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Child Support and MRE: A Case Study of the p.a.p.a. Curriculum

p.a.p.a.
parenting and paternity awareness

© parental responsibility curriculum for teen students

Overview

This Case Study examines a successful and replicable approach to integrating marriage and relationship education (MRE) services with Child Support Enforcement (CSE) services. The “Parenting and Paternity Awareness Curriculum” (p.a.p.a.) represents a unique partnership between the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) and the State Board of Education (SBOE) in Texas.¹ It offers a promising practice for engaging high school youth in conversations about successful and responsible parenthood and healthy relationship skills, as well as the legal responsibilities and realities involved in supporting a child. Nationally, the p.a.p.a. curriculum represents the first state-wide effort to educate students about paternity and child support responsibilities as the basis for a program.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with Gilbert Chavez, Program Manager for Family Initiatives, and Michael Hayes, Deputy Director for Family Initiatives at the Office of the Attorney General. Information provided on the OAG website, as well as the Evaluation of the Parenting and Paternity Awareness (p.a.p.a.) Curriculum Final Report 2008-2010² (authored by Cynthia Osborne, PhD, of the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin) helped inform this case study.

Background

Despite reports that pregnancy rates in American adolescents are declining, rates of sexual activity and births to adolescents continue to concern public health and human services professionals.³ The economic and social costs of non-marital births for which paternity has not been established, are

mounting and states are looking for help. Every child born to unmarried parents is a potential child support case that costs the state money. Unmarried parents can be any age, but many are teen parents. In Texas, the state leading the nation in repeat teen births, a program to address healthy relationships, teen parenting, and child support was necessary to address these challenges.



The Parenting and Paternity Awareness (p.a.p.a.) curriculum dates back to the late 1980s when staff members in the Child Support division of the Texas Attorney General’s office were often called upon by teachers to talk to students about child support issues. As part of Title IV-D of the Social Security Act of 1975, education and outreach concerning child support and paternity establishment services were required. In 1995, because of need to create a consistent presentation, an official outline and resources for a four-to-five session course were developed. This initial five-session curriculum received an award from the Corporate Fund for Children, was endorsed by all statewide teacher organizations, and was reviewed in a book by James Levine titled *New Expectations: Community Strategies for Responsible Fatherhood*.⁴ Despite the quality of the outline, teachers were still depending on OAG staff to conduct presentations but, with more than 1,000 school districts in the state, it was impossible for OAG staff to cover them all. In addition, some teachers felt that the outline’s message toward fathers was more punitive than it was positive and supportive. At the time, alternative curriculums designed for the target population were scarce and what was available was mostly about co-parenting.

In the late 1990s, new approaches were being developed to support and engage fathers in partnership with the mothers of their children. In 2001, the OAG began to make the curriculum more experiential and interactive, in addition to being grounded in the Texas state curriculum standards for health classes. A collaborative team including OAG staff, curricula developer Pam Wilson, staff from the Texas Fragile Families Initiative, and teachers and youth, began redrafting the curriculum to be more teacher-friendly with lesson plans, step-by-step instructions, and more activities. The revision was finished in 2003 with 10 lessons and new sections to include healthy relationships, marriage, and family violence prevention. More than 2,000 Texas educators and community professionals were trained to teach the curriculum in high school health and Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) classes.

In 2007, the state legislature passed HB 2176 directing the SBOE, in collaboration with the OAG, to develop a parenting and paternity awareness program for use in high school health credit courses. The OAG produced an updated version of the p.a.p.a. curriculum and the SBOE adopted the curriculum beginning with the 2008-2009 school year. The 14-lesson revision, distributed on CD-ROM beginning in 2011, added interactive games and included a new video segment featuring interviews with teen parents. This curriculum is now required statewide for high school health credit. More than 6,000 FACS teachers, health teachers, school nurses, and counselors have been trained through a partnership with the OAG, the SBOE, the Texas Education Agency, and regional education centers. These teachers are also supported through other resources such as ongoing monthly update training segments and an



electronic OAG newsletter with teaching tips and adaptation options.

