



## **Getting to Graduation and Beyond: Improving The Life Chances of Pregnant and Parenting Teens and Their Families**

*A Policy Brief from Public Citizens for Children and Youth*

### ***Introduction***

On any given day, Philadelphia is home to 10-12,000 teen parents.<sup>1</sup> These young parents face difficult struggles as they approach adulthood with the added responsibility of raising children. They are at risk of dropping out of high school, making their and their children's lives more vulnerable to negative life outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a 2006 longitudinal study of the School District of Philadelphia estimated that nearly 1 in 5 female students who were freshmen in 1996 had given birth to at least one baby within four years after starting high school.<sup>3</sup> The overwhelming majority of these young mothers, approximately 70 percent, had not graduated from high school after four years. Unless these young women return to school, their chances – and their children's prospects – for success in life are limited.

In recent years, changes in the economy and shifting needs of the workplace have deepened the risk to these families. Fifty years ago, most jobs in Pennsylvania could be filled by workers who had not graduated from high school; today as our economy has become

increasingly knowledge-based, good job prospects for uneducated workers are rare. Through it all, there is an increased recognition that teen parents' quitting school is too costly for the individual, the family and our society. With this in mind, groups throughout the country have been striving to lower the teen birth rate and develop policies and practices to improve the likelihood that parenting teens are able to secure an education that will help best prepare them for life.

In order to be successful, every community has to act collectively towards halting a rise in the numbers of children giving birth to children, identifying young people who are about to become parents and, in turn, helping convince them to stay in school and connect them with needed services. These

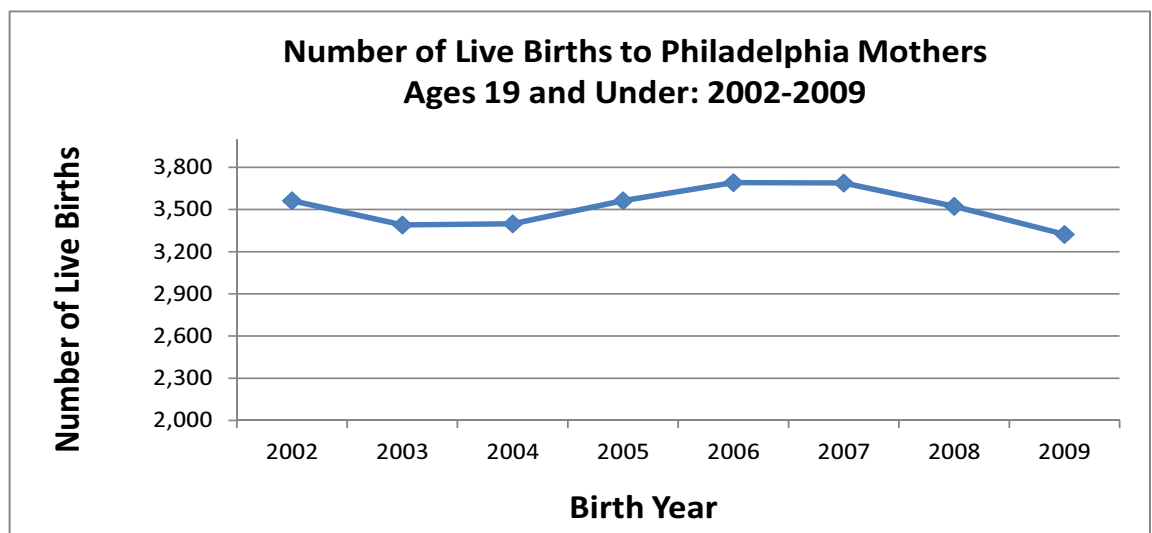
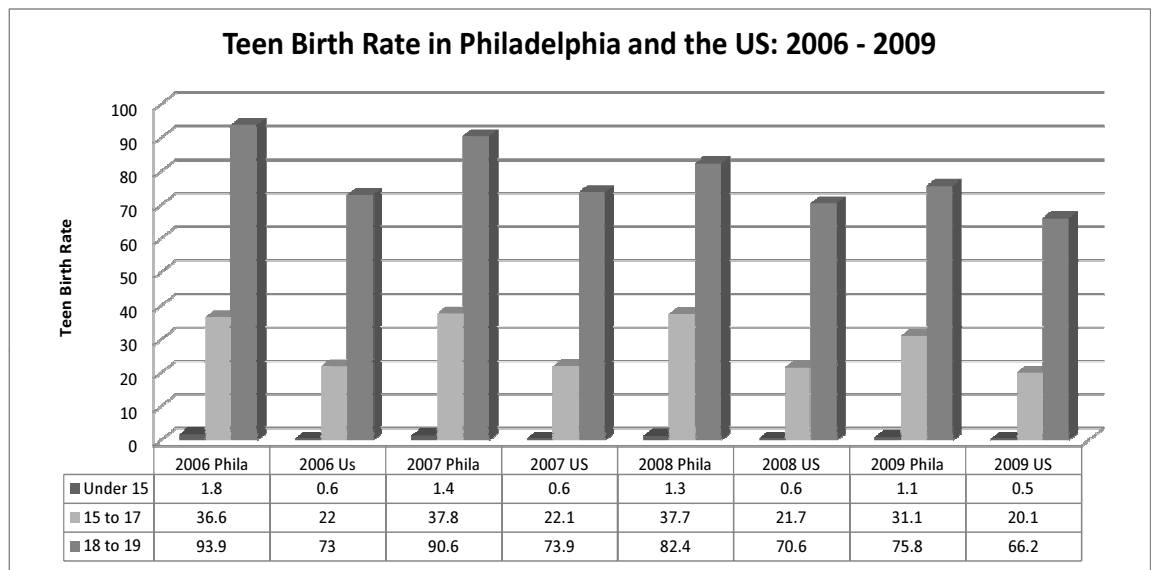
are the goals of PCCY's Pregnant and Parenting Teens Project. Challenged by both a fragile economy and an increasingly anti-public spending political environment, the project can, nonetheless, report progress in changing policies and practices that benefit these young families.



