

Ending the cycle of poverty

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Professor Vanessa Johnson wants to show pregnant and parenting teens pathways to success. Photo by Craig Bailey

(PhysOrg.com) -- While many academically talented high-school students in Providence, Rhode Island, are figuring out what outfit to wear to school on a particular day, other top grade-earners are busily getting their children dressed and off to a babysitter.

School life presents parenting or pregnant teens with challenges unknown to most of their peers, and the cost of failure is high—a continuation of the cycle of [poverty](#) that finds young people entering into low-end jobs rather than completing school.

Northeastern associate professor Vanessa Johnson is determined to find out whether there are methods for success that can be copied and communicated to young people who are caught in this parenting trap.

Johnson, director of the [College](#) Student Development and Counseling

Program in the Department of Counseling and Applied Psychology, is studying a group of 20 [students](#) in Providence, all parenting or pregnant and all successfully matriculating through high school, several with top grades.

She hopes that by studying these teens on their path to academic achievement that she can ultimately design a program to assist other young [parents](#) through school, opening doors for them to four-year college educations.

“We want to help parenting and pregnant students gain social capital,” says Johnson, who notes that ending the cycle of poverty is her ultimate goal. “We want to help them navigate through college, and articulate in conversations with teachers what they want to accomplish.”

For starters, Johnson sees a need for young parents to be integrated with the larger peer group of high-school students, and into school life.

“There is so much learning that goes on in conversations among peers,” and students who remain a part of the larger group stand to gain much more than those who, finding themselves pregnant, only keep company with other pregnant or parenting teens, she says.

As Johnson works to broaden her studies into a much larger cohort, she is also developing the Teen Parenting Access to College Initiative, which will be designed to help students balance academic and family pressures, and may include a summer component, workshops, exposure to college and other supportive measures.

The goal is to help the students enroll in college and break that cycle of poverty.

“My interest in this hits close to home,” she says. “Teenage pregnancy was a big part of my family. My sisters are all doing well, but, I have one

who is just getting her college degree at age 48.” Had there been more help for young, pregnant girls in school, she suspects this proud moment would have occurred years ago.

“So many teenage parents lack a support network,” Johnson says. At its worst, the lack of support can cause youngsters to spiral into low-paying, menial jobs. “By helping them get into good schools, and by providing a structure of support, their futures could include meaningful work” and a better start for their young families.

Provided by Northeastern University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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