

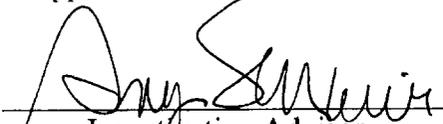
THE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL AGE PARENTHOOD ON THE  
GRADUATION RATE OF ALTERNATE SCHOOL STUDENTS

by  
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ABSTRACT

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The effects of school age parenthood on the graduation rate of alternate school students  
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Graduation, the successful completion of high school, may seem unattainable to students who have failed or withdrawn from classes repeatedly. Students who have fallen far behind their peers in credits earned are considered at risk of not graduating. Often, at risk students are placed in alternative schools which, through individualized attention and courses designed for credit remediation, provide at risk students with the opportunity to graduate on time. When a student who is already designated at risk faces the additional stressor of early parenthood, logic would suggest, and indeed research demonstrates, that the student's chances of completing high school would decline. This study compares the graduation rates of alternate school seniors (or older) who are pregnant or parenting teens with those who are not. The premise of this research is that the factor of becoming a parent may, in some cases, lead to a student taking home and school responsibilities more seriously, thus increasing his/her chances for graduation.

The information about the graduation rates was collected through a survey of 10 alternative schools in Wisconsin. There was an attempt to use information from schools with similar characteristics in terms of school size, school purpose\*, and community size. The survey collected statistics about the number of seniors (or older) students, the number of pregnant or parenting seniors, and the number of each of those groups who graduated. The information was requested for each of the past three years.

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\*Schools chosen consisted of credit deficient students in general, without an emphasis on teen parents or a significant population of expelled students.

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## Chapter 1--Introduction

The fate of teen parents is of great importance to our communities because of the numbers involved, “. . .about one million teenagers--12 percent of all 15-to 19-year olds--are getting pregnant each year; teenagers are responsible for 12 percent of all the births of the U.S.” (Woodman, 1997, p. 36). The literature is replete with forebodings of doom for teen parents and their offspring. Teen parenthood is described as leading to unemployment, poverty, and suffering (Bassey, 1996; Eby & Donovan, 1997). Glazer states that there is a “remarkably poor prognosis for the average family launched by a teen birth. Compared with families where the first child is born later, teen mothers are less likely to complete high school, tend to earn less and are disproportionately poor” (Glazer, 1988, p. 2). Murray cites illegitimacy, a factor in many teen pregnancies, as “the single most important social problem of our time--more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy, welfare or homelessness--because it drives everything else”(Murray, 1993, p.A14). The Robin Hood Foundation commissioned a special report entitled Kids Having Kids, which examined the costs of adolescent child-bearing in the United States.

“Of the half a million teens who give birth each year, roughly three fourths are giving birth for the first time. Even more striking, more than 175,000 of these new mothers and their offspring are especially vulnerable to severe adverse social and economic consequences. More than 80 percent of these young mothers end up in poverty and reliant on welfare, many for the majority of their children’s critically important developmental years.” (Maynard, 1996, p.1).

According to the report, “researchers estimate that adolescent childbearing itself costs the tax payers \$6.9 billion each year” including higher public assistance benefits, medical care expenses, “the increased number of criminals caused by adolescent childbearing. . . and the increased costs of foster care” (Maynard, 1996, pp.18-19).

Woodman recognizes the social factors challenging teen parents, but also sees a political angle that allows continued negative attention to this group. She states that, “Pregnant teens are an easy target: they are a young, impoverished, and largely disenfranchised segment of the U.S. public. Because it involves poor, mostly unmarried young mothers, the teen pregnancy issue taps into a vengeful national mood that blames women and demands harsh, ideological solutions to complex and seemingly intractable problems” (Woodman, 1997, p. 36). In a Children’s Defense Fund publication entitled, Poverty Matters: The Cost of Child Poverty in America, Arloc Sherman removes the focus from the teen parents when he reports that “(p)overty puts children at a greater risk of falling behind in school than does living in a single parent home or being born to teenage parents. . .” (Sherman, 1997, p.1).

Perhaps it is a political agenda that maintains such a negative outlook for teen parents, yet there are signs of a brighter future for teen parents and their offspring than the earlier comments would suggest. Upchurch and McCarthy note some societal changes for this group, “the enactment of Title IX of the Educational Act of 1972 make it illegal for schools receiving federal funding to expel students because of pregnancy or parenthood. In addition, changing marital patterns and more tolerant social norms have made adolescent childbearing less socially stigmatizing” (Upchurch & McCarthy, 1990, p. 224). The impact of these changes is seen in an increased graduation rate for school age mothers from 19 percent in 1958 to 56 percent in 1986 (Upchurch & McCarthy, 1989). In 1996, the statistics are once again discouraging. Maynard reported that

“(o)nly about three of 10 adolescent mothers earn a high school diploma by age 30 compared with nearly 76 percent in the comparison group. Adolescent childbearing alone accounts for more than 40 percent of this difference. Adolescent childbearing is responsible for over 30,000 adolescent girls annually not completing high school” (Maynard, 1996, p.12).

Finkel, looking at one program for teen parents, found that “. . .two- thirds of pilot participants graduated high school, there was a greater likelihood of graduating the longer one was in the program, and women without a repeat pregnancy were likely to finish school” (Finkel, 1997, p.1). Regarding financial implications of early parenthood, Geronimus & Korenman state, “Within- family estimates suggest that the standard cross-sectional approaches to studying the effects of teen childbearing on future socioeconomic well- being overstate the costs of teen childbearing. . . Differences in high school completion and current marital status can account for all of the lower income (from within- family estimates) of teen mothers in their thirties. . .” (Geronimus & Korenman, 1992, pp. 1208-1210). Their findings suggest that, in thinking of the future well being of teen parent-headed families, the factor of graduation from high school is significant.

