

Let's Talk About Sex

Community leaders call for an open discussion about Cumberland County's high teen pregnancy rate. Part 1 of 2 { BY BLAKE CHRISTY }



Teen mom Asia Brown, of Vineland, and daughter Aaliyah, 1, at IMPACT's Parent Linking Program facilities.



Full version and extra resources available at SNJToday.com/teenpregnancy

Diapers, PediaSure, and baby wipes are not normally found in the office of a college president, but you'll find these items in the office of Cumberland County College President Dr. Yves Salomon-Fernandez. She has two kids of her own—ages seven and nine—but the baby products are not holdovers from their infant years. "I often see young parents around campus, so I keep these things in my office for them," Dr. Salomon-Fernandez said.

On campus, and around Cumberland County, it is not uncommon to find teen parents; the county has the highest teen pregnancy rate of all 21 counties in the state of New Jersey. In Cumberland County, for every 1,000 females ages 15–19, 59 will have a child. (Teen pregnancy data does not include miscarriages or abortions.) To put this in perspective, Ethiopia, a developing country, has a teen pregnancy rate of 60. And Cumberland County has almost triple the New Jersey average rate of 20. All this begs the question: Why is this happening in Cumberland County?

Dr. Angel Kelly, nurse practitioner of Cumberland Obstetrics, says she meets with a pregnant teen almost

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every day. During her many years practicing medicine, she has noticed that people are not aware of the extent of the problem. “We have been leading the state in most teen pregnancies per-capita,” Dr. Kelly said. “If you look at the trend, we have been at the bottom almost continually, so clearly everything we have been doing has not worked.”

When the teen pregnancy rate is as high as Cumberland County’s, it becomes a community issue. Dr. Joseph P. Riley, an obstetrician in Bridgeton, believes it’s a “complete public healthcare failure.”

“We have to start treating it as the public health problem it is,” he said.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies estimates that the average taxpayer costs associated with a child born to a teen is about \$1,682 per year—from birth to age 15. The 2,280 teen births in Cumberland County in 2015 could cost taxpayers \$57.5 million over the next 15 years.

Teen parents are also more likely to drop out of high school. Only an estimated 40 percent of teen parents will earn their high school degree. Lower academic attainment means a less productive and lower-skilled workforce, leading to higher unemployment—all factors that could result in a cycle of reliance on public services.

The majority of teens in Cumberland County will not become pregnant, but simply living in a community with a high teen pregnancy rate is cause for concern. A high teen pregnancy rate is evidence that many adolescents are having unprotected sex, which puts teens in the community at a higher risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease (STD). In fact, Cumberland County also has the highest STD rate in the state.

Among adolescent development and health professionals, the consensus has been that in order to prevent teen pregnancies, educators need to reach children during their formative years.

“Education has to start early, before the onset of sexual activity has occurred,” Dr. Kelly said. The Guttmacher Institute estimates that the average teen is sexually active by age 17. “This does not mean that we have to go in and start talking about sex in fourth grade, but it does mean that we have to be talking about trust, and talking about relationship building, and confidence building,” Dr. Kelly said.

Kimberly Friddell, executive director of Inspira’s Innovative Model for Preschool and Community Teaming (IMPACT), has been on the front lines of addressing teen pregnancy in Cumberland County for more than 15 years. When asked if the school systems in Cumberland County are doing enough, she said, “No, we do not do enough.”

