

# POLICY ON LEARNER PREGNANCY

Namibia has a policy on teenage pregnancy prevention. But is it known? And is it effectively implemented?

Falling pregnant at school used to be an unpredictable business. If and when a girl was to be readmitted after having given birth, used to be a matter left to the discretion of individual schools. This also included consequences for the father. In some cases he was expelled from school for a period and in others not. 1994 saw a task force, which involved both governmental and non-governmental representatives investigate the issue and make recommendations.

After numerous consultations and much feedback, Cabinet approved temporary guidelines in 1999. These, despite criticism, remained effective for ten years. In 2008, the Legal Assistance Centre was tasked to work with the Ministry of Education to create a new policy on learner pregnancy. The assignment was to create a policy with two aspects: prevention and management. The process of developing the new policy included interviews with learners and consultative meetings at regional and national level with a range of stakeholders, including teachers, principals,

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regional education officers, counsellors, social workers, school board representatives and non-governmental organisations. Feedback based on the input received was incorporated into a

working draft, which was endorsed by the Ministerial Planning and Coordinating Committee in April 2009 and approved by Cabinet in October 2009.

The role of the family as well as the community is considered. Detailed provisions explain the type and range of information schools are obliged to provide to all learners, as well as specific information learner parents will require. Most importantly, the new policy emphasizes flexibility. It acknowledges that different families and communities have different attitudes to learner pregnancy. Thus, it allows pregnant girls to remain in school until four weeks before the due date without requiring that they do so; if a girl and her family would not be comfortable for her to remain in school once the pregnancy becomes visible, she may leave at that stage. Similarly, it allows learner-mothers to return to school shortly after giving birth if they wish, provided that the school, family and health care providers are satisfied that she and the baby are in good health and that the baby will be suitably cared for when she is at school. If the young mother and her family feel that she should stay at home for a longer period of time with the infant, she may take a leave of absence for up to a maximum of one calendar year.

No pregnant girl or learner-mother will be forced to remain in or out of school against her will. Decisions can be made according to her personal situation, and with the support of her family

and the school. This flexibility also allows for appropriate responses depending on the time of the academic year in which the pregnant learner gives birth. Many teachers consulted, mentioned this factor as being an important one, and felt that it would be much better to

time

returns to school with reference to practical issues such as the curriculum and the timing of exams. No "one-size-fits-all" solution makes sense in practice.

The new policy does not provide for a leave of absence for learner-fathers, since their biological role with respect to the baby is different from that of the learner-mother who gives birth and



breastfeeds, but it encourages learner-fathers to be involved and responsible parents and to share in the duty of maintenance. By allowing them to continue their education, the new policy places them in a better position to assist with future financial support.

The new policy places a very strong emphasis on prevention, which includes the encouragement of abstinence and the



communication of values such as gender equality and respect for individual autonomy. Practical prevention measures such as providing safer school and hostel environments, facilitating effective access to contraceptives and encouraging alcohol-free social activities for youth are also included. It is anticipated that implementation of the prevention section of the policy will be the primary mechanism for reducing the

incidence of learner pregnancies.

Ironically, the Learner Pregnancy Policy document has failed to adequately address the issue of teachers who involve themselves in improper relationships with learners. The policy put more emphasis on aspects such as counseling, learners' sexual health, managing pregnant learners and educating the learner-father and learner-mother on their responsibilities but does not address how learners should deal with sexual maneuvers from teachers.

The policy can best be summarised by reference to its six guiding principles:

- the right to education
- prevention by means of positive interventions rather than punishment
- providing learners with appropriate information about reproductive health matters, to encourage responsible decision-making
- respect for the right to freedom of choice for both boys and girls, as well as respect for the dignity of the individual
- support to learner-parents to help them complete their education in a manner which takes into account the health and welfare of the newborn child, and
- respect for cultural and family values by providing sufficient flexibility to allow for a range of options.

The policy is also noteworthy for its recognition that the broader community needs to play a role in all of these areas. Schools constitute only one of the many players, which share in the role of shaping the behaviour of the youth. A child's family should

have the first and foremost responsibility of providing the child with the values and examples, which will guide him or her through childhood and adolescence. The religious community, the wider community, government ministries, the media and society at large also influence the values of Namibia's young people.

Ensuring that girl learners are able to continue their education after pregnancy is critical if Namibia's long-term goals concerning gender equality in education and development are to be achieved.

If you are school-going and find yourself pregnant, know there are guidelines on how you are to be treated. Know above all, there are provisions on how your school needs to support you before and after having given birth.

Statistics of the number of teenage pregnancies at schools are difficult to come by leaving the question of the effectiveness of the Learner Pregnancy Policy unanswered.

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[http://www.kas.de/upload/auslandshomepages/namibia/Children\\_Rights/Children\\_M.pdf](http://www.kas.de/upload/auslandshomepages/namibia/Children_Rights/Children_M.pdf)

SCHOOL POLICY ON LEARNER PREGNANCY IN NAMIBIA, Legal Assistance Centre, 2008.

<http://www.thevillager.com.na/articles/632/Learner-pregnancy-policy-unripe/>

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