This study examines the graduation rates of at risk students in alternate schools in mid-sized Wisconsin cities--comparing pregnant or parenting seniors with those at risk seniors without that additional challenge--to determine whether the probability for a successful completion from high school are as discouraging as some may suggest. At risk students are defined by Wisconsin statutes to be “pupils in grades 5 to 12 who are one or more years behind their age group in the number of high school credits attained, or 2 or more years behind their age group in basic skill levels, and are also one or more of the following:

1. Dropouts.
- 2m.[sic] Habitual truants. . .
3. Parents.
4. Adjudicated delinquents.” (Children at risk, 1997, p. 2612).

Alternative programs were established as one way to help at risk students earn a high school diploma. By focusing attention on alternate school students who are also dealing with school age parenthood, the “worst case scenario” is seen; those students with not one, but two strikes against their chances for graduation.

The indicator of high school graduation is used in this study because high school graduation is a widely recognized entry point to a successful future. “Keeping children in school through graduation is one of the most effective deterrents to a life of poverty. National research continues to affirm that school success is the single most important qualification is assuring one’s future career opportunities, economic independence, and well-being” (Smith, 1989, p. 1). Looking at dropouts instead of graduates would focus on failure and would present complications due to a lack of a consistent definition for a dropout (Ascher & Schwartz, 1987; McKay, 1993; Sylvester, 1992).

There are some limitations inherent in this study. The number of alternate schools in Wisconsin, which are similar in size and function to each other, is small. The number of students participating in alternative schools is also small because of the nature of the programs, so between these two factors, the ability to generalize to a larger population is finite. A second shortcoming is that, although alternate schools are in place to assist at risk youth graduate from high school, the individual schools vary greatly in terms of the populations that they serve, the size of the school, the manner in which the staff carry out their work with the students, and even in the mission guiding the school.

Each state’s statutes regarding education contrast with those of other states, and in Wisconsin, two policies impact the generalizability of the outcomes. One is the mandate for children to remain in school until they are 18 (or meet specific criteria); the other is the home schooling procedure. Because of the expectation for students to remain in school until they are 18, the percent of graduates from a senior class in Wisconsin would likely be smaller than the percent of graduates from a senior class in Minnesota, for example, where students are allowed to withdraw from school at age 16. The reason for this is that those students who remained in school in Minnesota until their senior year are likely those who have had or who anticipate having success in school; if not, they could just withdraw. In Wisconsin, on the other hand, the senior class would probably be more diverse in ability and hope for academic success, because students are mandated to

attend. Regarding home schooling, in Wisconsin the procedure for enrolling and remaining in home schooling requires a parent to file a form each year informing the government of intentions to home school your child (Benson, 1999). There is no requirement for a certain level of education for the parent in charge of education, nor is there a requirement to provide any proof that any education is actually being accomplished. In some cases, parents have withdrawn their son or daughter from school, saying that they intend to home school the child, when they appear to school authorities to be attempting to circumvent the mandatory attendance law. A state with different standards for home schooling would differ in the effect of that standard on their graduation rates.

The author of this study has worked in an alternative high school for more than 6 years and has observed that the impact of parenthood has, in some cases, provided the already at risk student with a reason to take a responsible approach to education. An alternate school student who is the mother of a 3 month old girl was asked about the changes she has experienced since becoming pregnant and giving birth. She admitted that previous to her pregnancy, she had skipped school frequently and even ran away from home for an extended time. Her current attendance at the alternative school is very good. She said, "it (the pregnancy) made me think that I have to go (to school). It adds another reason why I have to graduate, I wanted to graduate before, but now I have to for her, to try to go to college, get a good job." Another student said that the pregnancy has "made me want to get it (high school requirements) done right away, eager to finish, more ambitious to get it done. I don't want to come back (to school) after I have the baby." Carol Lendle, a public health nurse who has worked closely with teen parents for years, described what she has observed in many of the teen parents with whom she has worked, "they mature, almost overnight. They fall in love with the baby almost immediately and make healthy changes for the baby that they may not have made for themselves on their own." A positive finding in this study would support this commentary and strike a chord

of hope for the future generation.

Preventing teen pregnancy is a current concern of public figures, but that subject is beyond the focus of this paper. This author has no desire to encourage early parenthood, as the challenges therein are significant and well-known; rather, to give those who are already teen parents a reason to believe in themselves. Those of us who work with these students can also benefit from a positive note. Predictions of doom for young parents, accurate or not, present one more reason for discouragement, at a time when these youth must draw upon their inner strength to survive, much less to be successful. If the doom-mongers are inaccurate, their discouraging message is even more devastating.

## Chapter 2--Review of the Literature

The literature review will consist of the following sections in order: dropouts; at risk students; alternate schools; and the educational experiences of pregnant and/or parenting teens.

### The Dropout Problem

#### Definition

A term in popular literature, a “high school dropout” appears clear at first glance—someone that has left school—and yet a commonly accepted manner of counting the number of dropouts has not been developed. According to Ascher & Schwartz, “The definition of ‘dropout’ varies among school districts, and the mobility of students makes counting dropouts accurately nearly impossible” (Ascher & Schwartz, 1987, p.2). They go on to describe some of the situations in which students leave school, which should not be classified as dropouts: those on extended leave; those who later return to graduate; those who withdraw to join the Job Corps; and those who withdraw to work on their General Educational Development credential (GED) (Ascher & Schwartz, 1987). Without a common definition, comparison of data across school districts is faulty (Fossey, 1996) which makes it difficult to identify successful programs (McKay, 1993). Aaron Pallas of Michigan State University is quoted by Sylvester as saying that counting dropouts “is a social and political process,” not a simple matter of number crunching (Sylvester, 1992, p.1). Fossey suggests several reasons that school districts may have for not tracking students more accurately including embarrassment about the number of dropouts, unrealistic accountability standards, and a decision to a focus on the students

that can be saved (Fossey, 1996). Another possible explanation is that school districts may lack the resources for the complex system needed to ensure accuracy (Ascher & Schwartz, 1997).