TEACHING ABSTINENCE: OLD SCHOOL

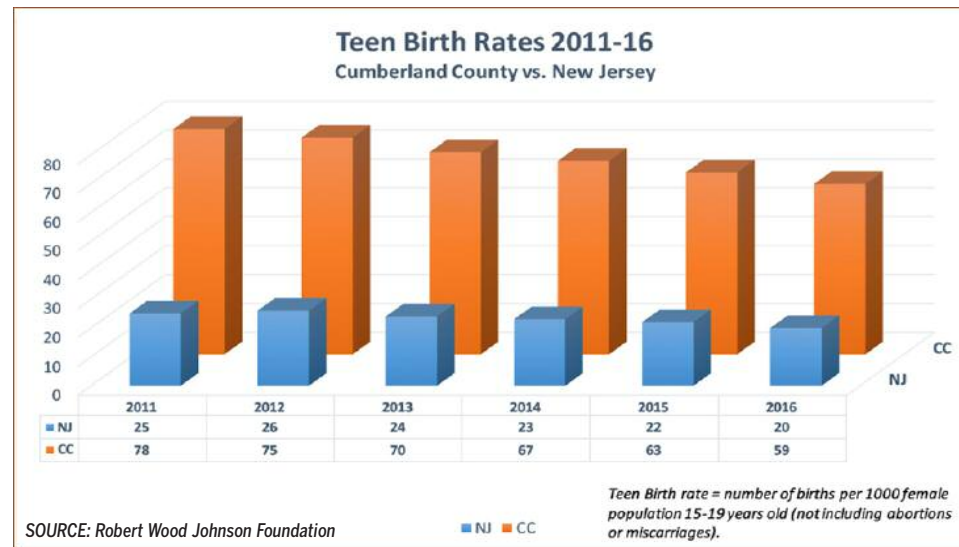
According to the New Jersey Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Core Curriculum Content

Standards (NJCCCS), schools should not limit sex education to abstinence-only lessons. In fact, their website explicitly states, “The NJCCCS require instruction regarding multiple methods of contraception; therefore, a school that chooses an abstinence-only curriculum as its only instructional program is not in compliance with the standards that specifically require students to understand abstinence, as well as contraception and disease prevention.”

This February all federal funding was cut to abstinence-only programs after a study by prominent sexual health researcher Douglas Kirby concluded that there is no proof that abstinence-only education delays the initiation of sex.

For years, the Millville School District has been teaching abstinence-only despite NJCCC standard. Dave LaGamba, Millville’s health supervisor, says the District has recognized the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only education and is working toward teaching contraception, starting in the fall.

“We are looking to go more into an evidence-based program to focus on absti-



nence, but broaden the horizon to be more about contraception and the different types of contraception,” he said. “But once again, with a primary base still focused on abstinence being the best way to reduce pregnancies.” An evidence-based program means pregnancy prevention, contraception, STDs, healthy relationships—with parents, peers, and partners—are discussed.

Mary Anna Ledden is the director of Millville’s school-based youth service program, LINK, which is managed by Inspira Health Network. She and her team are helping Millville to develop a new sex education program. While an evidence-based program should have already been adopted in Millville to be in accordance with the New Jersey standards, Ledden says not speaking about the taboo topic became customary: “It was the norm within this community, and even though you see the norm isn’t working, sometimes that is more comfortable.”

Ledden is hoping to gain approval from Millville to go one step further than just teaching about contraception, by making birth control and condoms available in school.

LaGamba said he and the school district have held meetings with parents, clergy, and

staff to involve the community in plans for updating Millville’s sex education curriculum.

THE BIRDS AND THE BEES

The Vineland and Bridgeton school systems have been teaching about the advantages and disadvantages of contraception. Vineland’s Board of Education website states that sex-ed is taught beginning in fifth grade by encouraging abstinence and that by eighth grade, contraception is brought into the conversation. In Bridgeton, sex-ed and birth control are taught in the middle school, and by ninth grade students are receiving contraception demonstrations in class.

Community leaders and experts all agree that it is vital to have an open conversation with adolescents about safe sex. “I think it’s a missed opportunity in our publicly funded schools if we are not providing students with the education,” said Dr. Salomon-Fernandez, Cumberland County College president.

Many feel sex-ed is simply not enough. Dr. Riley advocates for contraception to be available at all public schools in the county.