Motivation for developing this program was fueled by the high rate of teen childbearing in the state of Texas and the substantial number of children living without both of their biological parents.⁵ The rate of teen pregnancies in Texas was the third highest in the nation and 50% higher than the national average. According to the 2008-2010 Evaluation of the p.a.p.a. program conducted by LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin:

- 40% of children in Texas were born to unmarried parents in 2008—a trend more common to mothers who are younger or of a racial or ethnic minority
- 82% of births to 18-to-19 year old mothers and 60% of births to 20-to-24 year old mothers were out of wedlock
- 72% of African American children and more than 50% of Hispanic children were born to unmarried mothers

The cost of teen childbearing to taxpayers was approximately \$1 billion in 2004 (attributed to high school drop-out rates, Medicaid and TANF expenditures, lost tax revenues, incarceration, and expanding child support enforcement cases).

- The program is not just about cutting costs, it is an effort to “help teens address reality before it happens”⁶ through an innovative approach to educate youth before pregnancy occurs. As of July, 2011, 5,900 educators had attended on-site p.a.p.a. training sessions, which included an overview of the curriculum, explanations of critical legal issues related to child support enforcement, and the training on how to effectively utilize the curriculum with the students. About 200,000 Texas students are taught this curriculum each year, totaling close to one million served since the initial mandate. The program will continue to be funded through Title IV-D dollars.

Program Model

The primary focus of the curriculum, as stated by the OAG, is to help students and young adults deal with the “rights, responsibilities, and realities of parenting.” Themes of the p.a.p.a. curriculum include:

- the importance of father involvement
- promoting responsible parenthood
- understanding the value of establishing paternity

and of the legal realities of child support

- understanding the financial and emotional challenges of single parenting and of young parenting
- the importance of healthy relationship skills and the importance of establishing strong, stable families
- the impact of relationship violence and the need for violence prevention
- how youth can optimally sequence decisions in their lives so their children have the best possible outcomes

The curriculum consists of 14 one-hour sessions that can be flexibly taught over the course of 14 days or 14 weeks. The curriculum was designed to be highly interactive and experiential. Through videos, students hear from other youth or young adults about their own stories of early parenting, how they faced the challenges of being a parent, and decisions they would make differently if they could go back in time. The educator provides a short lesson on a particular topic each session that is exemplified through group activities and games. Students also complete a workbook of exercises allowing them to introspectively apply each lesson to their own lives. There are also voluntary research assignments used by students as homework to help illuminate their learning. Although the curriculum is only taught in English, handouts and student workbook sheets are available in Spanish and the video segment has Spanish subtitles.

The developers of the curriculum hold a strong belief that parents are the ultimate and most important teachers for students. Seeking out parental advice and involvement is strongly encouraged. Parents can read a summary of

each session in order to follow up with their teens about what they are learning and to express their own views on that subject. It is expected that the relationship between youth and parents may become stronger as parents talk with their teens about the rewards and challenges of being a parent.

Marketing and Outreach Strategies

Initially, letters were sent out to school superintendents, principals, curriculum specialists, physical education and health teachers, as well as FACS teachers informing them of the curriculum training opportunities. Because this curriculum is mandated for health classes in Texas, the program is typically marketed only to teachers and principals in the state.

The curriculum, training, and other resource guides are provided free of charge to educators, social service program professionals, and staff of community based organizations. Although many state child support programs have expressed interest in the curriculum, to date it is not known if any other state has adopted the curriculum on a state-wide level. Some cities and counties in other states have utilized the curriculum by adapting it to their own state laws regarding child support, visitation and divorce. The estimated cost for a state to implement this curriculum is approximately \$.50 per student.⁷

The Texas OAG has very generously made available for free on their website the basics of the curriculum, including worksheets and videos, allowing interested parties to review the curriculum and find answers to questions. The pre- and post-tests, session review materials, and supplemental classroom materials, are available to educators



upon request. There is also a section on the website with information for parents.

Evaluation of the program

From 2008 to 2010, a rigorous multi-school, multi-year evaluation of the curriculum was conducted by Dr. Cynthia Osborne, at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. The goals of the evaluation were to:

- determine the impact the program had on students' knowledge and attitudes regarding parenting, paternity establishment, and healthy relationships
- track educators' use of, and fidelity to, the curriculum
- examine program support from collaborating agencies, school districts and regional service centers, as well as other interested community or faith-based organizations

In order to evaluate program implementation, delivery, and outcomes, data was gathered on 5,730 students from a representative sample of 47 Texas high schools. Online pre- and post-

assessments were administered to determine what knowledge students retained as well as information about attitudes on the issues discussed. Data was also gathered from 75 students on specific issues through focus groups. In addition, information about the maintenance of curriculum fidelity was collected from surveys of over 900 teachers and 66 principals trained in p.a.p.a.