Several public institutions and programs in Philadelphia provide support to pregnant and parenting youth to help them remain in or return to school. PCCY reported on some of their efforts in a February, 2007 policy brief.<sup>4</sup> Now, almost five years later, this paper examines the current status of public supports devoted to assisting pregnant and parenting youth in the pursuit of their high school diplomas.

### *The Teen Birthrate is on the Decline*

Locally there has been a stabilization, and in some age cohorts, a reduction in teen births. There are approximately 3,500 births annually to Philadelphia teens.<sup>5</sup> The city, as well as the nation, seems to be experiencing success in lowering the teen birth rate.<sup>6,7</sup> Last year, the teen birth rate in the United States reached its lowest level ever. That is good news. How successful we are in keeping these young parents in school or having them return to school will have a profound impact on their lives.



## *Public Agencies and Programs Are Reaching Out*

### ELECT/CTC and the School District of Philadelphia

ELECT/CTC (Education Leading to Employment and Career Training/Cradle to Classroom) is the primary program in Pennsylvania's public schools charged with helping pregnant and parenting youth stay in school and preparing them for employment or higher education after high school graduation. ELECT/CTC is funded by the state and administered through intermediate units or school districts. In Philadelphia, the Philadelphia School District works with the non-profit organization Philadelphia Communities in Schools to operate ELECT/CTC. ELECT/CTC staff provide academic support and case management services connecting students to vital resources such as child care and health care.

Staff make home visits to educate students on parenting skills and child development, bring students homework when they are on maternity leave and check in when they have been absent. Today, Philadelphia's ELECT/CTC programs are in 32 Philadelphia schools (many are in the neighborhood high schools), up from 25 schools five years ago. Five of the 32 sites are in alternative schools, many of which were opened in the last few years specifically to assist students most at-risk of dropping out or those who dropped out and wanted to return to school. Many of these students are over-age and under-credited; many are pregnant or parenting.

Among several goals of the ELECT/CTC program, a major objective is helping at least 75 percent of its students graduate.<sup>8</sup> Over the last four years, ELECT/CTC participants have consistently exceeded this goal with approximately 85 percent of its students earning their diploma.

The program strives to help students maintain or increase their grade point average, prevent repeat pregnancies and, starting this year, assist 50 percent of its graduated students in finding a job or a job training program.

While the program is successful with students it serves, its reach had not been as extensive as hoped. Over the last several years, the Philadelphia ELECT/CTC program was threatened with funding cuts due to low enrollment. Since that time, the program has steadily increased the number of pregnant and parenting teens it serves and now surpasses its expected enrollment numbers. Program enrollment doubled from 749 students during the 2006-07 school year to 1,488 in 2009-10.<sup>9</sup> During this last summer (2011), the program's funding was threatened again due to state budget constraints; many organizations and individuals successfully advocated in support of the program and its improved results.