Critics argue it is not the responsibility of the schools to provide access to contraception. Young people can go to Title X-funded family planning clinics and receive birth control without parental consent and on a sliding fee scale. However, while the services are available, they are not always easily accessible. Michelle LaRue, director of education at the Title X-funded FamCare, said lack of public transportation is the biggest obstacle for teens trying to get affordable contraception in the community.

BRIDGETON’S BABY BOOM

Bridgeton High School has consistently had the most teen pregnancies in the county. Bridgeton’s federally funded Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Initiative (APPI), which is managed by Complete Care, started providing birth control, Depo-Provera shots (the shot prevents pregnancies for three months), and condoms in the city’s high school six years ago—and noticed the benefits almost immediately.

When the program started, in the 2010-2011 school year, there were 34 documented pregnancies. In subsequent years, the number of pregnancies continually dropped. By

the 2014-2015 school year, there were only 14 reported pregnancies. This decrease in pregnancies, from 34 to 14 births, possibly saved taxpayers \$504,600 over the next 15 years, based on the aforementioned National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy’s data. The results indicated that providing methods of contraception, and educating students about their advantages and disadvantages, might have worked.

However, in this past school year, 2015-2016, something changed as Bridgeton reported 31 known pregnancies—almost the same number in Bridgeton as before contraception was offered. “It was very frustrating to all of us,” APPI’s director Megan Vengenock said. “We don’t know if it was just an off year [or what].”

In fact, eight of the 31 pregnant students had transferred into the school district this year from Mexico and Guatemala already pregnant.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The spike in pregnancies seen in Bridgeton confirms Friddell’s belief that the challenge is not simply whether to teach abstinence-only versus evidence-based sex education. She said the issue runs much deeper than that. Dr. Kelly agreed with Friddell. “You cannot only throw out facts about STDs, and anatomy, and sex,” she said. “You have to give teens a sense of self-worth, you have to give them goals, you have to give them something other than seeking attention from a sex partner... and these lessons need to start early, before the onset of sexual activity.”

Friddell has recently applied for a federal grant, through the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families—Family and Youth Services Bureau, to develop a comprehensive sex-education program to address the larger issues of teen pregnancy in Cumberland County—healthy relationships, adolescent development, financial literacy, parent-child communication, and educational and career success.

The grant would help Friddell to provide an after-school program to 90 students at Vineland’s Veterans’ Memorial Intermediate School, Millville’s Lakeside Middle School, and Bridgeton’s Broad Street Elementary School who are most at-risk of becoming teen parents. Hispanic, Latino, American Indian, and socioeconomically disadvantaged youth of any race or ethnicity are most at risk of becoming a teen parent. Friddell’s grant would potentially address adolescent pregnancy in what she says is the most effective way—by being consistent, on-going, and comprehensive.

Cumberland County College’s new president, Dr. Salomon-Fernandez, is thinking about teen pregnancy more than ever, and not just because she has to keep track of her inventory of PediaSure and other baby supplies.

As Dr. Salomon-Fernandez said, “I think what we need to remember is that if a young woman has a child, life does not stop.” She added, “It is in our best interest as a community to make sure that those who choose to move forward are supported fully.”

Talking with Teen Parents

Could Vineland's Parent Linking Program be a national model for mitigating the effects of teen pregnancy? Part 2 of 2 { BY BLAKE CHRISTY }



Naya Lopez, a PLP graduate, with her daughter, Jasmari, on the day she graduated from Vineland High School with honors.



Full version and extra resources available at SNJToday.com/teenpregnancy

Asia Brown's life has not gone as she planned. At 18 years old, she has a child. Her new role as a mother made her think she could be independent, so she and her daughter voluntarily moved from home. The move was unsuccessful, and Brown ended up in a homeless shelter. "I spent Christmas [at the homeless shelter]... it was—numbing," she says. "It was just numbing."

