

HB0401 - Public Schools-Pregnant and Parenting Students-Policies and Reports
January 27, 2021 at 1:30 p.m.
POSITION: SUPPORT

Dear Chair Anne Kaiser and Members of the House Ways and Means Committee.

Thank you for offering me this opportunity to share my personal and professional experience working with pregnant and parenting teen girls. My name is Isabella Wise. I am 28 years old, married, and the mother of a 13 year old daughter. Professionally, I am a full time positive youth development professional serving and interacting weekly with approximately 150 teen girls in middle and high school. In my job, one of the most important tasks I do is pregnancy and STD prevention.

I love my job because I was once that teen girl who did not have anyone to help or guide me! I wish I had a caring adult when I was teen girl. I came to Montgomery County from El Salvador as an immigrant seeking refuge as an unaccompanied minor. It was a traumatic experience. I did not speak English and without an older adult who cared about me I was vulnerable to many dangers. When I was 15 years old, I went to the doctor thinking I was sick and the doctor told my mom, "your daughter is pregnant". I was in shock and did not know how it happened or what to say! My mom told me that I needed to have an abortion, but I refused. I was finishing my 8th grade year and entering 9th grade. No one in my middle school acknowledged my pregnancy or talked to me about my situation. In high school, I did not have anyone talk to me about my pregnancy nor share information about resources I needed.

As I returned to school, I had all kinds of issues, starting with depression. I missed school a lot because of my depression and doctor appointments for my daughter. When I was in class sometimes, I had to go to the bathroom to lactate. It was really embarrassing because I would just throw the milk in the toilet. One day my mom was called in to a meeting and the school administration recommended that I take my GED, later and just focus on my daughter now. I was lost and did not have any guidance, so I dropped out. Everything went down the hill after that! My life turned into literally a dangerous horror story, between gang violence, and foster care! I did not get my GED until I was 21. Because of the support I finally received through the foster care system I am happy to share with you that I graduated with honors from Frostburg, hold numerous professional certifications and am pursuing my masters and PhD degrees.

As you can see, I understand firsthand the needs of vulnerable teen girls. That is the reason I support this bill! I want other young ladies to have what I did not. Nothing has changed from 14 years ago! It is time for a change. Young ladies need to be supported, so they can finish school and not drop out. All it takes is one adult guiding these young ladies.

But as you know, it isn't enough just to say pregnant and parenting girls need a caring adult. Unless the school system has defined roles and the trained adults to provide the support and unless that support is clearly defined and written in a job description, it will not happen!

That is why I am sharing some of my experiences today. If I had a caring adult to guide me in middle and high school, like Crittenton girls do, I could have avoided the trauma I experienced.

We can all agree that prevention is cheaper and more effective than intervention. For far too many girls an unplanned pregnancy becomes a life of welfare for themselves and their children with no future.

I am in full support of HB0401 because of the benefit it will provide to many young pregnant and parenting youth in Maryland's public schools without the need to invest a lot of money.

Isabella Wise

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