Several ways of counting dropouts include the event rate, the completion rate, and the holding power index. The event rate counts “the number of students who leave school in a single year without getting a degree” (Sylvester, 1992, p.2). This data is easy to obtain, however, it does not differentiate between those actually dropping out and those who have moved out of the district, withdrawn for home schooling, or died, for example. The process for obtaining the completion rate involves “(s)urveying households to find out how many household members in certain age groups have not completed high school” (Sylvester, 1992, p.2). This process obviously involves time and money beyond the reach of most school districts and requires a high level of cooperation to achieve any level of accuracy. The holding power index (HPI) is “(t)he ability to hold a cohort of students in high school through graduation” (McKay, 1993, p.206). “The HPI formula is the number of graduates divided by the number of students entering the class, minus those leaving the class before graduation” (McKay, 1993, p.206). Sponhour reports that while this number is used nationally, it can still be deceptive—influenced by such factors as a growing district or late graduates who go uncounted (Sponhour, 1990). Despite national efforts, the accurate, consistent counting of dropouts remains a challenge.

### Scope of the Problem

The number of dropouts in our nation is great. “The national dropout rate has held steady at about 25 percent for the past 25 years. Between 700,000 and 1 million students quit school each year” (Sponhour, 1990, p.2). “In 1997, just over three-quarters of the 18-

through 24-year olds not still in high school were reported as being high school graduates (76.7 percent); another 9.1 percent of these youths were reported as having completed by an alternative route such as the GED” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p.22).

Indeed, the National Center of Education Statistics reports that “the emphasis given in recent years to decreasing dropout rates and also revising standards and high school graduation requirements may have translated into an increase in the use of alternative methods of high school completion, rather than an overall decrease in dropout rates of increase in the proportion of young adults holding a high school credential” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 22). The numbers add up: “(t)he cumulative effect of hundreds of thousands of young adults leaving school each year short of finishing a high school program translates into several million young adults who are out of school, yet lacking a high school credential” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p.22).

There are differences in the high school completion rates (this statistic includes a high school diploma or an equivalent credential) among various groups. “White youth are still more likely than both black and Hispanic youth to complete high school. . . In 1997, 90.5 percent of all white youth ages 18 to 24 had completed high school, followed by 82.0 percent of black and 66.7 percent of Hispanics” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p.16). Differences were noted in the dropout rates across the country. “Status dropout rates in the Midwest were significantly lower than those in the South and West” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 13). Wisconsin’s rates of high school completion for three sets of three years follow: 1989-1991, 93.4 percent; 1992-1994, 93.4 percent; 1995-1997, 90.7 percent. These rates compare favorably with the national rates.

The GED is one common alternative to the high school diploma. It consists of a series of 5 tests designed to cover content in the areas of social studies, reading, grammar/writing, math and science. "About three-quarters of a million people take the GED test each year and nearly a half million test takers receive a GED credential" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p.19). The GED is considered a lesser credential; it is valuable as a sign of knowledge, but does not demonstrate the self-discipline and perseverance of a high school diploma. Wisconsin offers students an opportunity to earn an HSED (High School Equivalency Diploma) which consists of the five tests included in the GED, and documented "instruction in the areas of health, civic literacy and career education or have successfully completed testing in these three areas" (Wisconsin Literacy Resource Information, 1999, p.1).

#### Social Impacts of the Dropout Problem

The financial costs to the United States related to dropouts have been estimated to be "296 billion dollars in lost productivity and foregone taxes over the course of that class's lifetime" (Unks, 1993, p.229). Unks details related expenses, "Also consider the cost of other services that are related to undereducation. Confinement of one person in a federal prison costs \$20,072 per year. . . Add in welfare, health, and employment services, and the nation faces a bill that dwarfs the costs of excellent prenatal, neonatal, and early childhood care for all children" (Unks, 1993, p.229). Beyond the financial costs, the dropouts are a loss to the work force. "Now. . . technological advances in the workplace have increased the demand for a skilled labor force to the point where a high school education serves more as a minimum requirement for entry to the labor force. The completion of a high school education is now even more essential as a basis for entry

both into additional education and training or into the labor force” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p.16). The large-scale impact of a reduced work force has political implications.

Politicians and business leaders fear that the dropout dilemma, if left unchecked, will soon inflict even deeper wounds on American society. Almost overnight, high technology has pitted nation against nation on a competitive economic battlefield. A bloated roll of dropouts could sap America’s strength for that fight. It’s a simple fact of supply and demand: fewer young workers coming into an economy that needs more people with high-level skills. Even a solid high school education might not be enough (Sponhour, 1990, p.5).

The concern devoted to the dropout issue is justified, given the implications noted above. On a much smaller scale, “(a)ccording to a 1987 report by the National Research Council, for each year of school completed by a teenage mother, the likelihood of her children repeating a grade will be reduced by as much as 50 percent. . .” (Dorrell, 1994, p.225).

### At Risk Students

#### Factors Related to the Risk of Dropping Out

The factors related to a student being at risk for not graduating, or for dropping out, range from biological to environmental. Unks traces the roots of difficulty in school back to the womb citing maternal health habits as a key element in the quality of neurological development (Unks, 1993). While the logic and notability of this assertion are recognized, these factors are very remote from the current context. In a more readily

observable realm, Sylvester notes explanations for a student dropping out. “Most experts agree that there are four basic reasons: lack of academic success; a feeling that no one in the school cares about them; a feeling that school isn’t relevant to their present or future lives; or serious personal problems” (Sylvester, 1992, p.2). “Four background factors have a significant effect on a woman’s risk of dropping out of school” including 2 or more types of reading materials in the home, intact families, mothers and fathers with 12 or more years of education, and enrollment in a college preparatory program (Upchurch & McCarthy, 1990, p.230). Wisconsin’s Executive Committee on Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention cites a relationship between risky behaviors with an increased risk of being sexually active among those teens who are dropping out of school, delinquent, and abusing substances (Executive Committee, 1998). Marrying or having children can also place a student at higher risk for dropout (Gaustad, 1991), as can an early sexual debut (Upchurch & McCarthy, 1990). Internal factors, such as a fear of failure (Masson, 1998) or “underlying motivational processes as revealed through measures of self- esteem and locus of control” (Finn & Rock, 1997, p. 231) may significantly effect a student’s performance.

