

CAPACITY BUILDING K–12

SPECIAL EDITION # 43

Supporting Teenage and Single Parent Learners to Complete High School

Teen and single parents face many barriers to finishing high school and gaining the skills they need to thrive in the changing workforce. What can we do to support these vulnerable learners?

Read the online version for hyperlinks to additional resources.

“All children and students will be inspired to reach their full potential with access to rich learning experiences that begin at birth and continue into adulthood, regardless of background or personal circumstances.”

Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario

Teenage pregnancy has long been associated with low educational attainment, dropping out of school and unstable socio-economic conditions.² The links to economic disadvantage are well established. According to the 2012 Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario, over 40 per cent of Ontario Works applicants have not completed high school.³

Single parents comprise a common student profile of those enrolled in Ontario's Adult and Continuing Education programs. In one school board, about half of the adult students surveyed were parents and about half of those were single parents. Many of these learners became parents as teens, left school before graduating and have returned to Adult and Continuing Education programs to complete their high school

diploma. Individuals who become parents at a young age often become disengaged from school for a variety of reasons. Supporting their re-engagement in education so that they can reach their full potential is a key goal of teen and single parent programs.

The intent of the Single Parent Initiative, described in this monograph, is to re-engage young parents in schooling so that they – and their children – can minimize the risk of experiencing poverty.⁴ If we support teen and single parent learners in attaining their educational goals, we can help them create a better path for their economic future. This, in turn, will enable them to better guide their children to complete their education, reducing the likelihood of living in poverty over generations.

Re-engaging Teen and Single Parent Learners

The Single Parent Initiative supports teen and single parents in finishing high school and transitioning to either further education and apprenticeship training or to the workplace. Through ministry funding, it engages Adult and Continuing Education educators in designing a program that integrates credit courses with parenting, life skills and career counselling while providing additional community services and support to students as needed.

Launched in 2013–14, with seven school boards, the initiative is now entering its third phase in the 2015–16 school year with nine school boards.⁵ In this phase, school boards will build upon the successes of the first two phases, assess the challenges that continue to exist and develop recommendations for ongoing program support and sustainability beyond the pilot phase.

Administrators of the program do not take a one-size fits all approach. Instead each board program is designed to address the specific needs of its learners (based on socio-economic status, geographic location, learning needs and so on).

Despite variations in learner profiles, most participants are female, have low credit counts, are financially dependent and have time-management issues related to their parenting responsibilities. Many face additional challenges stemming from mental health issues and low self-esteem. Yet, as a group, they share great resilience in facing their challenges and persistence in pursuing their goals.

Boards participating in the first two phases of the Single Parent Initiative report that students are not only graduating with their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), but also improving life skills and becoming better parents and caregivers to their children.⁶ They also report that it was often the opportunity for life skills development that prompted students to return to school and complete their education.

Findings from the participating boards on the initiative's early successes are corroborated by those from several case studies undertaken by school boards with existing programs for teen parents.⁷

Ali S. (age 23),

a single mother living with her parents, needed her last elective credit to graduate from high school. She thrived in class, made friends, managed her social anxiety, and felt very proud of herself for learning to cook and sew. Ali is graduating this year and moving out of her parents' house.

Sky I. (age 22),

a single mother on assistance, needed credits towards her OSSD. In the program, she learned she had a natural talent for fashion which led to tremendous growth in self-esteem and leadership skills. Sky decided that she wanted to pursue a career in sewing and design. She will be graduating next year.

Chelsea L. (age 33),

a mother of five on disability assistance, needed credits towards her OSSD. In the program, she shared that she had been emotionally and physically abused and, as a result, had extremely low self-esteem. She was able to form friendships and learn new skills in the safe environment of the classroom. She will be graduating next year.



Keys to Success

While each student's context is unique, all boards reported the following common components as key for each learner's success:



Renewing motivation to learn...

Successful programs for teen and single parents leverage the motivation to improve the life chances for one's children as a way to encourage enrolment. Teen pregnancy and/or parenthood often become the impetus for positively re-evaluating educational goals and aspirations – an ideal window of time for schools to re-engage students who have dropped out of school or are at risk of doing so.