Overall results suggest that the curriculum is improving students' content knowledge and attitudes, and educators strongly recommend the curriculum.

Highlights from the evaluation report include:

- More than 85% of teachers believe the curriculum is relevant and more than 81% believe it should be taught to all students prior to completing high school.
- Students reported that p.a.p.a.'s focus on building positive relationships helped them to identify the negative impact a baby can have on a relationship and to understand how parental relationships affect children both emotionally and physically. Students reported that p.a.p.a. had provided them with greater knowledge on the importance of building stable, long-term relationships before having a child. The majority of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the p.a.p.a. curriculum was relevant for "recognizing the signs of unhealthy dating relationships" (85.4%) and "understanding the characteristics of a healthy marriage" (82.2%).
- There were significant increases in student knowledge related to the legal aspects of paternity and child support.
- After receiving the curriculum, significantly more students reported that they plan to delay having children until after they are married, and they have an understanding that having a child

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prior to marriage reduced their chances of a future marriage.

- There was a significant increase in students' knowledge about the costs of raising a child as well as an increased understanding of the importance of raising a child with two actively involved parents.
- There was consensus among students that the curriculum is necessary and important for all teens and young adults. Many students thought a follow-up course would be beneficial.
- A second-year follow-up with students revealed a loss of specific knowledge regarding the legal aspects of paternity establishment and child support; however, the students reported having retained messages that influenced their decision-making in relationships during the prior year. A longer-term follow-up evaluation is planned.

Lessons Learned

1. It is crucial to build relationships with the school districts and educators. Educators are already under pressure to cover state-mandated education requirements in each class. Requiring yet another multi-session component can create additional stress. Much of p.a.p.a.'s success

was attributed to the OAG office's intentional outreach to the school districts to build good working relationships and to meet their desire to be successful with the mandate. The OAG worked to build a curriculum that was clear and easy to use and that helped the educators do their job effectively. In addition, they scheduled conveniently located training options and provided interesting and useful trainings for educators. The outcome of those efforts was more frequent and effective communication between developers and educators as they worked collaboratively to improve the curriculum.

2. It is a challenge to ensure fidelity to the curriculum. Since the p.a.p.a. program is a train-the-teacher model and resources are not available to observe implementation in each and every classroom, it is often difficult to ensure that each educator is maintaining curriculum fidelity. Decisions were made to provide high quality trainings on the front end and to utilize evaluations and ongoing student and educator feedback. This information was used to design new ways to make curriculum fidelity easier for educators to uphold. Frequently updated electronic resources and ongoing evaluations help inform everyone in the system about the outcomes of these efforts.
3. Long-term impact is difficult to measure. To measure the impact of this program on future pregnancy, relationships, and paternity establishment would require following teens for years after they participate in a high school class. This is an expensive and challenging evaluation strategy. Furthermore, measuring a change in attitudes about relationships and parenting is also challenging, especially in a short amount of time.

4. Marriage and relationship education is a natural fit with child support awareness. In high schools it is an effective way to provide teens with the knowledge to recognize the signs of unhealthy dating relationships and the characteristics of a healthy marriage. Marriage and relationship education can help teens understand the importance of both parents being involved in their child(ren)'s lives (both emotionally and physically), and the skills necessary to maintain a healthy relationship even if the parents are no longer romantically involved. Some teens (girls in particular) may be under the false impression that having a baby will improve an unsteady relationship with a romantic partner or that they will feel more "loved" by having a baby. It is important that teens understand the importance of building stable, long-term relationships before making the decision to have a child. Combined with child support awareness, MRE provides valuable tools to increase teens' knowledge of the emotional and financial costs of parenting, and may guide them to making responsible decisions in the future.

Conclusion

The p.a.p.a. curriculum is an innovative, cost-effective secondary school curriculum designed to teach students about the rights, responsibilities, and realities of parenthood. It has been well-received by administrators, educators, and students. Importantly, the curriculum is helping change a stereotype and paint a more positive picture about the importance of child support and paternity establishment for the benefit of children. The curriculum also presents realistic and relevant information to teens and young adults that impacts their relationships and their thought processes about intentionally planning for their future and

preparing for parenthood. This program includes Texas-specific child support laws, but can be implemented anywhere with support from a local child support division to incorporate local laws.

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References

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