#### Lack of Predictability

It is interesting to note that, although the above factors may place a student at increased risk of dropping out, being in a risk group is not necessarily a good predictor of educational performance or outcome. Gaustad describes the phenomenon: “(d)ifferent risk factors are important in different communities. Even within the same school, students drop out for different reasons. Finally, most dropouts are simply unexplained. The majority of students within any particular risk factor do not drop out, and the majority of

dropouts are not in the at-risk groups” (Gaustad, 1991, p. 2). Surprisingly, students deemed to be at risk might not even suffer from poor performance (Finn & Rock, 1997).

### Characteristics of Successful At Risk Students

School related attitudes and behaviors that are related to success include recognition of personal responsibility for academic achievement and the demonstration of that responsibility measured through being on time, being prepared for class, and attending regularly. These behaviors, referred to as academic engagement, are seen by some as the best inroad for increasing a student’s academic achievement (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994). It may be surprising to hear that “. . .extensive extracurricular participation does not have a direct link to sustained academic achievement among students at risk” (Finn & Rock, 1997. p. 231).

### Alternate Schools

#### Description

Wisconsin statutes mandate that “(u)pon request of a pupil who is a child at risk or the pupil’s parent or guardian, a school board. . . shall enroll the pupil in the program for children at risk” (Children at risk, 1997 p. 2612). According to Kathy Mehls, guidance counselor for both the Chippewa Falls High School and the Chippewa County Alternate School, in the Chippewa Falls School District for senior high school at risk students, early interventions include a work incentive program, and academic resource centers (open before school, during the school day, and after school to provide academic support) (personal communication, April 7, 2000). Later interventions include summer school (available to sophomores and juniors) and night school (available to juniors and

seniors). When those interventions are insufficient to assist the student to meet graduation requirements, the student may be allowed the opportunity to attend the alternate school. For alternate schools, the dictate from the state is that the school size is to range from 40 to 200 students, be located within 5 miles of the school district, and to allow students to work towards earning a diploma (Children at risk, 1997). Conant reports,

The special facilitative school climate offered by alternative schools can improve student self-esteem, reduce the dropout rate, and increase productivity. . . Strategies for keeping at-risk [sic] students in the students in school and for enhancing their self-esteem include limiting class sizes, selecting teachers carefully, being flexible, and avoiding the conventional model of school in which rewards and penalties dominate the teacher-student relationship (Conant, 1992, p.1).

Bill Bejin, the principal of the Chippewa County Alternate School describes how alternate schools help at risk students remediate credits. “Alternate schools provide a different learning environment and curriculum which often meets the needs of at risk students better than a traditional high school setting. For example, independent study courses allow students to work at their own pace and get help when needed. They also allow the students to move through courses more quickly” (personal communication, April 4, 2000).

### Advantages

The smaller size of alternate schools is an advantage. Woods states, “(s)ize and location of the school or program play a role in dropout prevention. . . Small size and a

low student/teacher ratio are particularly beneficial. Alternate schools designed to serve at-risk populations of students have been successful. . .” (Woods, 1999, p.7). Students in smaller schools feel more supported and cared about and respond with better attendance and participation (Finn & Voelkl, 1993). An alternate school student comments on his experience at an alternate school, “You’re on a one-on-one [sic] basis with your teachers; you call them by their first names. It’s like they’re your friends- not just your teachers- and it makes a big difference.” Smaller schools allow for individualized instruction and caring relationships, which encourage success (Damico & Roth, 1994; Woods, 1999). Smaller schools may allow for more flexible approaches to better suit the learning styles of all learners (Sylvester, 1992).

One of the accommodations that an alternative school may allow is 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> year enrollment options, which obviously allows more time for lingering students to complete their high school graduation requirements (Fossey, 1996). The ability of alternate schools to meet the at risk students’ needs through individualized learning approaches, establishing caring relationships, and allowing the extra time that may be necessary to complete the requirements fosters in the students a sense of working together, perhaps a sense of community. Royal and Rossi studied communally organized schools and found that students in those schools “showed more interest in academics and greater achievement gains, and they dropped out at lower rates” (Royal & Rossi, 1997, pp.2-3). Thus, the at risk students who are in alternate school providing opportunities for a sense a community and hope for academic success likely have a lower rate of dropping out of school than the students with risk factors who do not attend an alternate school.

## Pregnant and Parenting Students

### Challenges Faced

There is no argument that pregnancy and parenthood make following through on responsibilities more difficult for school age parents. Along with the physical discomforts that can accompany pregnancy to various degrees, a pregnant student often finds her mind preoccupied with the changes in her body and her future. A parenting student deals with an unending responsibility to care for a needy infant or toddler, physically, emotionally, and financially. Students juggle multiple responsibilities. One teen mother of a 10 month old girl admits, “it’s hard to concentrate on homework because you always have to worry about what she’s doing and where she is.” Childcare arrangements can be difficult to coordinate and pay for, and may be unreliable. In a recent week, a teen mom’s child care provider was not available, so she enlisted the help of friends in order to attend school. Dealing with a sick child can throw off the best of plans. Teen pregnancies are more likely to result in premature births or low birth weight babies, which can cause additional health problems, as well as additional stress for the parents (Glazer, 1993; Unks, 1993). Childbearing adolescents as a group spend “57 percent more time as a single parent during the first 13 years of parenthood” (Maynard, 1996, p.12).

### Educational Impact of Parental Status

Given the challenges noted above, it is not surprising to learn that some students dealing with these hurdles do not achieve their high school diploma. “After controlling for both observed and unobserved differences in background and personal characteristics, we found that early childbearing reduced the educational attainment of young women by one to three years” (Klepinger, et.al., 1995, p.27). As noted earlier, the study completed

by the Robin Hood Foundation researchers found that only 30% of the adolescent mothers studied completed their high school diploma requirements by age 30 (Maynard, 1996).

