

HB1298: County Boards of Education - Pregnant and Parenting Students - Policies and Reports
February 26, 2020
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
FAVORABLE

My name is Mona-Lee Belizaire, a resident of Burtonsville and a former teen mother. My testimony is from the perspective of my experience as a young mother and how the support that I received afforded me the opportunity to excel academically and become the successful woman that I am today.

When I became pregnant at 18 years old, I was a junior at the University of Florida. It was a very challenging and confusing time for me. Although my own resilience played a factor in my success, what made the most difference was having the support necessary in order for me to complete my education. My support system not only consisted of my family, but included friends, church family, and teachers. I was also able to access various community resources. In the summer of 2017, I graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor's degree in Health Education and I later attained two masters' degrees in Public Health and Social Work.

Youth who are expecting and parenting face significant challenges with enrolling, attending and completing high school. They also experience difficulties with continuing their education either in college or vocational school. The responsibility of providing for a child increases the risk of an expectant and parenting student dropping out of high school.

As Benjamin Franklin so rightly stated "Investment in knowledge pays the best interest". In order for young parents to be successful, they need policies, such as this, that will provide avenues for them to reach their academic and professional goals. Ensuring the success of students, aids in the prevention of intergenerational poverty as children fair better when their parents graduate. Providing holistic support to expectant and parenting teens reduces the economic short and long term consequences they, their families and communities, and even the nation can face. It is equally important that we do not exclude young males and young fathers from the conversation and support mechanisms. To that end, I urge the committee to consider using the language of *expectant and parenting students* instead of pregnant and parenting students which encourages the support of young fathers.

For these reasons, and many more that you'll hear from other supporters, I urge you to vote favorably. Thank you.

Mona-Lee Belizaire
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