Eventually, Brown gave in to her family's plea and moved back home. But despite the pressure and anxiety of being a teen parent, Brown always has a smile on her face. Looking at her daughter Aaliyah, who has refused to take off her tiara since her first birthday just a few days ago, Brown says, "She's everything, she's my mini me."

Aaliyah is munching on Froot Loops and playing peek-a-boo with her mom. She wobbles around and slumps onto a couch in the IMPACT Parent Linking Program's (PLP) childcare center, indifferent that this is a classroom and not a living room. Brown and her daughter seem to be more than comfortable here.

"It was very nice coming [to PLP]," Brown says. "They

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were very open and very honest, I couldn't trust anybody better to be with my daughter."

The Innovative Model for Preschool and Community Teaming's (IMPACT) PLP is a unique program for pregnant or parenting students at Vineland High School. Almost 20 years ago, in 1997, Inspira Health Network and the Vineland Board of Education collaborated to establish PLP, a reaction to the high teen pregnancy rate in the city. The program is still vital today.

Cumberland County has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the state of New Jersey. According to the *2016 County Health Rankings and Roadmaps*, a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, Cumberland County has a teen pregnancy rate of 59 for every 1,000 young women between the ages of 15 and 19. This is the same rate of adolescent pregnancies that the World Bank estimates the entire world averaged 18 years ago. And, it is triple the state of New Jersey's current average.

Teen pregnancy is categorized as a health behavior, meaning that its existence

"Eleven years ago, I was in their shoes. I know what [being a teen mom] is like. Every step they are going through, I went through."

— Stephanie Lang

is shaped by culture, family life, and the socio-economic makeup of the community. Lowering the teen pregnancy rate may be difficult, but PLP is being proactive to mitigate its effects. The program provides childcare and parenting classes so young parents can graduate from high school. On average, only 40 percent of teen moms will finish high school, according to research done by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies.

Executive Director of IMPACT Kimberly Friddel notes that at PLP that statistic does not hold up; this year 100 percent of PLP's participating seniors graduated. Of those 14 seniors, 12 are heading on to higher education. A total of 42 students took part in the program this year (six were males).

PLP has been an important part of Brown's support system. When Brown spent time in a shelter, it went unnoticed by many of her friends. "A lot of people did not know that I was in a shelter," she says, "so when I would say [after school], 'OK, I am going home,' I was not actually going home."

At PLP, Stephanie Lang and Talliba Bentley-Fonville, are like Brown's second family, so they knew something was up



Teen mom Asia Brown, of Vineland, and daughter Aaliyah, 1, at IMPACT's Parent Linking Program (PLP) facilities.

when Brown was not living at home anymore. "Mrs. Bentley and Mrs. Stephanie actually noticed a difference in me about two to three months [after] I came into the program," Brown says. "I was a lot quieter, and I have a big personality, so if I am quiet usually something is wrong. I would talk with them; they helped me out a lot."

Lang and Bentley-Fonville were also teen mothers. IMPACT gave them the opportunity to eventually become the support system they needed when they found out they were pregnant.

"Eleven years ago, I was in their shoes," Lang says. "I know what [being a teen mom] is like. Every step they are going through, I went through, from their thoughts and feelings, to deciding if they are ready for a baby, weighing their options for abortion and adoption, and then telling their parents when they decide to keep the baby. [I know what it is like] to be scared to tell your parents, and how it is to deal with their disappointment. The whole process, it is like I am reliving it, and that is what gives Talliba and me an advantage. The girls take you more seriously because they know you know what it is really like."

