Prioritizing Education for Expectant and Parenting Youth

Overview of the Pregnancy Assistance Fund

Finding ways to address the diverse needs of expectant and parenting youth and their families (EPY) to improve their health, education, and well-being is a long-standing priority of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The HHS Office of Population Affairs (OPA) funded the Pregnancy Assistance Fund (PAF) grant program from 2010 to 2020. The PAF program supported states and tribes to provide a wide range of services in settings such as high schools, community service centers, and/or institutions of higher education.

PAF services focused on five areas: (1) personal health (e.g., case management, prenatal care, health insurance enrollment support, behavioral health, violence prevention); (2) child health (e.g., home visiting, nutrition, access to healthcare, well-child visits); (3) education and employment (e.g., tutoring, academic support, assistance with college applications, employment and job-readiness training); (4) concrete supports (e.g., food, housing, transportation, baby supplies including diapers, cribs, car seats, etc.); and (5) parenting supports (e.g., parenting and healthy relationship education, child development education, child care). PAF grantees determined which areas to focus on to improve outcomes for EPY in the areas of health, parenting, education, and economic stability.

About the Study

HHS/OPA contracted Abt Associates to identify successful strategies and lessons learned from the Pregnancy Assistance Fund grant program (see https://opa.hhs.gov/research-evaluation/pregnancy-assistance-fund-paf-program-evaluations/evaluation-key-strategies). The study produced six topical briefs and corresponding in-depth case studies. The team identified six topics from a review of grantee documents and input from OPA staff. They reflect the range of approaches PAF grantees took to best serve EPY needs. The topics are (1) serving system-involved (justice or child welfare) youth; (2) serving youth in Tribal communities; (3) serving youth in rural communities; (4) cross-sector partnerships; (5) policy and systems-level strategies; and (6) strategies for improving educational outcomes. For each topic, the study selected grantees from the pool of 26 grantees funded in the most recent cohort (2018-2020) and in at least one other cohort.

The briefs and case studies draw from review of grantee documents, performance data, and semi-structured phone interviews with grantee and grantee partner staff.

Focus of this Brief

A key objective of the PAF program was to improve educational outcomes for EPY. To underscore this objective, OPA provided guidance for potential settings for PAF projects, prioritizing educational institutions such as high schools and institutions of higher education (IHEs). EPY face challenges that can affect their educational attainment and completion, and as a result, their employment and economic mobility. Teen parents are less likely to complete high school than their peers who do not have children. Only half of women who become parents in their teens complete high school by age 22 compared with 90% of those who do not have children during their teenage years.[1] Of those EPY who do receive high school diplomas, even fewer continue to post-secondary education. Being or becoming a parent while attending college can also present challenges that affect educational attainment. Of women who became parents while attending community college, 61% dropped out, many citing numerous challenges including childcare as the reason for leaving school.[2] These challenges make the efforts of PAF grantees critical to helping EPY thrive.

This brief focuses on the experiences of four PAF grantees and their efforts to support educational retention and achievement among EPY. It discusses the challenges grantees encountered and the variety of important strategies and approaches they employed to support EPY in meeting their educational goals.

Key Findings:

- PAF grantees faced the twin challenges of EPY's need for concrete support and disengagement from school in supporting them in their educational goals.

- In educational settings, lack of awareness of EPY and difficulties identifying those in need of educational support presented challenges to grantees.

- Implementing programming in school settings strengthened the focus on educational goals; implementing in community-based settings provided access to EPY not currently engaged in school.

- PAF grantees dedicated significant resources to raising awareness of the needs of EPY (both in school and community settings) and identifying and prioritizing this population for PAF programming.

- A combination of individual and group support helped EPY meet their educational goals.

Four Grantees Supporting Education Among EPY

The study team interviewed PAF grantees in Oregon, Wisconsin, New Mexico and Minnesota and a purposive selection of local implementation partners. Two projects led by state Departments of Education focused on comprehensive case management and tailoring the school environment to support EPY in high school settings. The other two projects, housed within the Department of Health, focused on educational progress and attainment to proactively address factors that predicate health outcomes for young parents and their families, one in community college settings and the other in community-based settings.

