



Oregon Health Authority: Prioritizing Education for Expectant and Parenting Youth

Overview of the Pregnancy Assistance Fund

Finding ways to address the diverse needs of expectant and parenting youth and their families (EPY) to improve their health, education, and well-being is a long-standing priority of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The HHS Office of Population Affairs (OPA) funded the Pregnancy Assistance Fund (PAF) grant program from 2010 to 2020. The PAF program supported states and tribes to provide a wide range of services in settings such as high schools, community service centers, and/or institutions of higher education.

PAF services focused on five areas: (1) personal health (e.g., case management, prenatal care, health insurance enrollment support, behavioral health, violence prevention); (2) child health (e.g., home visiting, nutrition, access to healthcare, well-child visits); (3) education and employment (e.g., tutoring, academic support, assistance with college applications, employment and job-readiness training); (4) concrete supports (e.g., food, housing, transportation, baby supplies including diapers, cribs, car seats, etc.); and (5) parenting supports (e.g., parenting and healthy relationship education, child development education, child care). PAF grantees determined which areas to focus on to improve outcomes for EPY in the areas of health, parenting, education, and economic stability.

Focus of the Case Study

This case study highlights how Oregon Health Authority (OHA) used their PAF grant to improve educational outcomes for EPY. Education is an important pathway to successful employment and economic mobility. However, EPY encounter several challenges that make education completion and attainment difficult. EPY are less likely to complete high school and college than their peers that do not have children.^{1,2} Accordingly, a key objective of the PAF program was to improve educational outcomes for EPY. OHA focused on this objective by partnering with four community colleges across the state in their Support to Expectant and Parenting Populations (STEPS) project. This case study expands on the “Prioritizing Education for Expectant and Parenting Youth” brief and provides a more in-depth exploration of the STEPS project.

OHA’s STEPS Program: Case Study Methods

To understand the STEPS approach to improving educational outcomes for EPY, we conducted seven semi-structured phone interviews with members of the state project team as well as their partners at each of the four community colleges. While the original plan was to conduct in-depth site visits to better understand the approach to serving system-involved EPY, at the time of data collection, site visits were not possible due to COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions.

** See the “About the Study” text box toward the end of this case study for more information about the larger project.*

Highlights of the Case Study:

- Community colleges provided an opportune setting for OHA to implement their PAF program (STEPS) to support EPY in achieving their educational goals. However, implementing in this setting was not without challenges.
- The STEPS program learned early on that they had to put significant effort toward identifying EPY in community colleges, as there was no formal system for them to identify which students were pregnant or parenting.
- The program's flexible approach to case management capitalized on relationships with partners to connect EPY to the resources and supports they needed.
- Critical to STEPS' success was a dedicated space and coordinator in each community college along with buy-in and support from the administration.

Description of Oregon's PAF Grant

At the heart of Oregon's PAF grant was the understanding of the importance of education for economic mobility and ultimately child, family, and community health. The STEPS program was a critical link in supporting the pathway from education to economic success for EPY.

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It has to be connected to education. If we don't provide the bridge to get them from poverty to the life that they really want. Education is that bridge, but it takes the support of a program to help people cross that bridge. They don't see themselves getting across that bridge, it doesn't seem like a real possibility. We need people that say 'yes you can and we will walk across that bridge with you.' If not they will grow up in poverty and their children will grow up in poverty or they don't get to the other side. It has to connect with education, or what are we doing? – Community College Coordinator

OHA used their PAF grant as an opportunity to partner with community colleges, given their overlapping interests and population served, their focus on educational outcomes, and the shared understanding of the importance of education for economic mobility. Community colleges focus on educational retention, persistence, completion, and graduation, and OHA viewed these goals as the way to improve child, family, and community health.

