

Books Before Babies



Mississippi and Arkansas are leading the country in a new effort to prevent unplanned pregnancies among young adults.

BY KATE BLACKMAN

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Mississippi Senator Sally Doty (R) was surprised to learn that the majority of teen pregnancies occur in 18- and 19-year-olds. “That is just not what you think when you hear ‘teen pregnancy,’” she says. “The myth out there is that it’s all these young girls, but it’s not. It’s our older teens.”



Senator Sally Doty Mississippi

She learned about the extent of the problem and some promising efforts by community colleges to tackle the issue while serving on the governor’s task force on teen pregnancy prevention. Higher education seemed the ideal place to focus efforts “so we could have the most effect.”

Doty drafted pioneering legislation that requires community colleges and universities to develop a plan to address unplanned pregnancy. Many states have educational programs aimed at adolescents in middle or high school, but post-secondary efforts have been limited to individual colleges. No state had ever tried a similar statewide approach to address the high rate of pregnancy among this age group.

The act delineated eight different areas the plan should address—such as incorporating

information on preventing an unplanned pregnancy into orientation and “student success courses,” raising awareness through academic classes, collaborating with health care centers and identifying ways to support student parents—but it was not prescriptive in the details, leaving most decisions up to the colleges.

“We have a great system of community colleges in Mississippi ... and they are the experts in the field of reaching 18- and 19-year-olds,” Doty says. “We didn’t want to tell them what would be best for their schools. We wanted them to come up with their own individualized plans.”

The bill passed in 2014. Doty says many of her legislative colleagues also were surprised by the statistics and in favor of taking a different approach. Doty also credits the bill’s passage to the governor’s support. “You don’t see too many Republican governors, or any governors at all, saying they want to address teen pregnancy,” she says.

Arkansas Joins In

The Arkansas General Assembly followed Mississippi’s lead by passing a nearly identical bill in 2015. Representative Deborah Ferguson (D), one of the bill’s sponsors, was surprised, like

Doty, that three-fourths of the teen pregnancies in her state involved 18- and 19-year-olds. “I probably watch too much reality TV—but I thought it was ‘16 and Pregnant,’” she says, referring to the MTV series. “That was a shocking statistic for me.”



Representative
Deborah Ferguson
Arkansas

Ferguson learned about Mississippi’s bill at a forum hosted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and decided to support a similar effort in her home state. Ferguson and Representative Robin Lundstrum (R) sponsored the legislation, which, like Mississippi’s, requires colleges to develop a plan to address unplanned pregnancy.

“No sense in reinventing the wheel,” Ferguson says.

In both states, the bills easily won bipartisan support and made these two Southern states—among those with the highest teen pregnancy rates in the nation—leaders in prevention efforts.

Keeping Goals Alive

In Mississippi and Arkansas—and across the nation—18- and 19-year-olds

account for around 70 percent of teen pregnancies and births. About 180,000 babies were born to this age group nationally in 2014. These young people are typically finishing high school and, if not going straight into the job market, are entering community colleges or four-year universities. An unplanned pregnancy can not only disrupt the educational and career goals of the young parents, but also hinder their children’s prospects in the future.

“Being a college student is difficult enough as it is,” says Kell Smith, director of communications and legislative services for the Mississippi Community College Board, citing challenges such as tuition cost and time management. “When you throw an unplanned pregnancy into the equation, it makes it that much more difficult.”

The data illustrate this dynamic. Nationally, nearly 1 in 10 female community college students drop out because of unplanned motherhood. Among students who have children after enrolling in community college, 61 percent do not complete their degrees. It’s not that the students don’t recognize the potential difficulties—80 percent report that having a child while in school would make it more challenging to achieve

