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Keeping Teen Moms in School

Motherhood is the leading reason why girls drop out of high school. The responsibilities of parenting are challenging at any age, but they can be overwhelming when still juggling English exams and science projects. With few places to turn for help, a study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found, only half of young moms receive a high school diploma by age 22.

Last year, roughly 700 teenage moms across the Commonwealth left high school. The consequence of not ensuring they make it to graduation day is far-reaching for them, for their new babies, and for Massachusetts.

Without a high school diploma or equivalency exams, young mothers are locked out of high-paying, skilled jobs. Compared to peers who graduate, dropouts make about \$9,000 less a year, according to Northeastern University. Most young moms must support their newborn on their own, fewer than one in four receive financial support from their child's father, and, even then, they receive only about \$2,000 a year. Half of teen moms in the United States live in poverty. For the state, government benefits for students who leave school cost hundreds of thousands of dollars over their lifetime.

The consequences of that absent diploma hit the newborn child hardest. Being born into poverty puts young children at greater risk for health complications. Children of teen mothers are more likely to have reading delays and score lower on school tests. Daughters of teen moms are also more likely to become young moms themselves.

In fact, teen parents are deeply motivated to graduate, reports a Gates Foundation study. Over half of expecting or parenting teens surveyed by the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy described feeling more motivated to do well in school knowing they had a baby on the way. They just need their school's help to navigate their dual lives as parents and students.

Yet few schools have effective strategies to ensure young mothers stay on track. What if each school had a comprehensive action plan to ensure these women receive their diploma? Fortunately simple ideas are being piloted that are already changing the fate of mothers and children.

In 2011, Chelsea Public High School piloted an Expectant and Parenting Student Liaison, in which a part-time case manager works with the school's pregnant and parenting teens. The liaison acts as an advocate and connector, supporting the work of overtaxed school guidance counselors and social workers. The role is all-encompassing: On any day, the liaison might introduce students to case workers at the Department of Transitional Assistance, set up meetings with teachers to plan the logistics of maternity leave, organize stroller donations, closely monitor grades, and even show up at a teen's home to ensure they come to school. In five years, the program has helped decrease the drop-out rate of teen parents by 65 percent.

Boston Public Schools implemented a similar liaison model in 2014 in most middle and high schools. The volunteer liaisons, often school nurses or social workers, advocate for students at school and connect them with community programs — although, without funding, they are unable to take on the full responsibilities of a case manager.

More funding is possible. The Legislature is considering a bill that includes a three-year competitive grant for districts to implement interventions for teen parents, including liaisons.

In the past 20 years, teen pregnancy rates have plummeted to a historic low — across the country and in Massachusetts. Still, there are many teen moms. The state needs to ensure that they and their babies have the best chance of success.