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MERCER COUNTY

Teen mom spirit: Parent-Linking Project provides support for students with children in Trenton

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By Carmen Cusido/The Times



Cie Stroud/For The Times
Valerie Rivera, 3, and her mom, Dominga Moralez, 18, share a moment at the Daylight Twilight High School day care in Trenton.

TRENTON — Like most high school seniors, Dominga Moralez is looking forward to the prom, worries about her grades, and is trying to figure out what she'll do after graduation next month.



But unlike most of her classmates at Trenton Central High School, Morales, 18, is the mother of a 3-year-old girl. She gave birth to her daughter, Valerie, just days before starting her freshman year in September 2007.

“She kind of changed me. I matured fast,” Morales said. She realizes that her grades and her future prospects will affect both herself and her daughter, she said. “I look at life differently. It’s not just me anymore.”

After readjusting to her motherhood, working hard and finding the support she needed, Morales has succeeded where many others failed.

The city’s schools have notoriously high dropout rates. In 2009-2010, 367 high school students dropped out, according to state Department of Education figures.

Mercer County’s teen birth rate is roughly in the middle of the range among New Jersey counties, according to data compiled by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

The county had a teen birth rate of 28 per 1,000 girls and young women from 2001 to 2007, slightly higher than the statewide average of 27 per 1,000.

KEY SUPPORT

The Trenton school district has not given up on its teen moms, however. Key support for Morales and a number of her classmates comes from the Parent-Linking Project, or



PLP, which provides free transportation and day care for students who agree to attend a weekly parenting and life-skills program.

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They also must not get pregnant again. If they do, they face being terminated from the program.

That practical assistance and positive pressure not only provides immediate benefits for the moms and their babies, but also establishes the foundations for a better future for the family and the community, program coordinator Melda Grant said.

“Statistics tell us that babies born to teen parents are more likely to grow up in poverty or become teen parents as well,” Grant said. “We offer high quality day care, and we also promote career or college for the participant. We’re always looking at breaking the poverty-level statistic.”

She noted that in the nine years the district has managed the program, only one participant has had to leave because of a second pregnancy. Morales said that for her, the PLP was a crucial bridge that helped her reach her imminent graduation.



“I would have probably dropped out of high school,” Morales said, if not for PLP.

That’s a common theme among the 13 moms and 14 children — including a set of twin boys — who are currently in the program, Grant said.

“I can honestly say that if the program were not in existence, a lot of the girls would have dropped out,” Grant said. “For most of them, there is usually no one available to provide care for their children during the day.”

The day care is located at the Daylight/Twilight alternative high school program on East Hanover Street, but it also serves student from Trenton Central High and Trenton High West. The state Department of Children and Families funds the day care’s \$121,000 annual cost.

The mothers enter PLP once they deliver their babies, or sometimes even prior to delivery in order to receive counseling on issues such as prenatal care, Grant and case manager Joy Walker said. Children may remain in the day care through age 3 or until the parent graduates.



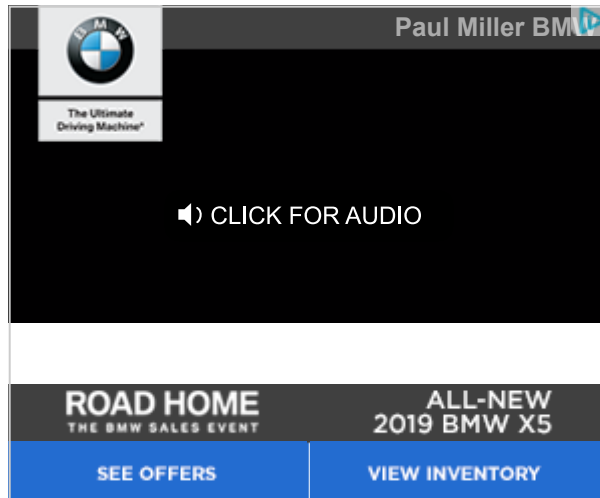
After graduation, most of the moms get jobs or attend technical schools or local county community colleges, Grant and Walker said.

SIMILAR PROGRAMS THROUGHOUT STATE

Similar programs operate in other parts of the state, including Newark and Union City. Stacey Solomon, president-elect of the New Jersey School Counselor Association, said finding a safe place for young children during the day is imperative if their student parents are to succeed.

“Day care is such a high expense in New Jersey,” she said. “Even if you have a babysitter, if they don’t show up, you can’t make it to school. If you can’t make it to class, you’re at a disadvantage.”

Trenton Central High junior Latoya McCray said concerns about the proper care of her 9-month-old daughter Desarae could have scuttled her education if not for PLP, which she joined in October.



The advertisement features the BMW logo and the slogan "The Ultimate Driving Machine" in the top left corner. The top right corner displays "Paul Miller BMW" with a play button icon. The main content area is black with a white speaker icon and the text "CLICK FOR AUDIO". At the bottom, there is a dark grey banner with "ROAD HOME THE BMW SALES EVENT" on the left and "ALL-NEW 2019 BMW X5" on the right. Below this banner are two blue buttons: "SEE OFFERS" and "VIEW INVENTORY".



“I couldn’t be in school,” the 17-year-old said. “I would be afraid of who is watching her.”

McCray, who intends to go into cosmetology after she graduates, lives with her grandmother, who works during the day. The PLP day care takes care of Desarae during the day, and after school McCray runs track while the baby is in the stands being watched by her coach, she said.

PLP is reserved for moms, but fathers who are in the Trenton schools are asked to join a program called Fathers at Trenton High: Earning Respect. There are not enough fathers to form a complete group, so Walker counsels them individually, she said.

Moralez is now preparing to graduate from high school during a ceremony next month while continuing the tight routine she has developed to accommodate motherhood and school.

Living with her own mother, she wakes at 3:30 a.m. so she has time to get Valerie ready for day care and herself for school. She gets home around 3:30 p.m., cooks dinner, plays with her daughter and puts her to bed. At 8:30 p.m. she heads for bed herself.

Moralez said she has already missed out on many teenage milestones. She doesn’t socialize outside of class because her free time is spent with her child. She’s no longer with Valerie’s father, doesn’t date, and rarely goes to the movies. She has given up dreams of enlisting in the military in favor of plans for beauty school or a job.



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One thing she's not missing out on is senior prom next month. Her daughter helped her pick out her purple dress, she said.

"Most people are going to Wildwood after prom," she said. "I have to go home to my daughter."

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