**TEEN PREGNANCY
By the Numbers**

1 in 4

Teens who will get pregnant by age 20

1 in 5

Teen moms who will have a second child before age 20

72%

Proportion of teen births to 18- and 19-year-olds

\$9.4 billion

Annual cost to taxpayers associated with teen childbearing

51%

Percent of all pregnancies that are unplanned

61%

Decrease in teen birth rate since 1991

89%

Proportion of teen births to unmarried women

64%

Percent of high school students who have had sex by the 12th grade

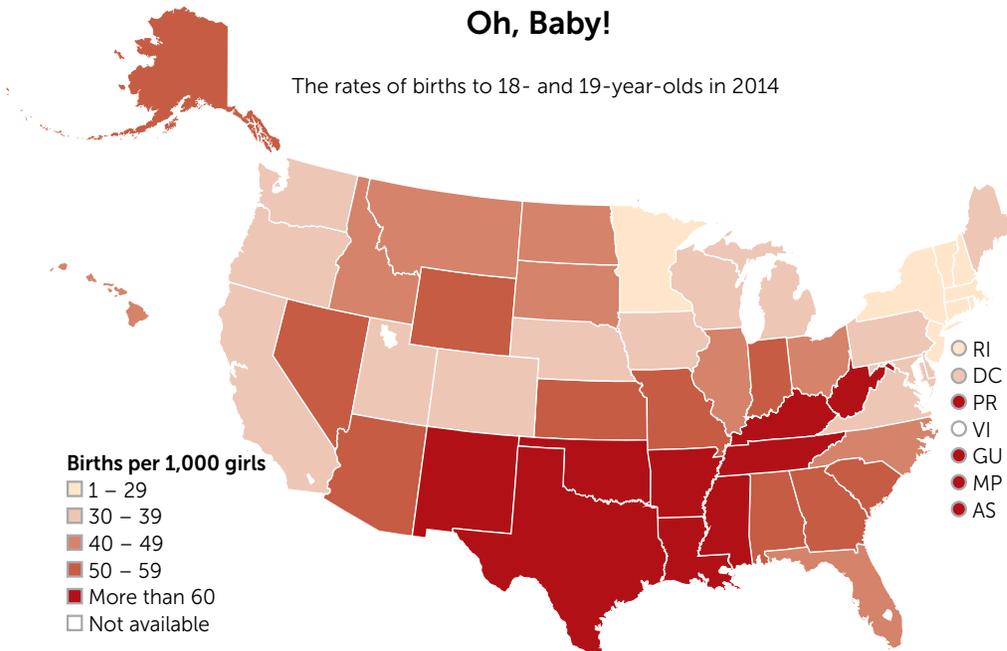
61%

Proportion of community college students who don’t complete a degree after having a child

Sources: *The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2016,* and *the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015.*

Oh, Baby!

The rates of births to 18- and 19-year-olds in 2014



Note: Statistics were not available for the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, 2015.

their goals.

Post-secondary education is becoming increasingly important to young people's career and financial success. It also has implications for the competitiveness of a state's workforce. "In today's global economy, it is not good enough to have just a high school diploma," Smith says.

In addition to curtailing students' educational goals and limiting their future earnings potential, unplanned births also affect states' bottom lines. Young mothers and their children are more likely than others to live in poverty or depend on public assistance programs. And children born to teen parents are less likely than their peers to earn a high school diploma—around 66 percent compared with 81 percent.

When factoring in the estimated costs to the health care, foster care and justice systems, along with the lower wages and reduced earnings associated with less education, teen childbearing cost U.S. taxpayers at least \$9.4 billion in 2010, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. In Arkansas and Mississippi, those costs were \$129 million and \$137 million, respectively.

The Plan Moves Forward

To create its plan, Mississippi's working group met in summer 2014 with a broad group of stakeholders from across the state, listening to experts, sharing information and engaging in discussions. "We all know [teen pregnancy] is a problem ... but when we saw the impact it had on our state, that's when we really started to take notice," says Adam Breerwood, president-elect of Pearl River Community College and co-chair of the working group. "This is going to be a generational problem for years to come if we don't start to curtail some of this."

In November 2014, as directed by the legislation, the group submitted its report to the Legislature. It emphasized the "3 C's: clinics, curriculum and counseling," says Smith, of the state's Community College Board, and it offered strategies and options for colleges to choose from in each of the eight areas identified in the act.

The attention to clinics relates to providing student health services on campus or in the community. Through a survey,

the group found that only five community colleges had health clinics, Smith says. The group also incorporated unplanned pregnancy topics into its curricula, and provided for counseling to "educate students on decisions they make and how they can affect not just their own future, but also the future of their children and their family," he says.

The report provides a framework—or road map—to guide each college or univer-



sity when deciding what is most appropriate for its students. The working group asked for \$50,000 for each community college and university to carry out its plan. Last year, the Mississippi Legislature appropriated a total of \$250,000 for all 15 community colleges, which was distributed based on the size of the institution.

So far, the majority of the community colleges have incorporated unplanned pregnancy prevention efforts into class curricula to educate students, says Smith. They have also used funds to bring in speakers and experts, hire part-time nurses and create promotional or marketing materials to build awareness of the risks and consequences of unplanned pregnancy.

At Pearl River Community College, Breerwood says officials hit the ground running. They enlisted student groups to help raise awareness about unplanned pregnancy and how students' daily decisions can affect their futures.

The college brought in nurses, hosted orientation sessions, conducted dorm meetings, held a concert and even put on a race as part of the activities this past fall. "It had to take a full college effort," Breerwood says,

including the students, because "that's who the other students are going to listen to."

Data on how successful the community colleges' efforts were will be available this summer. So far, students appear to find the information valuable.

As part of Hinds Community College's efforts, students participated in online lessons about unplanned pregnancy and college completion developed by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. One student wrote in the evaluation: "I am a single parent of two kids. I understood every statement and wish I would have known about this ... sooner. As of now, I am taking all precautions to prevent any other pregnancies until marriage."

Doty, Breerwood and Smith say they've made progress in the state. "I think we have made a tremendous impact this fall," Breerwood says. He hears it "in the conversations our students are having."

Looking Ahead

Breerwood has big ideas for the future, from hiring a new employee dedicated to student retention and unplanned pregnancy to including other members of the community in the conversation, like high school students, to learn about the issues.

Although many of the efforts in Mississippi to date have been low- or no-cost, the future success of some of these ideas may depend on the Legislature. Community colleges are asking for \$750,000 this year—an additional \$500,000 to continue their work. An economic analysis of the budget request estimates that the efforts could save Mississippi \$541,000 annually in state agency spending, which could then be used for other programs.

Arkansas' working group submitted its plan in November 2015, and will begin implementing it in the fall, says Ferguson.

"It is neat that Mississippi is leading the way on this," says Smith, with the Mississippi Community College Board. "You have two states in the South that recognize, first of all, the importance of higher education, and second, the issues that could prevent someone from earning an associate or a bachelor's degree, and we're working toward addressing those, which will only help the state in the long run." ■