

RH Reality Check

Separate and Uninformed: Discrimination Against Pregnant and Young Latina Mothers in California Schools

By [Rocio Córdoba](#), California Latinas for Reproductive Justice
May 4, 2010 - 7:00am

Published under: [Access to Abortion](#) | [Contraception](#) | [Maternal Health](#) | [Sexuality Education](#) | [Women's Rights](#) | [adolescent](#) | [adolescent pregnancy](#) | [comprehensive sex ed](#) | [Latina](#) | [latino](#)

[Rocio Córdoba's blog](#) | [Printer-friendly version](#) | [Login](#) or [register](#) to post comments



Separate is not equal. We know that to be true in many contexts, including historically segregated schools, neighborhoods, and institutions. The young people in our communities seeking an equal opportunity to learn, be healthy and thrive face countless challenges as the policies created to support them are but a faint backdrop, if present at all, in their lives.

This is especially true if you are a young person of color in California. And if you happen to be pregnant, or a young mom, the promise of an equal education is made even more obscure by our institutions. Separate schools for pregnant and parenting youth are not equal.

According to a new report by [California Latinas for Reproductive Justice](#), *Young Women Speak Out!*, pregnant and parenting young Latinas face systemic discrimination in educational institutions, lack access to equal educational opportunities and experience a dearth of social supports in their communities.

In a series of focus groups conducted in key regions of California, we learned that pregnant and parenting youth experience persistent discrimination and bias from teachers and school officials. This includes pressure to transfer out of comprehensive high schools into alternative programs and being relegated to substandard instruction, despite federal and state legal protections.

One young woman shared her own experience: "I had to leave; my principal or superintendent told me 'you can't stay here while you are pregnant. You have to go to another school, because the pregnant school is required for pregnant people.'" Another young woman described the "academics" she received at the so-called "pregnancy school" she attended: "my teachers...didn't even teach the class she just gave us work that we had to work out of our workbooks... She didn't teach us anything academic wise."

Other focus group participants stated that, even though they weren't forced to leave their schools, they were ostracized within their institutions by being "kept in one corner of the school." At the same time, Latina youth reported to CLRJ a lack of social supports in schools and their communities for continuing their education and accessing positive opportunities. "Maybe if I would have been more exposed to colleges and stuff like that at a young age, maybe it would have motivated me to do good in school," reflected one young woman.

We also learned that young people aren't receiving the full information and resources they need to make well-informed decisions about their health and lives. Even in a progressive state like California, where longstanding policies require comprehensive, medically-accurate instruction by schools that choose to teach sex ed, young people are still at risk of receiving biased and inadequate information.

Young Latinas reported that sex education was more of an afterthought rather than a class designed to give adolescents the opportunity to learn about contraceptive usage, resources and referrals for STI testing, among other provisions that promote youth sexual health. Others reported hearing shame-based, abstinence-only messages.

These experiences send a strong message that schools are failing to monitor the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education required under California law. Our educational systems must do a better job of ensuring that every student receives medically accurate, culturally-competent information in a setting where they feel comfortable asking questions.

We know from research and our own experience that Latina/o parents strongly support comprehensive sexuality education. A recent study by the Public Health Institute found that 90 percent of Latina/o parents in California support comprehensive sexuality education. At the same time, the focus group participants encouraged the availability of sexuality education for their parents and more communication about sexuality within their families. Why aren't educational institutions listening to our youth and their families?

If we really want to support young people, particularly the most disenfranchised youth, we need to start by examining their realities and ensuring that our policies are promoting their health and educational opportunities. Keeping them in the dark about critical information they need, then blaming them for the consequences, is not the answer. And relegating young women who are pregnant to a corner of the school -- or to another school altogether -- is not only counter to civil rights laws, it is a shocking denial of young people's dignity.

It is time for our educational institutions to take action and ensure that *all* young people -- including pregnant youth and young families -- have equal opportunities to learn, be healthy and parent with dignity. Separate and uninformed has never been equal. Not then, not now. Not ever.

<http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/2010/05/03/separate-equal-even-pregnant-young-mothers-school>