Trusting relationship between learners and instructors ...

Where trusting and supportive relationships exist, students report greater success in facing their challenges and developing the skills needed to achieve their goals – reflecting the important role that a caring, reliable adult can play for learners who may feel stigmatized in a school setting and lack confidence and direction.



Flexible, customized curriculum delivery ...

Helping students prepare for their role as parents and caregivers while completing OSSD credit courses is a key component of programs supporting teen and single parents. Together with guidance, career and life planning, a range of learning opportunities, from cooking and household management to family literacy and self-advocacy, are offered to set students up for success. Flexible timetabling and personalized delivery are crucial to accommodate learner needs and schedules. Having multiple staff – including teachers, guidance counsellors, Education Officers, public health nurses, and social workers – facilitates the provision of customized delivery.



Strong community partnerships ...

Community partnerships provide additional expertise, resources and supports, thereby reducing some of the operational costs of the program. Through cultivating collaborative relationships, administrators and community partners can support the sustainability of program success.



Wrap-around supports ...

Reliable childcare, transportation and financial challenges are the top three issues for teen and single parents. Addressing these challenges through “wrap-around supports” enables learners to focus on their studies, complete their education and advance in their educational pathways.



Supportive peer relationships ...

There is much value in having participants with similar life experiences sharing the same learning environment. Teachers and other instructional staff are crucial in facilitating and welcoming open dialogue where learners reflect on their lives and empower one another to further achieve their goals through sharing their stories.

Some Promising Practices for Re-engaging Teen and Single Parent Learners



Supporting teen and young single parents to complete their education leads to improved life outcomes for students and their families.

Effective Programming

- Personal and trusting relationship with at least one caring, reliable adult
- Collaborative program delivery provided at one location
- Small group setting with supportive peer relationships
- Flexible and individualized delivery to accommodate learner

Community Services and Supports

Wrap-around supports provided to meet learner needs:

- Childcare
- Transportation
- Healthcare
- Social supports

Parenting, Life Skills and Career Counselling

- Build on and leverage renewed educational goals of teen parents
- Learning about parenting and family literacy
- Transitions to further education and apprenticeship training or workplace

Endnotes

Note that for reading ease, this publication uses a modified version of American Psychological Association (APA) style for references. Titles in green are available online as hyperlinks.

1. Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). *Achieving excellence: A renewed vision for education in Ontario*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
2. Furstenberg, F. (1976). The social consequences of teenage parenthood. *Family Planning Perspectives Journal*, 8, 148–164; Upchurch, D. (1993). Early schooling and child-bearing experiences: Implications for postsecondary school attendance. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 3, 423–443; Luong, M. (2008). Life after teenage motherhood. *Perspectives on Labour and Income*. Statistics Canada Catalogue No. 75-001-X; Canadian Women's Foundation. (2013). *Fact sheet: Moving women out of poverty*. Toronto, ON.
3. Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario. (2012). *Brighter prospects: Transforming social assistance in Ontario*. A Report to the

Minister of Community and Social Services

4. Canadian Council on Learning. (2009). *No "drop" in the bucket: the high costs of dropping out*.
5. Two of the pilot programs in the Single Parent Initiative focus primarily on Aboriginal single parents. Lakehead District School Board is implementing a program in partnership with the Ontario Native Women's Association in Thunder Bay, and Keewatin Patricia District School Board is partnering with the Mino Ya Win Health Centre in Sioux Lookout.
6. A requirement of the funding agreement was for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the pilot programs. This involved tracking learner progress on traditional indicators such as credit accumulation and attendance, as well as qualitatively gathering learner and instructor perceptions of improvements in alternative indicators such as parenting skills, self-advocacy, health and nutrition, budgeting and financial literacy, and other life skills.

7. Three case studies were undertaken by school board and Ministry researchers on existing exemplary programs that support pregnant and parenting teens to remain in or return to school to complete their high school diploma. These case studies involved the collection and use of both quantitative and qualitative data to describe the elements of the program that made it an effective and engaging model for teen parents, gauge the impact of the program on its participants, and describe the profile of participants in the program.

Contact StudentSuccessPolicy.Branch@ontario.ca for more information about the Single Parent Initiative.