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## Task force holds hearings on keeping pregnant, parenting moms from dropping out

By Mary Ann Fergus and Vikki Ortiz | Chicago Tribune reporters  
10:55 PM CDT, August 5, 2008

Shanell Stampley desperately wanted to stay in high school after giving birth just before her freshman year.

"I'm like, if I don't get an education, then how am I supposed to take care of my daughter?" said Stampley, now 21. "My mom had it hard because she didn't graduate high school, and I did not want to go in her path."

But making it to school on time, or at all, was a constant struggle for the 15-year-old, who lived in a women's shelter at the time and rode a bus to drop off her baby with a sitter. After too many late arrivals and missed classes, Stampley said, she was expelled from Juarez Community Academy in Chicago.

She has told her story to a state task force that is studying how to keep students in school during pregnancy and parenthood, or when facing domestic violence or sexual abuse. The task force is holding hearings statewide, including one from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at South Elgin High School, 760 E. Main St. in South Elgin.

For Stampley, "It was either, 'You find a way to deal with it, or you're going to be put out of school,'" she said.

But task force members say they hope that the discussions will lead to policy recommendations and legislative support for young parents and those dealing with abuse.

"We're going out in the field to find out from those children who are directly impacted," said Sonya Whitaker, an educational consultant and co-chairwoman of the state task force with state Rep. Karen Yarbrough (D-Maywood). "We want to give children a second chance at being successful."

South Elgin is one of the five high schools in Elgin-based Unit District 46, the state's second-largest school district.

The number of pregnancies at the district's high schools and its alternative school range from 10 to 40 a year, district officials said.

A budget crisis several years ago forced cuts in programs to help new teen parents. An on-site child-care center for students that operated about a decade ago also was closed after grants ended and were not replaced with long-term funding, said Karen Fox, who handles special projects for the district.

But working with an Elgin-based coalition, officials have looked at ways to make their response to teen pregnancy more uniform.

"We thought we were being very responsible on a personal level, but as a system, it was very different at every building," Fox said.

Across Illinois, school districts wrestle with similar issues, said Wendy Pollack, director

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of the women's law and policy project at the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law in Chicago.

The Ensuring Success in Schools Task Force was created at Pollack's suggestion, after she became frustrated with dropout rates and a lack of resources for youths. A number of young parents called her saying they had been forced out of school after too many child-care-related absences, she said.

"These were young women who were good students," Pollack said.

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