Comparing the factor of parenthood with that of marriage for its impact on educational achievement, Chavez reported the following percentages of females who graduated in three groups: 95 percent of females who had neither married nor had a child, 84 percent of those who had married and were without children, and 58 percent of those who had a child but never married (Chavez, 1998). Most of the research regarding the effects of early parenthood has been done on young women. The Robin Hood Foundation researchers looked at teen dads and found that,

(a)adolescent dads will finish an average of only 11.3 years by the age of 27, compared with nearly 13 years by their counterparts who delay fathering until age 21. . . adolescent childbearing and closely linked factors account for adolescent dads finishing one semester less school than the comparison group of older fathers. In many cases, the semester may be the pivotal one that determines whether a high school senior will graduate or drop out (Maynard, 1996, p.17).

While the above information paints a grim picture, there are some positive notes from research with contradictory findings:

Women who manage to remain in school when they become mothers fare just as well of women who progress straight through without dropping out or having a baby. . . For each race/ethnic group, women who had a baby while in school were more likely to graduate than to

drop out of school. This relationship was strongest for white women, followed by Hispanics and blacks. . . For all race/ethnic groups, women who had a baby while enrolled in school are no less likely to eventually graduate than women who progressed straight through to graduation (Upchurch & McCarthy, 1990, p.228).

For those who do not earn a high school diploma, there is still some hope by way of this group's higher rate of completion of the GED mentioned earlier. However, the GED does not bring with it the earning power of the diploma.

In terms of social functioning, there is also reason for hope. "A 1990 study of 2,000 youths found that teenaged mothers show significantly lower rates of substance abuse, stress, depression, and suicide than their peers" (Males, 1997, p.51). Males concludes that ". . . impoverished girls who get pregnant may not be the heedless, self-destructive figures politicians and the media portray" (Males, 1997, p.51). This encouraging viewpoint reflects this researcher's experience with parenting at risk students who are motivated to turn away from their past behaviors and show responsibility for the sake of their child(ren).

#### Social and Economic Consequences

The combination of lower academic achievement, single parenting with inadequate support from absent fathers, and low rates of marriage combine to make it very difficult for teen parents to provide for their offspring (Maynard, 1996). As a result of the financial pressures and their inability to meet them, "(a)bout 50 percent of all teen mothers are on welfare within one year of the birth of their first child. . . With two children, teen mothers are more likely to stay on welfare for many years" (Glazer, 1993,

pp.2-3). The U.S. General Accounting Office bears discouraging news, “(w)omen who begin childbearing during their teenage years are significantly more likely than women who postpone having children to live in poverty, to receive public assistance, and to have long periods of welfare dependency” (GAO, 1995, p.3). This fact is made more significant by the reality that “(t)he birth rate for unmarried women aged 15 to 19 increased threefold between 1960 and 1992” (GAO, 1995, p.3), resulting in a larger portion of the population living in poverty and needing assistance. Indeed, many of the births are to young mothers who are already living in poverty. “For white women below the poverty line in the year prior to giving birth, 44% of births have been illegitimate, compared with only 6% for women above the poverty line. White illegitimacy is overwhelmingly a lower-class phenomenon” (Murray, 1993, p.A14). Dorrell observes that “(t)he phenomenon of children having children is creating generations of children who will live in poverty and who are unlikely to receive the necessary assistance to have healthy and productive lives” (Dorrell, 1994, p.224). He further recognizes that “. . .the current job market makes it extremely difficult for an under-educated single parent to support her child. Such conditions and feelings continue the cycle of dependency from generation to generation” (Dorrell, 1994, p.225).

In an attempt to discourage a cycle of poverty, politicians have initiated welfare reform. There have been limits to the amount of money a family can receive and how long it can continue receiving benefits. “The hope behind these policies is that if welfare is harder to get, teenagers will be discouraged from giving birth to babies they have no means of supporting” (Woodman, 1997, p.39). Wisconsin has been a forerunner in welfare reform. Similar to other welfare reforms, “. . .Wisconsin’s welfare replacement

program, Wisconsin Works (W-2) strives to remove any incentives to adolescent pregnancy. . . For example, teens are no longer eligible for cash payments and it encourages teen parents to remain in school by providing access to subsidized childcare” (EEAPP, 1998, p.8). However, the theory behind welfare reform, that decreased benefits will decrease the number of births to teens, has not been proven. On the contrary, Newton reports that adolescents tend not to use contraceptive devices in their sexual activity because they interfere with spontaneity. He calls their attitude toward birth control cavalier, and concludes, “(T)he impulsiveness of adolescents with regard to sexuality, allied with adolescent self-consciousness, works against the use of birth control as a means of preventing adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases” (Newton, 1995, p.101). The possible consequences of sexual activity appear to take a back seat in the mind of an adolescent, whether the consequences are child bearing, disease, or finances. A more realistic and validated theory is described by sociologist Ruth Sidel, who is quoted as saying, “(t)he quickest way to lessen the number of children women have is to give them real options. Women with the lowest birthrates are those who have other goals in life” (Woodman, 1997, p.40).

#### Help for Young Parents

Students who are parents can achieve educational success. There are conditions in families, schools, and individuals that are associated with a greater chance of success. Some of these factors can be manipulated and some cannot. In families, higher levels of parental education and income, an intact nuclear family, residing outside of the southern U.S., and being Caucasian are linked with success. In schools, a high income school (with more resources, high expectations, and peers with higher levels of performance), an

engaged teaching staff, for Black students, a racially diverse school, and positive educational labels on the student can make a difference. In the individual, performing well in school, being engaged in school, and planning to attend post-secondary school are all associated with educational achievement (Manlove & George, 1996). The importance of these students feeling accepted is recognized. "Teenage parents have the same needs as other students including being accepted by their peers and being able to continue their involvement with school activities" (Dorrell, 1994, p.225).