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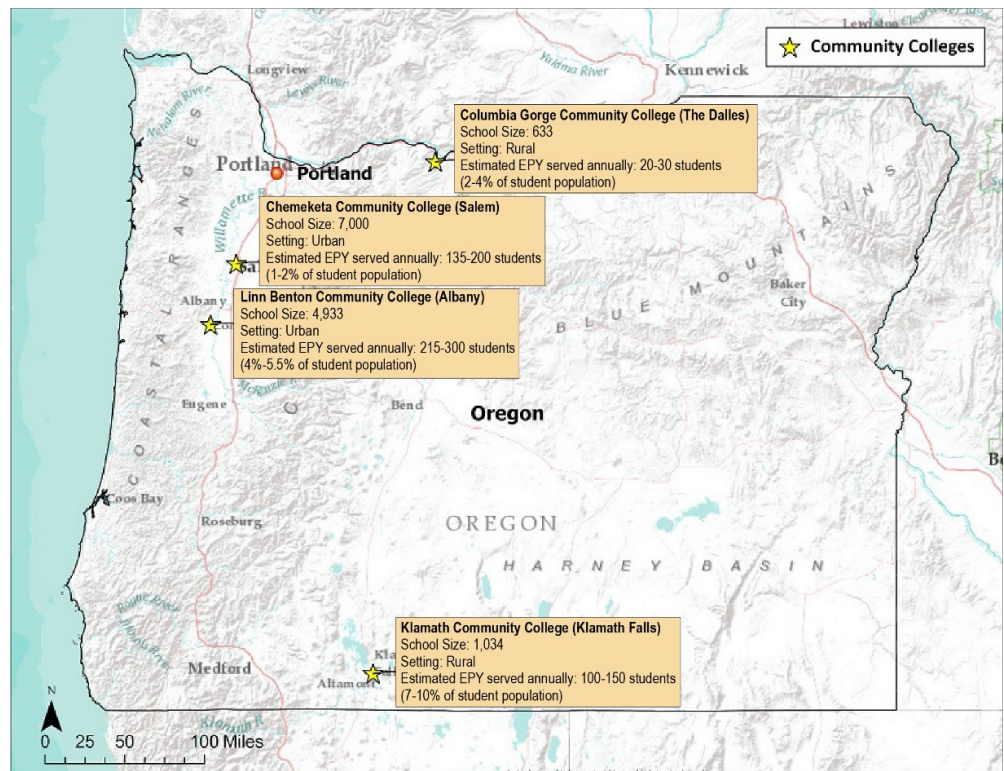
“Helping a student parent or a parent reach their career and educational goals will really improve child health and family health and community health.” – Grantee Team

OHA partnered with the community colleges shown on the following map. These colleges varied in geographic location and were both urban and rural. They also differed in size and number of EPY students served annually during the grant.

In each of these community colleges, the PAF program worked toward advocating for EPY, raising awareness about the existence and the distinct needs of this population, and removing EPY's barriers to achieving their educational goals. Primary components of the STEPS program in the community colleges included:

- **Case management/service navigation.** Each of the programs followed an approach that was modeled after a program called [Achieving the Dream](#). This model involved both high and low engagement case management. Higher engagement consisted of more traditional case management. Students met regularly with the coordinator and received services and referrals as well as emotional and concrete support. Low engagement was more driven by students' immediate needs. Services included coordinator support when a student was in crisis, networking lunches or other events, or connections to specific resources (e.g., how to find a food bank, identifying potential scholarship opportunities) or services (e.g., SNAP, TANF, GED supports). It also included text messages, emails, or phone calls with resources, information on STEPS events, key college deadlines, and information on other programs. Some of the colleges had more formal needs assessments, but the case management approach taken was guided by what the student preferred.
- **Concrete supports, including scholarships.** Addressing material needs was also an important component of meeting EPY's needs to allow them to continue their educational pursuits. In addition, providing concrete supports drew students to the program; from there, STEPS staff were able to connect them to additional referrals and supports. STEPS provided concrete supports such as food, housing, medical care, bookstore gift cards, transportation, diapers, baby supplies, and car seats, as well as emergency funding (e.g., when a student's car broke down, without funds to fix it, they are unable to attend classes and stay enrolled in school). Some programs also provided scholarships to help fund EPY's attendance at community colleges.
- **Connections to peers.** STEPS programs provided valuable opportunities for EPY to connect. Some community colleges had a peer network for parenting students; others held support groups for EPY. These connections were important because EPY were able to see other student parents in their same situation. Connections to peers served as a source of both emotional support and information exchange for student parents.
- **Parenting workshops.** Some community colleges also offered parenting workshops to STEPS participants as well as to the public.

To ensure oversight and consistency across the four community colleges, OHA provided ongoing technical assistance. This support provided responsive problem-solving and troubleshooting to ensure successful project implementation.



STEPS State Team Technical Assistance:

- Monthly conference calls
- Annual in-person training
- Quarterly meetings between an external consultant and each community college
- Regular, informal communication

Key Elements of Oregon’s Approach to Improving Educational Outcomes for EPY

OHA’s approach to supporting EPY in meeting their educational goals provides valuable lessons learned.

Working with Community Colleges

Partnering with community colleges allowed OHA to leverage their focus on education specifically for EPY. OHA described how community colleges were a good fit for this work because they are student-centered, have expertise in working with populations with unique needs, and are able to meet students where they are to support their educational goals. Community colleges celebrate and assist the diversity of stages at which students are entering the community college setting.

