

The New Heights Evaluation: Implementing an Effective School-based Program for Expectant and Parenting Teens

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health (OAH), launched the Pregnancy Assistance Fund (PAF) to address the needs of teen parents. With a 2010 PAF grant, DC Public Schools (DCPS) central office staff refined and expanded a program called New Heights that previously existed in just two high schools, making it available as of the 2011–2012 school year in all of the district’s large comprehensive high schools. OAH conducted an evaluation of New Heights, seeking to better understand the program’s goals and structure and the ways in which New Heights supports expectant and parenting students in addressing the challenges they face when they have not yet completed high school.

The New Heights evaluation

The New Heights evaluation has two components: (1) documenting the implementation of the program and (2) assessing its impact on academic outcomes. This **brief**, a **brief** on program impacts, and the full report, *Raising the Bar: Impacts and Implementation of the New Heights Program for Expectant and Parenting Teens in Washington, DC*, are part of a series of products from the evaluation.

New Heights: A structured yet flexible approach to support parenting students

New Heights is a voluntary, school-based program of supports designed to help expectant and parenting students in DCPS navigate the challenges of pregnancy, parenthood, and completing high school. New Heights aims to increase school engagement and credit accumulation while building teen parents’ self-sufficiency and resilience. The program is designed to help teen parents progress toward high school graduation and plan long-term education and employment.

In each participating school, New Heights places a dedicated program staff member, called a “coordinator”. New Heights coordinators are a diverse group of trained staff who work both independently within their school and collaboratively across schools to help their students overcome the obstacles that pregnancy and parenting place in the way of completing high school. Coordinators are responsible for integrating the four main components of New Heights into the regular school day: (1) advocacy, (2) targeted school-based case management, (3) weekly educational workshops, and (4) incentives. Taken together, these components aim to help expectant and parenting students identify their strengths so they can overcome barriers, become self-sufficient, and achieve educational success.

New Heights Core Components



Advocacy. Educate school staff and empower expectant and parenting youth to ensure they attend and complete school.



Case management. One-on-one targeted and tailored support to help youth meet their academic goals.



Educational workshops. Held at least three times a week, lunchtime workshops provide supplemental education on relevant topics.



Baby bonus bucks. A system of in-kind incentives that students earn when they attain personal goals and use for purchasing items such as maternity and baby supplies.

New Heights: Keys to success

OAH's evaluation of New Heights found that the program had a positive impact on academic outcomes for parenting females, as described in a [brief](#) on program impacts. Discussions with New Heights staff, participants, partners, and district leaders gathered insights into how the program might have achieved these outcomes.



Coordinators with diverse skillsets form the backbone of the program. Coordinators are collaborative, experienced, and possess a can-do spirit. Each coordinator is also a good fit for their school. To identify and hire the right mix of coordinators, New Heights leadership worked collaboratively with each school. Then the program provided the tools, self-care opportunities, and training that are essential for meeting the requirements of its students.



Highly dedicated coordinators do what it takes. Coordinators tailored their case management to fit individual students' requirements. They developed achievable academic and personal goals; connected students to community-based resources to resolve housing, transportation, childcare, medical, employment, or other issues; worked with teachers to monitor academic performance; and developed program workshops and incentives for students to meet their goals. Through all aspects of their work, coordinators continuously emphasized that students must learn how to advocate for themselves.



Coordinators foster collaboration within schools. To get buy-in for the program, coordinators worked hard to develop relationships and credibility within their schools. They volunteered for school events, offered assistance to teachers and staff to relieve their workloads, and highlighted program benefits. Teachers and coordinators often worked together to connect with and engage hard-to-reach students and students on leave.



Coordinators fostered motivation by offering safety and support. Coordinators reported that removing stigma of teen parenting and offering a safe space was key to building trust and strong relationships with students. Students said they could go to their coordinators with any problem and the coordinators would help them. Students emphasized the closeness they felt with their coordinators, and said they often trusted them more than other adults in their lives. The students said the program felt like "home."

Key takeaways

The New Heights evaluation provides an in-depth look at the implementation of the program in DCPS. The coordinators are critical to the program and they have the autonomy to implement and integrate the core components as necessary. In other words, the coordinators are expected to do what it takes to support each student in making progress and graduating. The results suggest that in DCPS, the program model and its implementation served to help a highly dedicated team of program leaders and coordinators come together to improve the academic outcomes of parenting students.

The Positive Adolescent Futures Study

The Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) is funding the Positive Adolescent Futures study, which includes three evaluations of programs that serve expectant and parenting teens. This study, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research under contract number HHSP233201450026A, is part of OAH's overall strategy to identify effective programs that offer a seamless network of support for teen mothers, fathers, and their children. The programs evaluated offer a range of programmatic approaches that are prevalent nationwide, particularly among OAH Pregnancy Assistance Fund grantees, including case management and referrals, home visiting, and school-based workshops. The programs take place in California, Washington, DC, and Houston, Texas. All evaluations measure impacts on outcomes that align closely with the program model and examine program implementation.

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