Alternate schools are cited as being able to meet the needs of teenage mothers. Successful programs offer many of the following services: classes in parenting, child development, and personal and child health; individual counseling; transportation; and child care (GAO, 1995). Child care services, or at least assistance in arranging and paying for them, are widely recognized as significant to the chances of educational success for teen parents (Dorrell, 1994; GAO, 1995). School age parents who are also at risk students may drop out of school, which would impact their earning potential, and possibly increase the demands on the public welfare system. Alternate schools, with the individual attention and array of services that they provide, offer at risk school age parents a better chance of successful completion of high school, which is a significant step towards a successful future.

## Chapter 3—Method

### Participants

The subjects of the study include students at selected Wisconsin alternate schools who were seniors<sup>1</sup> or older during the past three school years. The alternate schools to be surveyed were chosen on the basis of community size, with an effort to find schools similar in size and focus to the Chippewa County Alternate School. Large school districts, such as Madison and Milwaukee were excluded because they have an array of alternate schools to offer students, which might skew results. Small town schools were excluded because they may not be big enough to support an alternate school, or may have one so small that the size could influence the results. The schools were located through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction web page.

A survey (Appendix A) was sent to the selected schools requesting information about school size and purpose, along with numbers of seniors or older who were school age parents and those who were not, and the number of each group who graduated for the past three years. These numbers were computed to provide percentages of graduates for each group. No demographic information was collected, so gender, race, and socioeconomic status for the participants is unknown.

The Human Subjects Committee of UW-Stout, to ensure that the treatment of subjects met the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association, reviewed and approved the research plan and survey. The inquiry was prefaced with a paragraph advising potential participants of their rights regarding the research.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the definition of seniors was not supplied, it is possible that this is not a consistent group. The definition I used for the Chippewa County Alternate School was a student in the fourth year after 8<sup>th</sup> grade, regardless of the number of credits he or she had earned. Some other schools may have used different criteria.

## Procedure

The survey was designed with simplicity in mind to increase the likelihood of response. The surveys were sent to the selected schools along with the cover letter (Appendix B) and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The letter requested a response within 2 weeks. Those who did not respond within that period were sent a reminder letter (Appendix C), along with another copy of the survey. Another 2 weeks were allowed for response. Phone calls were then made to some that had not responded and replacement surveys were sent. The information received from participants was then collated.

### Chapter 4--Results

The information and data collected from the participating schools follow.

#### **School 1**

Location: the northwest quadrant of Wisconsin.

Population: about 115 students per year, with a cap of 60 students at a time.

Focus: credit deficient students (at least one year behind in the number of credits earned), some of whom are working on HSED

Percent credit deficient: about 90%

Do pregnant and parenting students need to meet the same criteria as other students?: Yes

Year	Preg/parenting		Non-preg/parenting	
	# grads/#seniors	%	#grads/#seniors	%
98/99	7/15	47	24/61	39
97/98	4/9	44	13/60	22
96/97	3/13	23	18/57	32

#### **School 2**

Location: the southern third of the state, near Madison, the state capital.

Population: about 60 students enrolled at one time.

Focus: alienated youth and school age parents

Percent credit deficient: 40-50%

Pregnant/parenting students need to meet same criteria: no

Year	Preg/parenting		Non-preg/parenting	
	# grads/#seniors	%	#grads/#seniors	%
98/99	5/6	83	3/ 4	75

The 98/99 school year was the first one that School 2 was open.

### School 3

Location: the northwest section of the state.

Population: typically 24 students are enrolled at one time.

Focus: students in grades 6-12 who are at risk of being expelled, or are returning from expulsion or an out-of-community placement.

Percent credit deficient: about 50%

Preg/parenting need to meet same criteria: no

Year	Preg/parenting		Non-preg/parenting	
	# grads/#seniors	%	#grads/#seniors	%
98/99	0/0	0	3/3	100
97/98	1/1	100	1/1	100
96/97	0/0	0	1/1	100

### School 4

Location: north of the center of the state.

Population: about 175 students at one time

Percent credit deficient: most (a specific number was not supplied)

Graduates: about 60-70 students graduate per year.

Note: The respondent from School 4 gave the following reasons for not providing the requested information: students may enroll anytime in the school year; they may not need to actually attend school to complete graduation requirements (e.g. work component); records of pregnancy and parenting are not kept; and students are not defined by traditional grade levels. These reasons seem to reflect the flexibility offered in many alternate schools, which can make definitions unclear (or at least unconventional) and statistics difficult to track.

### School 5

Location: the northern quadrant of Wisconsin

Population: about 95 students are enrolled at a time

Focus: serving credit deficient students.

Percent credit deficient: 97

Preg/parenting students need to meet same criteria: no

Year	Preg/parenting		Non-preg/parenting	
	# grads/#seniors	%	#grads/#seniors	%
98/99	2/3	67	21/25	84
97/98	2/2	100	27/30	90
96/97	2/4	50	(Not available)	

Table 1 (p.28) summarizes the survey results, providing the numbers of potential and actual graduates for the pregnant/parenting students (P/P) and for those who are not

pregnant/parenting (Non P/P). Although some schools reported more than one year, each group was treated separately to enlarge the sample size. The year for each group is noted. Figure 1 shows the percentages of graduates for each group. The P/P group of percentages has a mean of 72 with a standard deviation of 26. The Non P/P group has a mean of 72 with a standard deviation of 30. The *t* test value was  $-.27$  with a *df* of 15. The test demonstrated that the difference between the groups was not significant, even at the .10 level ( $p > .10$ ), and in fact, the Non P/P group had a higher mean, suggesting a higher frequency of graduation than the P/P group.