While improved, Philadelphia Communities in Schools still struggles with identifying and enrolling students. Philadelphia Communities in Schools reports that many pregnant and parenting students are leaving the School District-run neighborhood comprehensive high schools, where most of the ELECT/CTC programs are based, and attending alternative schools with which Communities in Schools has not traditionally partnered.



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ELECT/CTC has established programs in these newer, alternative schools yet seeking and finding these young women and men and setting up programs in these smaller settings is challenging.

### The Philadelphia Department of Public Health: *City Health Centers*

The overwhelming majority of young women who become pregnant in Philadelphia do secure prenatal care. In 2009, the Philadelphia Department of Public Health stepped up its efforts to connect these young people with supportive services to stay in school. The Department operates eight community-based health centers that, in addition to providing primary care and dental services for children and adults, also offer prenatal care and family planning services. PCCY collaborated with the city health centers to develop questions on their intake form for health center staff to ask pregnant and parenting teen patients about

their school status and then refer them to appropriate educational support services (such as ELECT/CTC).<sup>10</sup>

Other initiatives specifically targeted for youth are in place at a few of the city health centers. Three health centers are home to youth clinics where a social worker serving as a youth clinic coordinator assesses teens' health and social service needs and connects them with the appropriate supports. Every time a primary care provider sees a teen, he/she automatically refers them to the youth clinic. The coordinator questions teens about their sexual activity, whether they are experiencing depression, their school and employment status and whether they have access to enough food. In response to an increase in signs of sexual and physical abuse among youth visiting the youth clinics, the coordinator addresses these issues as well. The majority of young people seen at the youth clinics are not pregnant or parenting, but the clinic is in contact with school re-entry programs and refers students when needed.

### **Outreach Innovation**

Based on the knowledge that most pregnant teens obtain prenatal care, in addition to working with the city health centers to routinely ask these youth about their school status and refer them to related resources, PCCY designed and distributed posters publicizing District Re-Engagement Center services, targeted at pregnant and parenting youth, to the city and private health centers as well as other public places where teens typically gather.

The poster depicts a young woman in her graduation cap and gown celebrating her achievement with her young son and the message, "It's not just about you anymore - you're not alone; help is available." The poster conveys optimism and possibility along with concrete information about the Re-Engagement Center. City health center staff have new tools to raise awareness among patients about services to re-enroll in school; questions on the intake form prompting them to begin a conversation about a youth's school status, reinforcing the importance of staying in or finishing school. They also refer youth to available educational resources.



The Philadelphia Department of Public Health: *Healthy Start*

Healthy Start is a program administered by the Division of Maternal, Child and Family Health at the Department of Health. Its main goal is to help reduce infant mortality in areas of the City with the highest mortality rates. The program began in 1992 and currently serves women in West, Southwest and North Philadelphia. Healthy Start facilitates connections among community organizations to provide health, educational and economic supports and services to pregnant women, new mothers and babies including preventive health care, parenting classes and support groups, case management and home visiting services, psychosocial assessments and referrals for behavioral health assistance.

Healthy Start does not specifically target pregnant or parenting teens, yet from June 2007 through May 2011, teenagers have comprised approximately 40 percent of program participants; on average over the last four years approximately 340 women have participated and approximately 125 have been teens.<sup>11</sup>

Healthy Start-funded organizations are expected to routinely question all their young participants about their school status and encourage them to continue their education and refer teens to school-related resources such as ELECT/CTC. Healthy Start is in the process of updating its assessment form to include questions about participants' school status and referral needs. Healthy Start organizations are in a prime position to guide and connect pregnant and parenting teens to the supports they need to stay in and return to school.



Department of Human Services

The Department of Human Services (DHS) is Philadelphia's child welfare and protective agency. Since 2001, a "pregnancy protocol" has been in place at DHS which calls for a social worker or foster care agency provider to notify the DHS health management unit of all pregnant youth to track their prevalence and ensure they receive necessary medical treatment. DHS recently established an Education Center to provide school-related information and resources to DHS staff to better support the youth they serve.

Currently, DHS does not keep aggregate data on pregnant and/or parenting youth in their care. Despite data limitations, DHS in its prevention and support roles, has increased its outreach to needy teens by providing them with information and access to some services. As DHS and the School District come together, more youth are better served.