- **Minnesota Department of Health** oversaw the Minnesota Expectant and Parenting Student Program implemented by three partner organizations[a] (the City of Minneapolis, Kaniyohi County, and the Northwest Indian Community Development Center) serving seven communities. The program operated in high schools, community service centers and institutions of higher education. The Minnesota Department of Health provided oversight, training, and technical assistance to the partner organizations.

- **New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED)** provided services to EPY enrolled in 29 high schools (in 18 counties) using the school-based Graduation, Reality, And Dual-role Skills (GRADS) program for education, peer support, and case management.[b] Its primary sub-awardee was the statewide GRADS agency, which oversaw the individual GRADS sites directly. Other partners included a statewide agency focused on school-based healthcare and an agency that provided food and nutrition support. NMPED facilitated training and statewide convenings to support coordinated service delivery for EPY and the project.

- **Oregon Department of Public Health** partnered with four Oregon community colleges to implement the *Support to Expectant*

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and Parenting Students (STEPS) Project. The project was designed to serve students through a linked system of community college and community-based services and supports. Each of the community colleges served rural communities and had higher than average teen pregnancy rates. The Oregon Department of Public Health provided oversight, training, technical assistance, and support for evaluation.

- **Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction** partnered with local education agencies in 8 communities to implement the *In-School Pregnant/Parenting Interventions, Resources and Education (InSPIRE) Project* in 65 high schools. The project included a state leadership team and an Expectant and Parenting Youth Advisory Group in each funded community. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction facilitated training, technical assistance, and evaluation support.

Profiles of Four Grantees Prioritizing Education for Expectant and Parenting Youth

	MINNESOTA	NEW MEXICO	OREGON	WISCONSIN
Grantee (state agency)	Minnesota Department of Health	New Mexico Public Education Department	Oregon Health Authority, Public Health Division	Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
PAF Grant Periods (fiscal year)	2010-2020	2010-2016; 2018-2019	2017-2020	2013-2020
Total Youth Served (annual)	**281**	**320**	**358**	**331**
Service Areas	Seven communities	26 school-based GRADS sites in 18 New Mexico counties.	Four community colleges	8 school districts with 65 high schools
Key Partners	• Large city health department • County department of health and human services • Tribal intermediary organization	• Statewide GRADS agency (which oversees GRADS sites) • Statewide TA and service providers for school-based healthcare, fatherhood support, and nutrition	• Community colleges • In-school departments and groups providing services such as advising, tutoring, and material supports • Community-based organization that coordinated service providers	• School districts • Local community partners for social supports such as healthcare, parenting courses, and career development
Primary Approach(es)	Case management (including referrals and care coordination)	School-based approach, through GRADS program (education, case management, peer support)	Community-based approach, through community colleges (education, case management, peer support)	School- based approach, through school districts (case management)

Sources: Grant applications, progress reports, performance measures reported to OPA, and information provided in interviews.

Challenges to Supporting EPY in Pursuing Their Educational Goals

Grantees and their partners encountered several immediate challenges as they worked to better support EPY in meeting their educational goals.

The pressing need for concrete supports, such as childcare and transportation, posed immediate challenges to EPY's educational enrollment and attendance

While the need for concrete support is not necessarily specific to EPY who are enrolled in school, it can create significant obstacles for educational pursuits. Finding reliable and affordable childcare was identified by grantees and implementation partners as one of the main challenges for student parents. Other challenges to attendance included finding dependable transportation to and from school, especially in more rural areas. In some community college settings, failure to comply with strict attendance policies meant EPY were unable to receive course credit, making it even more difficult to complete their degrees. PAF programs had to prioritize these needs for concrete support.

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> *So, yeah, I would say trying to figure out the childcare issue, figuring out both childcare and transportation issues, that feeds into attendance, which feeds into graduation. So, it's sort of a cyclic kind of – if you take one piece out of it, then it starts to cave in. -Grantee*

EPY's lack of engagement in school posed a challenge for supporting educational progress

Teen pregnancy and early parenthood can result in the interruption or termination of formal education. One implementation partner emphasized that EPY are at risk of chronic absenteeism and may lack proficiency in subjects such as math and English. EPY may often struggle to manage and organize the many competing demands on a parent, making it even more difficult to stay in school. For students who have dropped out, these competing demands can be particularly daunting for efforts to re-enroll and engage with schools. Disengagement was most evident in community settings where young parents were out of school and weren't necessarily motivated or able to reconnect with schools on their own. Grantees and their partners found that overcoming EPY disengagement from school was a key first step in promoting educational goals.