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What makes us different from any of the other programs that you might come across that’s supporting education and training for parents is that we support them where they are at, where they are coming to us. They might be living in a shelter, they might not have their GED. They might have gone to college years ago when they were a kid and just totally tanked their GPA. All of them are welcome and we are going to help them right from where they are coming to us from and help them get on a plan for success. – Community College Coordinator

Community colleges offer a variety of programs at a range of levels, including GED, adult basic education, ESL, certificates, and two-year degrees for EPY to further their education and skills in service of their future career development. This range of programming provided diverse opportunities to support EPY’s specific educational and career goals, and once they achieved a particular goal, enabled them to continue their educational attainment.

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We have a lot of good certificate programs in welding, material testing, diagnostic imaging, and accounting. That leads to different certificate programs that get you better jobs. Plus we have the pathway to go onto a 4 year college. – Community College Coordinator

These community colleges provided holistic support for students and their families. In addition to educational classes, many community colleges already had groups and resources that the STEPS program could connect EPY to. Furthermore, these community colleges were well-integrated with their surrounding communities, with strong connections to other community services and resources.

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At the community college we are not just about getting the degree, we are adult basic education, GED, ESL, all these short-term training programs as well as a two-year degree, or a two year and transfer degree. In the community college setting, there are so many options that can transform a parent’s life for their family. They could come in the door not having a GED not having a high school diploma and we could really help them on their dream of becoming a veterinary service assistant, or whatever it may be. Plus our career counseling can help get them on their career path, plus having all the other supports maybe their child is recently diagnosed with autism, or we can connect them with all these parenting groups and educational resources. And so it’s really this place where we can come from holistically and take care of the whole family. – Community College Coordinator

Operating within the community college setting also provided STEPS program participants with constant modeling of educational success. Everyone the students interacted with had degrees, and students were able to see that they could be successful like those around them.

Despite these advantages of working within community colleges, this setting was not without its challenges. Notably, community colleges tend to place a high priority on attendance. Strict attendance policies that are not flexible for parenting students with competing demands made it difficult for EPY to stay enrolled. Interviewees also noted that the community college system is not set up to accommodate the schedules and needs of parenting students – there aren't always a variety of class times or family-friendly spaces on campus where students could bring their children while they completed coursework. It was challenging to get community colleges to recognize the unique supports and accommodations needed by EPY. Community colleges are also often commuter colleges, so students spend limited time on campus outside of attending class. This made it harder for EPY to connect with STEPS and other programming. This was found to be particularly challenging in the smaller community colleges.

Identification of EPY

An unanticipated challenge of the STEPS program was identifying EPY in the community colleges, a critical first step for supporting this population. These community colleges did not have any formal reporting of parenting status, making it difficult to identify parenting students. Formally collecting this information would have been a heavy lift for community colleges and a large request, considering competing demands for other information. Only one of the colleges was able to successfully integrate a question on parenting status on the new student intake forms. Another college started to collect information to identify parenting students as part of a voluntary survey, but only half of the students had completed the survey. They worked to incorporate this information into the registration forms.

Identifying EPY for the STEPS Program

Effective outreach strategies to identify EPY included:

- Fliers around campus
- Information on school website
- Speaking at orientation
- Attending community events
- Social media
- Open houses

In lieu of available information identifying parenting students, the STEPS program relied primarily on word of mouth and referrals as the mechanisms for identifying and recruiting EPY to participate in the program. Coordinators worked to ensure other departments, offices, and programs knew about the STEPS program and could refer EPY. School counselors and advisors would often refer EPY to the STEPS program. Coordinators also provided community programs with information about the program for EPY who were considering attending community college.

Partnerships to support case management

To meet EPY's range of needs via case management, coordinators relied on partnerships, both within and external to the community colleges. Coordinators worked to form as many connections as possible so they could be a "one stop shop" for resources for EPY. Many of the student parents had needs that extended beyond the community college but still played a role in their ability to continue their education. Having community connections for those external referrals and services was important. However, internal partners gave the project credibility and helped integrate it into the community college setting.

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To really get buy-in, it can't just be a community-based program housed in a community college.

– Grantee Team

One of the keys to connecting students to the resources and supports they needed was to make the process as easy and accessible as possible; EPY did not otherwise have the capacity to connect with all resources needed to achieve their educational goals. Coordinators would often make warm hand-offs between EPY and other programs, services, and supports they referred EPY to on campus. In addition, they would follow up with EPY through emails and calls to ensure EPY had been connected to the appropriate services.

Critical On-campus Supports:

- Financial aid staff who understood the constraints student parents faced
- Counselors who understood EPY's unique needs
- Title IX staff

Dedicated program space and coordinator

The STEPS team learned that it was important to have a designated program coordinator on campus with a physical location where EPY could meet with the coordinator. The coordinator served as a champion for the students and the program and was an emotional resource for the students as well.