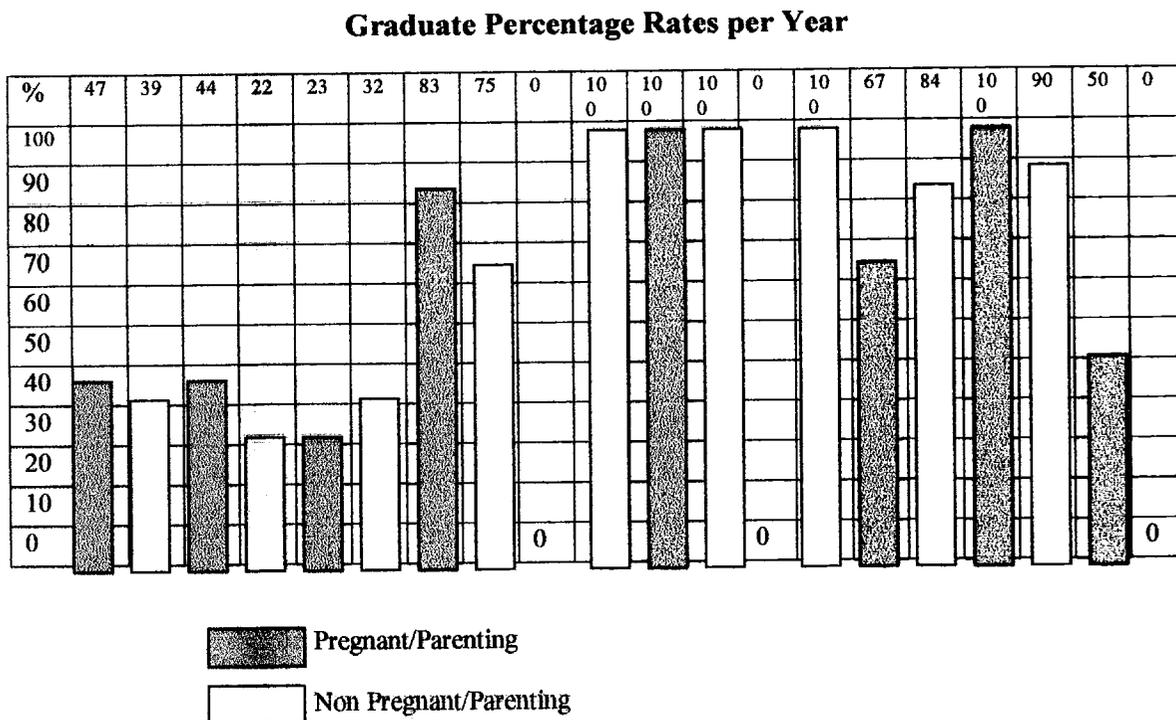
Table 1

**Raw Data**  
Numbers of graduating students/ number of seniors or older for each group

	<b>Year</b>	<b>P/P</b>	<b>Non P/P</b>
School 1	98/99	7/15	24/61
	97/98	4/9	13/60
	96/97	3/13	18/57
School 2	98/99	5/6	3/ 4
School 3	98/99	0	3/3
	97/98	1/1	1/1
	96/97	0	1/1
School 5*	98/99	2/3	21/25
	97/98	2/2	27/30
	96/97	2/4	0

\*School 4 did not supply data.

Figure 1



### Chapter 5—Discussion

The statistical results do not support the original hypothesis that the factor of pregnancy or parenting improves an at risk student's chances for graduation. Rather, when alternate school students were grouped by school and year, the school age parents had a lower mean (of percentage of graduates per group) than did those who are not dealing with the added responsibility of a child (64% mean for pregnant/parenting, 72% mean for non-pregnant/parenting). Having the challenge of facing not one, but two obstacles, (at risk status and school age parenting) does, according to my results, slightly decrease a student's chance for graduation. Anecdotal evidence shows that some individuals can rise to the challenge and reach the academic milestone, but as a group, pregnant and parenting alternate school students do not outperform their alternate school counterparts.

Comparing the outcomes at different schools, the percentage of graduates appears to be substantially lower in School 1 (22-47%) than in Schools 2, 3, and 5 (50-100%) (see Table 1). Factors, which include the size and composition of the school, could be effecting the percentage of graduates. The group sizes in School 1 (9-15 for pregnant/parenting students and 57-61 for non-pregnant/parenting students) are much larger than the group sizes for Schools 2, 3, and 5 (1-4 for pregnant/parenting students, 1-30 for non-pregnant/parenting ones). The data supports the concept that a school having a smaller group of students has a higher percentage of graduates, which is consistent with the literature, and indeed, with the ideology behind alternate schools. In terms of school composition, School 1 serves not only those students who are working towards high school graduation, but also those who are eventually headed towards their HSED. Those

students who have no intention of completing their diploma are included in the total number of seniors for both the school age parents and those who are not. Because their measure of success is not a high school diploma, but rather, the completion of an HSED, they lower the percentage of graduates from School 1. The other schools may or may not serve seniors pursuing their HSED. Another difference in the composition of the school populations is that in Schools 2, 3, and 5, pregnant and parenting students do not need to be credit deficient to enroll. In fact, in schools 2 and 3, only about 40-50% of students are credit deficient, as opposed to the 90-97% who are credit deficient in Schools 1 and 5. Those seniors who are not credit deficient would logically have a smaller number of credits to complete prior to graduation than those who are, increasing the former group's chances for success.

A different way of looking at the raw data, rather than treating each school or year as a separate entity, is to aggregate the statistics from the schools together to form 2 large groups—one of pregnant/parenting alternate school students and the other of non-pregnant/ parenting alternate school students—and compare the percentage of graduates from each of those groups.

**Total # of students**

Pregnant/parenting		Non-pregnant/parenting	
# graduates/# seniors	%	# graduates/# seniors	%
26/53	49	111/242	46

As you can see, when compiled together, the pregnant/parenting group's rate of graduation is slightly higher than the non-pregnant/parenting group. Both of the groups have a relatively low percentage of graduates.

Of the schools who were sent surveys, only 5 of the 10 schools selected responded, despite reminders and phone calls. Perhaps the schools that did not respond were similar to School 4, which did not track statistics in a format conducive to completing the survey. It is also possible that the staff member who received the survey was not comfortable sharing the information; for example, graduation rates may have been lower than was considered desirable. It is also possible that the school representative believed that the school was so unique in character that the survey responses would misrepresent the school. In the absence of a response, one can only speculate.