This personal relationship that PLP's staff forms with the women and men in their program is one of the many reasons IMPACT's PLP is the best in the state—in fact, the only one of its kind—in New Jersey. While many high schools offer parenting classes and some may offer health care, IMPACT's PLP goes above and beyond state requirements. Thanks to a grant by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, PLP is able to offer free childcare. In order to receive the childcare, one of the parents, mom or dad, must attend 80 percent of the parenting classes that are taught for academic credit, maintain a C average, and not have a repeat pregnancy—stipulations that most teen parenting programs in New Jersey do not have. Going beyond what the State requires is something that Executive Director Friddel is proud of. "The State requires 30 group meetings a year, [meeting] once a week," she says. "So we, in just a month-and-a-half, meet the grant level of



At PLP, Talliba Bentley-Fonville, left, and Stephanie Lang, both former teen moms who can relate to their students, teach them about what to expect in their new roles as moms and dads.

service because we meet every day.”

The free childcare makes it possible for the women and men to stay in school; the parenting classes ensure that their children are being taken care of properly when they go home. While PLP helps teen parents in Vineland, it does not mean that it is any easier. Friddel says, “We are not advocating for teen pregnancy. But since they are pregnant, we want them to be successful parents, understand child development and behavior, and most importantly prevent a repeat pregnancy.”

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says one in six teen pregnancies are repeat.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies estimates that “the average annual cost to taxpayers associated with a child born to a teen mother each year from birth to age 15 is about \$1,682.” Ensuring that students will graduate with their high school diploma decreases the chances that they will need to rely on public welfare services. Supporting programs like PLP can help to decrease those costs.

When Naya Lopez found out she was pregnant, her mom was disappointed, but that became her motivation: “[My mom and I] got back from my first appointment with the obstetrician [and] she said of the doctor, ‘That could’ve been you.’” Lopez, who always dreamed of being a neonatal physician says, “That hit me. My mom gave up on my dream. She thought I wasn’t going to be able to achieve anymore.”

Lopez graduated this year from Vineland High School and PLP. Humbly, Lopez says, “I have a 4.1 GPA. I take college physics. I was scared that class would be hard, but it was easy. I also take gym, and Advanced Spanish 4. I take AP Bio, and AP Literature and Composition. What else do I take? Oh, Medical Terminology and Pre-Calculus. And no lunch.”

Lopez has a support system at home to take care of her daughter, Jasmarié. Still, Lopez takes advantage of IMPACT’s parenting classes because she was nervous about being a good mother. IMPACT has been a safe place for Lopez to turn.

“It’s somebody who really understands what you’re going through,” she says,

“especially from Stephanie who’s a teen mom herself. It’s good to have people who don’t judge you.”

Having the IMPACT community has helped Lopez to continue to succeed. She will be pursuing an undergraduate Biology degree at Rowan University this fall.

Without the IMPACT program, it is possible that many young women and men who were in the program would not be as educated as they are today, a fact that Fordham University Professor of Economics Dr. Kristine Angela Kintanar says could further inhibit economic growth in Cumberland County.

“Economic growth is a function of labor and capital,” Kintanar says. “However, the quality of labor is also important, and that is why investment in human capital is always an important determinant of rapid economic growth... A high [teen] pregnancy rate may contribute to the economic stagnation of the community, since it may take people away from educational and professional opportunities.”

Supporting programs like IMPACT ensures that more of the labor force is educated, Fridell says. “When you drop out of high school, it is more difficult to become employed,” she says, “and you become part of the system that the taxpayers as a whole are paying into to support their fellow person.”

Lopez’s success story may make it seem as if raising a child and trying to graduate high school is easy, but she is aware that she is not the norm. “Just because I have a 4.1 GPA...and I’m a teen mom doesn’t mean it’s easy for me,” Lopez notes. “I have a lot of help, but not everyone has a lot of help.”

Unlike Lopez’s seemingly successful ride through high school, Asia Brown has had to take a less conventional path to a high school diploma. Brown dropped out of Vineland High School in March to meet the financial burdens of raising a child, but she is still determined to earn her high school diploma. Brown studies and works at the Vineland Youth Corps and is planning on graduating at the end of this year. Lang, Bentley-Fonville, and the rest of the IMPACT team are guiding Brown through and making sure that she does not become another Cumberland County statistic. ❧