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And what we've heard a lot from the coordinators, is that they also just spend a lot of time listening and letting someone cry on their shoulder, or problem solving, talking through challenging situations with them. Whether it's breastfeeding or childcare or, "What do I do when my kid's sick" or "How do I talk to a professor about my pregnancy," different emergencies, kind of just being there for them and supporting them in whatever comes up. I think that's a big role that this project has played, and the coordinators have played, that isn't often quantified or described in the intended outcomes. – Grantee Team

Having someone that was fully dedicated to the mission of the project was important – it gave students a face of the program and someone they knew would listen and advocate for them. Many of the community colleges had programs and services that EPY could use; but the coordinator was necessary to put the pieces together for EPY. This allowed the EPY to take advantage of the supports and services they needed to navigate the academic system. Some of the coordinators were also single parents that went through the community college system, so they were able to serve as role models for EPY.

Having dedicated space that was centrally located was also important; it helped make EPY feel comfortable meeting with the coordinator, congregating, and bringing their children into the space. While the team mentioned that a resource center for parenting students was ideal, it was not always possible. In those instances, having an office where students knew they could bring their children while meeting with the coordinator was important.

Administrative buy-in

STEPS program team members also learned how critical administrative buy-in was to identifying students and implementing program activities to support their educational goals. Having community college leadership support and “own” the STEPS project was helpful in prioritizing the work. Administrative buy-in was helpful in ensuring access to student academic information, which was necessary in working with EPY. Some community colleges struggled with buy-in at the beginning but were able to build critical relationships over time. In other cases, buy-in at the beginning wavered as the project continued; in many instances, this was due to turnover in leadership. At times, turnover led to positive change and increased support for the project; other times, turnover meant the program was de-prioritized. In either case, turnover meant that the program was constantly working to establish or sustain leadership buy-in to support program activities. The grantee suggested aiming to have the Vice President or Dean of Student Affairs take ownership of the project to increase the stability of program support. In one case the community college President took an interest in the STEPS program; the school and leadership were thinking about how to address the issue of childcare on campus. They had conversations about building a childcare facility on campus, which could also be used for early childhood education and for internships and externships for the child psychology program. Due to the President's support, the team was hopeful that this would come to fruition.

STEPS Response to COVID-19

As with other PAF projects, STEPS was challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic and related shutdowns made it even more difficult for students to attend classes due to juggling parenting, childcare, their child's education, and other commitments. Although the project transitioned to offering case management sessions via zoom or by phone or email, it was difficult to get students to attend, as they were already at capacity. During the pandemic, coordinators tried to call and email parents to inform them of resources and provide them with necessities. The lack of in-person contact, however, made it particularly difficult to engage new students, and it was challenging to connect student parents with each other. Interviewees also noted that community colleges are often taxpayer funded, making their funding precarious—particularly when a crisis like COVID-19 hits and funding for programs such as STEPS is often reallocated. Despite these challenges, the STEPS project team worked to continue to support EPY during this time.

Summary

OHA's approach to the STEPS program was grounded in the importance of education for economic mobility and child and family health. OHA found community colleges to be an ideal setting to support expectant and parenting youth who had committed to furthering their education. Program coordinators at each community college worked directly with EPY to address potential barriers to retention and completion of various programs. It is not uncommon for relatively easy-to-address issues to create barriers for EPY educational goal attainment. Having someone onsite meant that these barriers could be addressed in a more immediate way. At the same time, project staff worked directly with administrators, faculty, and other partners to implement multiple strategies to identify EPY and raise awareness of the unique needs of this population.

References

- 1 Perper, K., Peterson, K., & Manlove, J. (2010). *Diploma Attainment Among Teen Mothers*. *Child Trends, Fact Sheet Publication #2010-01*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.
- 2 Antonishak, J., & Connolly, C. (2014). *Preventing Unplanned Pregnancy and Completing College: An Evaluation of Online Lessons, 2nd Edition*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED571551.pdf>

About the Study

HHS/OPA contracted Abt Associates to identify successful strategies and lessons learned from the Pregnancy Assistance Fund grant program (see <https://opa.hhs.gov/research-evaluation/pregnancy-assistance-fund-paf-program-evaluations/evaluation-key-strategies>). The study produced six topical briefs and corresponding in-depth case studies. The six topics were identified from a review of grantee documents and input from OPA staff. They reflect the range of approaches PAF grantees took to best serve EPY needs. The topics are (1) serving system-involved (justice or child welfare) youth; (2) serving youth in Tribal communities; (3) serving youth in rural communities; (4) cross-sector partnerships; (5) policy and systems-level strategies; and (6) strategies for improving educational outcomes. For each topic, the study selected grantees from the pool of 26 grantees funded in the most recent cohort (2018-2020) and in at least one other cohort.

The briefs and case studies draw from review of grantee documents, performance data, and semi-structured phone interviews with grantee and grantee partner staff. Note that due to COVID-19 restrictions, case studies could not include the originally planned site visits.

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