

Teen pregnancy

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schools to keep a low profile on policies affecting pregnant teens, even when the availability of moral support after the fact doesn't mean the school officially tolerates or condones irresponsible or premature sexual activity among teens. A pro-life stance leads to hard choices, since the highest risk for infant as well as maternal mortality is in the adolescent population, as Donna DelSanto, a counselor in Nazareth Academy's pioneering teen pregnancy program, has observed.

Nazareth's long-standing policy of compassion toward teen mothers, formulated during the early 1970s, led eventually to a program far more involved than simply keeping the pregnant student in school. Funding obtained through a grant from the Maternity and Early Childhood Foundation now pays DelSanto's salary as a part-time counselor, fees for tutors and speakers, expenses of educational materials and costs of workshops held to improve communication between parents and teenagers.

"I've heard people say that if you have a program like this, it increases promiscuity, gives kids permission to become teen parents," DelSanto reflects. "Our experience is that (the program) doesn't. We've had panels of teen parents, who put into real perspective for other students what the struggles are. Our teen parents have been able to influence their peers to not want to pursue the same path."

DelSanto is available throughout the one day a week she spends at Nazareth, counseling both pregnant teens and those who want to avoid the same fate. This coming school year, she plans to offer a workshop to teachers who may find themselves counseling students with unresolved questions about sexuality — such as how to deal with a pregnant classmate. DelSanto also leads a weekly support group for teenaged mothers who are Nazareth students.

"Our feeling is that we're giving a double message if we're not supportive of these students," DelSanto explains. "When you're talking about pro-life, you have to look at the whole picture. We feel that we have to accept the students where they are, and try to ensure the highest quality of life for that unborn

child, as well as the parent. If they don't finish school, the likelihood of the poverty cycle continues."

Students who aren't allowed to remain in school, says DelSanto, might interpret their enforced exile as an indication that they should terminate their pregnancies. "We're not saying we want to make it easy for students to become pregnant," she insists. "But if the situation arises, we want to give them the support that enhances the quality of their lives and those of their unborn children."

Such considerations as adequate maternal nutrition for still-growing teenagers, ensuring that pregnant teens make their doctors' appointments and attend prenatal classes, and helping them face the realities of child care, housing, economic and emotional problems require an active advocate who understands the complexities of the issues involved.

"The reality is that (many) students are sexually active. You can't turn your back on the reality, so you have to re-evaluate your strategies," says DelSanto, who estimates that

Nazareth has about six pregnant students a year, including a certain number of transfers from other schools or Melita House. "Each year that I've been there, ages, classes, races and economic groups have varied widely. Our youngest parent is 14."

Such distressing realities lead to positions that aren't universally popular. Still, DelSanto is unswerving in her determination to pay more than lip service to her pro-life beliefs. "We're about life, in its fullest sense," she declares. "Our emphasis is on supporting life, whether that means helping a student make good choices as a parent or helping her realize her potential as a full person. We can't turn our backs on them, if they should become pregnant. That's really when these particular students need us most."

"Obviously, there are struggles involved," Donna DelSanto concludes, "but that's part of the risk."

Educational deficits

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ly they withdraw into themselves or exhibit poor behavior in class.

"By the time you're in fifth grade, you realize that you're not strong in some areas. The kids really like that (problem being) named," Sister Jeanne Marie believes. "There's no pussyfooting around. They're relieved (to learn) that it's not their imaginations, not their fault."

"At Nazareth, we notice that by the time they get to ninth grade, their self-concept is very poor," she adds.

The students weren't the only ones to feel relieved after the meeting. "The parents, I think, found a real support group" in the meeting, Sister Ann says.

Soon, the sisters promise, the frustration these students have encountered will be transformed into disbelief at their own progress. "The first report card (in Nazareth's FLS program) is difficult. They're doing much better, and they question the grades," Sister Diana remarks.

Such improvements can also spawn disbelief on the part of teachers in traditional programs.

"Some of the teachers who see that we're breaking down learning tasks see that as 'spoonfeeding,' which equals inflated grades," Sister Diana observes. "But if education was working, all of our students would be getting B's and A's."

"The philosophy of education has been that you've got your A kids and your D kids. Mastery learning says that every one of our kids is an A kid — if you can get rid of that old mentality."

Slow learners, she explains, aren't any less intelligent than average students, they just need more time and reinforcement to grasp concepts.

"It has nothing to do with intelligence. Intelligence is variable with the time they need to digest the material," Sister Diana asserts. She likens mastery learning to swimming instruction. "You wouldn't say that a kid had to learn a certain stroke in 40 minutes or drown, but you'd do it in school!"

Sister Ann feels, however, that the St. Ambrose faculty will eagerly accept mastery learning. As a result of her earlier attempts at remediation, her participation on East Irondequoit's Committee on the Handicapped and the school's use of a psychologist, the faculty is already used to hearing about new teaching techniques.

In fact, the three sisters won't be surprised if other St. Ambrose teachers start picking up the methods of mastery learning. As Sister Diana points out, the method wasn't designed just for special-education classes.

But Sister Ann doesn't expect to convert the whole school to the mastery program. "There really isn't a lot of room for expansion — both in terms of finances and in the building," she acknowledged. "We're a bit bound by that, but at least we can help 24 kids."

"I've always wanted school to be successful, to help build up the kids' self-confidence," she concludes. "That's what I think is so exciting, the possibility of picking these kids up."

St. Ambrose still has four openings in the fifth/sixth grade mastery learning program. Tuition of the program is the regular St. Ambrose church/school support, though applicants need not live within the parish boundaries. Those interested in the program may call Sister Ann at (716)288-0580.

marriage didn't send her child to CCD because she was distraught that she couldn't have her new baby baptized.

Why is it so important for parents to be involved in religious education?

First, the children become committed to their parents' ideals. My son surprised me on my birthday with four bags of groceries for the poor. A woman at St. Rita's volunteered to teach vacation Bible school because her son wants to be an aide.

Also, it nurtures family relationships. One parent, after celebrating confirmation family-style, said, "It made me feel like all the effort I put into raising my son is sacred, and that the parish acknowledges all these years of working with God and my child."

Parents who become catechists find, as I did, a tremendous opportunity for personal growth and discovery. Like religious vows and holy orders, this ministry brings out people's gifts.

Eighteen years ago, a friend of mine said, "I don't know enough about religion to teach four year olds." But she started a preschool program and today is the executive secretary of an entire parish religious education program.

Many of our confirmation group leaders at St. Rita's view their involvement in the kids' service projects as a gift to themselves, something they'd always wanted to do but never had time for before.

Passing on the faith to others helps us to make it on our own.

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Catechist

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however, I get a parent who says, "We never had to do service projects when I was in school. We just went to classes and then got confirmed."

How do you reply?

I tell them the gospel can't be confined to a text and a classroom. It must be lived.

How has the role of parents changed in religious education?

For a while, the Church forgot that parents are the primary religious educators. Children's religious education was usurped by the professionals. The parents just sent the kids to school and let the sisters take care of it.

Now, however, parents have gotten away from using catechetical ministers as filling stations. Parents act as a team with us. If they're not teaching, they're picking up films, providing transportation for other people's kids, or working on the parish newsletter.

Surely you must find some parents who are not responsive.

When parents just send their children to religion class and don't seem to care, we reach out and try to understand why they can't do what we expect them to do. After all, they must care or they wouldn't send their children.

So what's keeping them from full participation? Sometimes it's an alcoholic in the family. Other times it's a divorce or second marriage. One woman in a second

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