Lack of awareness of EPY within some educational settings and difficulties identifying EPY for educational support made it difficult for grantees to support this population

Implementation partners emphasized the challenges of identification and recruitment for the program. The ability to work with young parents to advance their education hinges on the ability to identify and enroll them for services. In community college settings in particular, staff were in many instances unaware of students who were parenting, making it difficult to identify these students and work with them. While data show that these community colleges had the highest concentration of under 24-year-olds who were parents, college policies on collecting and sharing information meant that the implementation partners did not have access to information about which students were parents.

PAF Project Approaches to and Strategies for Supporting EPY in Meeting Their Educational Goals

To improve the educational achievement of EPY, each of the grantees crafted approaches that addressed the needs of EPY within the local context and complemented statewide efforts to support them. The strategies described below were key to helping EPY meet their educational goals. Projects focused on creating supports for student parents particularly at risk for academic failure; some emphasized programming that built community and social supports among student parents; others provided expanded case management to help transition from high school to college.

Implementing within school settings gave grantees access to expectant and parenting students and helped them focus on educational goals

The setting of the project played a critical role in grantees' ability to address educational outcomes. Three of the four projects operated within educational systems. There were several benefits to this strategy. The mission and goals of these educational systems were to advance the educational outcomes of students, which aligned with the PAF projects' goals for EPY. Program visibility within schools and program staff with connections to key school staff served to reinforce the importance of education. The EPY that the projects interacted with were already, by nature of being in those education systems, enrolled in and invested in education.

> **PAF projects expanded supports for EPY in educational settings by:**
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> - **enhancing staff and service offerings (e.g., adding a full-time clinical psychologist, academic tutors in EPY-specific charter schools)**
> - **providing a coordinator to facilitate access to services**
> - **increasing the reach of an existing statewide school-based intervention for EPY**

Grantees also capitalized on the infrastructure of the educational settings. Community colleges and high schools had curricula, resources, and instructors that were already in place and available to students. In one of the community colleges, project staff worked directly with faculty and administrators to identify student-centered services and programs already in place and then worked to tailor these services and programs specifically for EPY. For example, community colleges had tutoring, mentoring, and advising departments that were accessible to all students. On-site PAF project coordinators were able to connect EPY directly to those existing programs and services and provide a more immediate response to issues as they arose. Across the grantees, there was a general observation that EPY can often have one or two seemingly small barriers (or issues that are relatively easy to resolve) that derail them from achieving their goals. The immediate proximity of resources and staff within school settings meant that PAF projects were in a better position to quickly help facilitate a solution.

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> *If young parents (or any students) are getting health services at the school-based health center, then they are less likely to miss as much school. —Implementation partner*

Implementing in community-based settings allowed PAF projects to reach EPY not currently engaged with school

While there were clear benefits to working within school settings, some EPY were no longer in school. Accordingly, community-based settings provided grantees access to youth who had dropped out of school or cut short their educational program. One grantee who focused on reaching these EPY partnered with several community-based organizations to provide case management services to EPY who were no longer in school and to specifically incorporate a focus on educational pursuits. Nurses, who worked directly with young parents through a community-based home visiting program, provided EPY with emotional support and referred them to resources, including academic mentoring and supports. As part of that support, EPY developed an educational plan that included long-term goals, identification of barriers to achieving those goals, and available assistance as they worked toward them. During regular home visits, nurses provided individualized support, including regular conversations about educational progress and reinforcing goals.

While the community-based settings provided access to EPY not engaged in school, nurses still relied on their strong relationships with schools to help EPY re-engage with the educational systems. They were able to provide school contact information and details about specific programs available to make it easier for EPY to reach out and engage with the school. Once EPY had re-engaged with schools, nurses continued to provide educational support, such as sitting in on IEP meetings, to help young parents stay motivated and on track.

Grantees raised awareness and dedicated resources to identifying the population

In school settings, the PAF projects recognized that a key element to the educational success of EPY was to raise awareness about EPY and the unique needs of young parents. Increased awareness among faculty and partners helped to create a more supportive, flexible environment in which EPY could succeed. Project staff could advocate for student parents and provide concrete examples of a) the needs of EPY and how they differ from other students; b) the benefits of specialized accommodations, programming, and supports for EPY (and their children); and c) the ways in which existing structures make it more challenging for retention and graduation.