Further research into the questions raised by this research could include a larger scale view, perhaps surveying all Wisconsin alternative schools—which could provide a large enough sample to detect whether there is a significant difference in the graduation rates of pregnant/parenting and non-pregnant/parenting alternate school students. Additional information could be gained by comparing the graduation rates of Wisconsin alternate school students with those of a different state to attempt to isolate the impact on those rates of the Wisconsin statutes regarding mandatory school attendance until age 18 and the lenient home schooling regulations. Also, a study focusing on the optimal size for alternative schools as measured by the percentage of graduates could prove useful.

In conclusion, this study has provided a glimpse into a few of Wisconsin's alternate schools. The statistics did not demonstrate a significantly higher rate of graduation for alternate school students who are school age parents than that of other alternate school students. Indeed, there appears to be only a slight difference in the two groups. As a side note, while the data are not definitive, it appears that even in alternate schools—designed to be small—the size of the school makes a difference and that

smaller schools are associated with higher percentages of graduates. With the recognition that the percentage of graduates for school age parents is similar to that of other alternate school students, those of us who are, or who work with, school age parents are reminded that the challenges facing school age alternate school students are very real. While some are able to meet those challenges and complete their high school diploma, perhaps going on for further education, some fall short of those goals. Those who seek inspiration can look to individual stories of success.

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## Appendix A

## Alternate School Survey

**Prior to completing the survey, please read the following consent. If you do not agree to participate, please return the survey in the enclosed envelope as soon as possible. Thanks!**

I understand that by returning this questionnaire, I am giving my informed consent as a participating volunteer in this study. I understand the basic nature of the study and agree that any potential risks are exceedingly small. I also understand the potential benefits that might be realized from the successful completion of this study. I am also aware that the information is being sought in a specific manner so that no identifiers are needed and so that confidentiality is guaranteed. I realize that I have the right to refuse to participate and that my right to withdraw from participation at any time during the study will be respected with no coercion or prejudice.

Note: Questions or concerns about participation in the research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to the researcher [Donna Shimoda, (715)723-5542 Ext. 6401] or research advisor [Amy Schlieve (715)232-1332] and second to Dr. Ted Knous, Chair, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 IHH, UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI 54751, phone (715)232-1126.

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1. What is the typical number of students enrolled in your school at one time? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Is serving credit deficient students (those who are at least 1 to 2 years behind in the number of credits earned) the main focus of your school? \_\_\_\_\_ If not, how would you describe the population that you normally serve? (e.g. expelled students, EEN students, adjudicated youth)

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Of those enrolled at any given time, about what percent are credit deficient ? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Does your school serve pregnant or parenting teens? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, does a pregnant or parenting teen need to be credit deficient to attend your school?

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix A

## Alternate School Survey

For the 98/99 school year, please provide the following statistics from your school:

- \_\_\_\_\_ # of pregnant or parenting teens, seniors or older
- \_\_\_\_\_ # of those who graduated by the end of the school year
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ # of seniors or older who were not pregnant or parenting
- \_\_\_\_\_ # of the second group who graduated by the end of the school year

If the information is available, please provide the statistics for the 97/98 school year:

- \_\_\_\_\_ # of pregnant or parenting teens, seniors or older
- \_\_\_\_\_ # of those who graduated by the end of the school year
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ # of seniors or older who were not pregnant or parenting
- \_\_\_\_\_ # of the second group who graduated by the end of the school year

If available, please provide the statistics for the 96/97 school year below:

- \_\_\_\_\_ # of pregnant or parenting teens, seniors or older
- \_\_\_\_\_ # of those who graduated by the end of the school year
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ # of seniors or older who were not pregnant or parenting
- \_\_\_\_\_ # of the second group who graduated by the end of the school year

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of School

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person completing survey

Please call Donna Shimoda with questions about this survey at (715) 723-5542 ext. 6401

**Thank you for your time!**

## Appendix B

Dear Colleague,

I am writing to you to ask your help. I am a School Social Worker in an alternative high school in Chippewa Falls and am working on my Master's degree in Guidance & Counseling. To this end, I am conducting research in a subject of great interest to me--at-risk students. I am looking for information about graduation rates for alternate school students. While much research has been done on dropout rates and there is much interest in helping at-risk students, I have not seen much research on the graduation rates at alternate schools. Working at an alternate school myself, I know that we do not always measure success by the cold, hard facts, but rather by the changes that we see in attitudes and behaviors. However, I am still curious about how well we are doing.

One of the things I am particularly curious about is whether there is a difference in graduation rates for those alternative school students who are also parents from the general alternate school population. The results of this survey will allow me to compare those rates. Your help in completing this brief survey would be very appreciated. I know the value of an educator's time. I am asking for information for the past three years; if you can only provide information about the past year, that would still be helpful. I look forward to receiving the results in the next two weeks. I have enclosed an envelope, for your convenience.

Thank you for your time!

Sincerely,

Donna Shimoda

## Appendix C

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Earlier this month, I sent you a survey about graduation rates of alternate school students. I did not get it back, so I figure that you got busy and, perhaps, may have misplaced the survey. I am sending you a duplicate in case that happened.

Working in an alternate school, as I do, surveys like this can be difficult to answer. For example, in my school, students enter throughout the year—not just in the beginning. Another difference in alternate schools is that seniors, the group that the survey is asking about, may come to an alternate school with only 7 or 10 of the 22 credits needed for graduation, which obviously makes their chances for graduating that year much slimmer than the typical graduate.

I am interested in getting the results of the survey to reassure myself of the range of expected results at an alternate school, recognizing that the odds of graduation are nowhere near as good as they are for a population that is not “at risk”. I hope that you can help.

If you have any questions about the survey or what I am asking for, I can be reached during the week, except for Thursdays at (715)723-5542, ext. 6401 from 8 to 3, at home at (715)835-0473, or by e-mail at [shimoda@ecol.net](mailto:shimoda@ecol.net). I’d be glad to clarify whatever I can. Thanks for your time!

Sincerely,

Donna Shimoda  
3422 Darryl Lane  
Eau Claire, WI 54703

On Floppy

Abstract.wps

Ch1.wps

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Ch.1.doc (actually ch.2)

Ch.2.doc

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