**The Creation of New Structures and Programs**

Project U-Turn

Project U-Turn is Philadelphia's main initiative to address and coordinate efforts on the dropout problem. Established in 2004 with national and local funding, Project U-Turn linked the School District of Philadelphia with numerous civic, public and private institutions and organizations to conduct research and implement practices to increase the number of students graduating from high school.

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Among its many accomplishments, Project U-Turn helped establish the Re-Engagement Center (see below) and helped initiate the creation of thousands of additional alternative, education slots primarily for older youth who had dropped out of school, allowing them to obtain their high school diplomas.

Data are not specifically available for pregnant and parenting students, but the on-time graduation rate (graduation in four years) for all Philadelphia School District students has increased from 52 percent in 2005 to 58 percent in 2010. The six-year graduation rate, reflecting students who struggled in school but persevered, has increased from 57 percent in 2005 to 63 percent in 2008, the last year for which data are available.<sup>12</sup>

#### The Re-Engagement Center and Alternative Education Programs

Until three years ago, the procedures for returning to school after dropping out were virtually unknown to students, parents and District staff alike. No concerted or coordinated effort existed to help youth who left school finish their education. Former students who tried to re-enroll at their old school may have been told they could not return or that they could return but first needed to complete certain tasks (i.e. procure a copy of their transcript, undergo testing to ascertain appropriate grade level).



Former students trying to re-enroll at School District headquarters likely would have received a different set of tasks to complete. For most of the District's history, there was no clear, standardized or centralized process to assist students wanting to return to school.

Three years ago students also did not have many choices about how they could complete their education. Youth could return to their former high school – where they were now older than the current students at their grade level. The District offered some classes in the evening so these older, returning students could learn alongside their peers and to better accommodate their job and family schedules. There were not enough of these evening (“Twilight”) slots to meet demand. These twilight schools did not have capacity to meet the need.

Project U-Turn collaborators worked together to design a “one-stop” shop, the Re-Engagement Center, to assist youth re-enrolling in school and to support current struggling students obtain their high school diploma or GED. Re-Engagement Center staff have access to students’ academic records and can access District information regarding credits accumulated, and credits still needed to graduate. Re-Engagement Center staff are also familiar with District policies and procedures, and can advise youth on what they must do to re-enroll in school. One of the Re-Engagement Center’s most important functions is to refer youth to an appropriate program to complete their education – either back to a traditional high school or to an alternative education program.

While the Re-Engagement Center was being developed, the School District and other Project U-Turn collaborators simultaneously worked to design and advocate for funds to create many new alternative, accelerated

high schools with available placements for thousands of students to work toward their high school diplomas.

From its beginning, the Re-Engagement Center has served young parents or pregnant youth. Approximately 40 percent of youth utilizing these services at School District headquarters were either young parents (about 33 percent) or pregnant (8 percent).<sup>13</sup> A second Re-Engagement Center opened in August 2010 in the Hunting Park section of Philadelphia to create an access point inside a community, specifically in a Latino neighborhood. In its first year, about 33 percent of youth utilizing the Hunting Park location's services were parenting or pregnant.

The Re-Engagement Centers assist pregnant and parenting teens with finding child care and completing applications for subsidy to pay for child care facilitated by Child Care Information Services. Over the last three years, both Re-Engagement Centers have reported that between 12-15 percent of youth they served indicated they needed child care services.

## Continuing to Build and Advocate for Increased Supports

In the summer of 2011, the Re-Engagement Center in Hunting Park was closed after a year of operation due to severe budget cuts, and staffing for the main Re-Engagement Center was threatened. Project U-turn, recognizing the importance of the Center in keeping teens in school, dedicated some of its funding to assure needed staff support.

Many of the alternative schools were slated to be cut as well. Students, with the active support of organizations like Project U-Turn, Youth United for Change and PCCY,

joined in testifying and opposing these cuts at rallies in City Hall and at the School District headquarters.

Many pregnant and parenting youth testified about how these schools had provided them with the flexibility, courage and hope to continue their education. These actions, coupled with the support of Philadelphia's Mayor and City Council, moved the city to increase its funding and saved most of these schools.

*"To hear young parents at the hearing talk about returning to school for their children's sake was a gift and an imperative."*

- An observer at City Council



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## Recommendations

There is increased recognition of the importance of young parents staying in school, graduating and being well-prepared for adulthood. While it is heartening that both the local and national teen birth rate is on the decline, measures to assure a continued reduction must be strengthened. The tried and true as well as new public initiatives and structures that have served pregnant and parenting youth over these last several years are encouraging, but they must be expanded and strengthened. In spite of the recent economic downturn, investing in the education and lives of two generations, teen parents and their children, must become priorities for all levels of government.