In some cases, identification and recruitment for PAF programming was facilitated by specific dedicated classroom time for this population; or by working directly within a charter school specifically for EPY, developed in response to a state mandate that required EPY to continue their high school education. In community college settings, where EPY status was often not systematically recorded, identification proved especially challenging. The projects had to devote significant PAF project resources to identifying the population in order to connect them to services and support. Successful techniques for identifying students included:

- posting fliers around the campus
- using word of mouth connections by discussing the PAF project with different school departments and administration
- adding parenting status to voluntary new student forms

Grantees used a combination of both individual and group support to help EPY meet their educational goals

Another key strategy to supporting the educational outcomes of EPY was a combination of both individual and group support. The projects needed to be flexible in their approaches to address the varying needs of the participants. Whereas one student might have challenges with scheduling classes, another might have challenges with childcare. Given the uniqueness of each student's situation, having individual case management proved critical to projects' ability to support students. Through individualized support, the grantees were able to provide both emotional and material support to students in an effort to reduce barriers to their academic success. Each of the

Partnerships were key in providing individualized support to EPY and connecting them with the supports and services they needed:

- Case managers or project coordinators often established formal and informal partnerships based upon identified needs of EPY, allowing for more flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs.
- Open lines of communication between EPY and partners who provided supports and services was critical to addressing individual needs.

projects had a designated project coordinator. Coordinators were "champions" of the project who worked individually with students to help them identify and understand the services available to them and also provide them emotional support. Often, a discussion with a trusted adult was what students needed to continue toward their educational goals. Through individual support, coordinators were also able to more quickly and flexibly provide practical supports to reduce barriers to meeting educational goals. Coordinators provided bus vouchers to help EPY attend school. They also connected youth to additional community supports and services, such as childcare or health care, which were provided in service of EPY's academic goals.

In addition to individual support, two of the grantees discussed the importance of group support, especially peer support. Projects convened EPY in classroom settings as well as via student lunches or peer support groups. One program model relied heavily on peer support to improve outcomes for EPY. As part of the program, a support group was offered to provide support in navigating school and district rules (e.g., related to absences or class schedules), shoring up social supports and relationships, developing life and parenting skills to increase confidence and competency, and in some cases academics. Having group support allowed students to discuss experiences with other parenting students. One implementation partner noted that during these support groups, parenting students learned from their peers how to navigate the education systems and also how to deal with the emotional stress of the competing demands of being a parent and being a student.

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> *"Providing youth with a community of young parents who are prioritizing staying in school 'is the huge value of the program'" —Implementation partner*

Conclusion

Each of the PAF projects discussed here prioritized education for EPY, helping them to formulate and achieve their educational goals of graduation from either high school or their selected educational program (e.g., associate programs, two- or four-year programs). In practice, this meant that each of the projects worked with EPY to reduce barriers to their educational progress. This included provision of material and social supports as well as direct advocacy within the school systems and communities to raise awareness of specific needs to continue/complete education. Significant resources were also used to identify EPY for supports and services.

Through both school and community-based settings, the projects placed a high value on addressing immediate needs such as childcare, transportation, and links to other parenting resources, in the service of furthering EPY's educational goals. Beyond these concrete supports, each of the programs was well positioned to provide emotional support to EPY and help them deal with feelings of social isolation or being overwhelmed through both individual and group support. EPY can be set back by a number of issues; having someone to talk to and plan with or provide a small resource can help to ensure that barriers do not become insurmountable. The connections of the programs to school and the immediacy of the connections to necessary supports and services allowed for a more rapid response before patterns or problems became entrenched.

Through these strategies, projects supported the education of EPY in service of their longer-term goal of improving the health and economic well-being of parents and children.

References

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2   Antonishak, J., & Connolly, C. (2014). *Preventing Unplanned Pregnancy and Completing College: An Evaluation of Online Lessons, 2nd Edition*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED571551.pdf

This brief and other related products are available at https://opa.hhs.gov/research-evaluation/pregnancy-assistance-fund-paf-program-evaluations/evaluation-key-strategies

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