national experts⁴, and cannot be overstated. In order for this effort to ever gain traction someone needs to wake up every morning thinking about how best to prevent teen pregnancy in Texas, be willing to have courageous conversations with state leaders, and facilitate coordinated efforts among those already working on this issue. Not everyone can do this work especially at the ground level. Second, the need to advocate aggressively for the implementation of evidence-based curricula, especially in school settings, is urgent and essential. Texas is one of only 11 states in the entire country that does not currently require either sex education or HIV education to be taught in its public schools.⁵ If sex education is taught in the public schools, Texas only requires that the information be age appropriate.⁵ The result is that most students in Texas public schools are receiving nothing more in the classroom than promotion of sexual abstinence until marriage⁶ despite the fact that nearly seven of every 10 students in Texas public schools will have had sex prior to graduation.⁷ As noted by the authors, there is extensive research available on sex education curricula that are effective in reducing risky adolescent sexual behavior, and continued avoidance of said evidence is irresponsible.

Finally, no matter a large state like Texas or a small state like South Carolina, teen pregnancy isn't prevented from behind a desk and isn't prevented solely by a statewide organization. Increasing the capacity of those doing this work at the local level, such as but not limited to parents, schools, institutions of faith, youth-serving community organizations, is not only important as the authors suggest, it continues to be the quintessential characteristic and hallmark of success of the South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

The challenge of reducing teen pregnancy is daunting and indeed 'everything is bigger in Texas.' Yet, there is momentum and a cadre of committed individuals who have formally assembled as a Board of Directors to lead the effort. I had the pleasure of attending Texas's first annual statewide meeting on teen pregnancy in 2010 and witnessed the passion of more than 250 individuals from across the state ready to take action. What they need is an organization to provide guidance, oversight and a statewide voice of leadership - all things that the Texas Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy can provide. The contents of this article suggest that process is well underway. What is also needed is a collective group of courageous and committed individuals in Texas (perhaps the readers of this journal) who are willing to step up, speak out and support these efforts. My hope is that this and other journals will continue to disseminate the success stories of the Texas Campaign and other state campaigns working in unison to prevent teen pregnancy. At the same time, I hope that readers understand no single organization can take on this challenge alone. It will take a sustained investment from all of us to protect the nation's most valuable resource, our young people.

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