### To do that:

#### **1. We must recognize that what gets counted counts.**

a. Overall: We must do a better job of tracking and counting the number of youth who leave school and were (or soon after became) pregnant and/or parenting. This count will take the combined efforts of schools and health providers, of the Health Department, the Department of Human Services, the School District and many other youth-serving programs.

b. City Health Centers: Health Center staff must continue to ask their pregnant and parenting teen patients about their school status and inform and encourage them to seek school-related resources to return to school. The teens' responses and the number of referrals staff make should be aggregated to better identify need and design interventions.

c. Department of Human Services: DHS should count the number of pregnant and parenting youth in its care. The agency should keep aggregate data identifying pregnant and parenting youth accessing

services from the DHS Education Center. DHS staff should continue to be trained about Education Center services and staff working with pregnant and parenting youth should continue to be encouraged to contact the Center.

d. Re-Engagement Center: The number of pregnant and parenting youth should continue to be identified and counted. Center staff should also continue to help connect them to the unique services they need – including child care, health insurance, health care and parenting supports. The Center should also track the needs of teens that they are not able to respond to and report on these needs to Project U-Turn and the public.

**2. We must recognize the importance of programs that focus on reaching out and supporting pregnant and parenting teens. ELECT/CTC must continue to grow its capacity and flexibility to outreach, identify and enroll youth and adapt its services to the ever-changing needs of pregnant and parenting youth.**

**3. We must continue to increase the number of alternative educational options for pregnant and parenting youth.**

**4. We must support increased quality child care and child care subsidy for children of teens.**

**5. We should explore a broad-based public awareness campaign to encourage pregnant and parenting youth to stay in or return to school.**

**6. We should explore and seek to replicate programs across the country that have successfully engaged both public and private organizations to help youth stay in or return to school such as community health centers and hospital-based prenatal clinics.**



**7. We must build and expand partnerships between public and private agencies that reach out and help these young families.**

Just as the message in our poster conveys, “You’re not alone anymore, help is available”- so too public agencies demonstrate that there are important results to be achieved by collaborating with other agencies to support pregnant and parenting youth and improve their life chances.



<sup>1</sup> PCCY analysis of Philadelphia Department of Public Health number of teen births.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman, S.D. (2006). *By the numbers: The public costs of teen childbearing*. Washington D.C.: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

<sup>3</sup> Neild, R.C. and Balfanz, R. (2006). *Unfulfilled promise: The dimensions and characteristics of Philadelphia’s dropout crisis, 2000-2005*.

<sup>4</sup> Public Citizens for Children and Youth. (2007). “Reconnecting pregnant and parenting youth to educational opportunities.”

<sup>5</sup> Bureau of Health Statistics and Research. *County Health Profiles, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011*, State of Pennsylvania. Harrisburg, PA: Author.

Retrieved from <http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=596007&mode=2>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton, B.E., Martin, J.A., Ventura S.J. (2011). *Births: Preliminary data for 2010*. National vital statistics reports web release; Vol 60 No 2. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

<sup>8</sup> Center for Schools and Communities. Personal communication. (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Although city health center staff ask these questions and teens’ responses are recorded in their individual charts, their responses are not aggregated; therefore, it cannot be reported how many of these pregnant and parenting youth are enrolled in school and how many were referred to education-related support services.

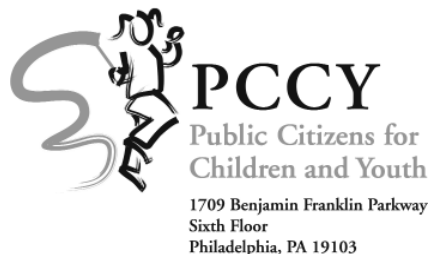
<sup>11</sup> Philadelphia Department of Public Health, Healthy Start. Personal communication. (2011).

<sup>12</sup> Socolar, P. (2011). 6-year graduation rate grows to 63%. *The Philadelphia Public School Notebook*. 18 (5).

<sup>13</sup> School District of Philadelphia Re-Engagement Center. Personal communication. (2010).

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About PCCY: Founded in 1980, Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) serves as the region's leading child advocacy organization and works to improve the lives and life chances of its children. Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects and budget analysis, PCCY seeks to watch out and speak out for children and families.



PCCY undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including child care, public education, child health, juvenile justice and child welfare.

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