

Rochelle Riley: Academy for pregnant, parenting teens aims to break cycle of poverty

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Catherine Ferguson Academy, a public charter school of choice for pregnant and parenting teens, is slated to close at the end of the school year. A new school with a similar mission, called Pathways Academy, is scheduled to open in a former retail store on Detroit's east side. / Ryan Garza/Detroit Free Press

The Detroit Public Schools district has chartered a new school for pregnant and parenting teens that is expected to open this fall, replacing the nationally recognized Catherine Ferguson Academy, which is closing.

The new school, which will open in a former retail store in east Detroit, has been in the works for a year and would have been the second school for teen mothers in Detroit.

The school, called Pathways Academy, will be a technology-based school with open classrooms. It has slots for 190 students and 12 teachers (with beginning salaries of \$40,000) and will be managed by the New Jersey-based Innovative Educational Programs (IEP).

IEP was founded in 1997 and operates 15 charter schools nationwide, said company spokesman James Simonic. It used to run the charter school at the Wayne County Juvenile Detention Center for seven years, with high marks from detention officials. But the contract was not extended, and a new contract was given to the company of Blair Evans, brother of former Wayne County Sheriff Warren Evans, Simonic said. Evans could not be reached for comment.

The school will be open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. and have Head Start slots for 39 infants and toddlers provided by Matrix Human Services, the agency confirmed Friday. Pathways also will admit boys, Simonic said. That makes sense, because, after all, there would be no babies without them.

The shift in schools comes as debate rises about how to educate students, particularly pregnant girls, who need alternatives to standard classrooms. It also comes as the Obama administration has partnered on a \$200-million effort to help improve the lives of black boys without an equal effort to help black girls.

Catherine Ferguson Academy, which was named for a freed slave who could not read but ensured that others could, has had a storied and rocky history. It faced closure, but protests, a national mention on MSNBC's "Rachel Maddow Show" and Evans Solutions' stepping up to charter it helped save it.

It isn't clear whether any Ferguson students will attend Pathways, but IEP is recruiting them as well as others.

"We have a building ... near the old Farmer Jack (grocery store)," Simonic said. "We're retrofitting the whole thing so we have a really nice school" and a Head Start center.

Pathways is aimed at ending the cycle of poverty that is passed from generation to generation, said Simonic and Leonard Dixon, executive director of the Wayne County Juvenile Detention Facility and chairman of the five-member board that will oversee Pathways.

It's time for our community to stop demonizing children who make mistakes, Dixon said.

"With our young people, we're not seeing our kids as kids," he said. "We're seeing them as little adults. ... Some of these girls have made mistakes. That doesn't mean that we still don't take care of them. And that philosophy goes deeper for me because I have relatives who have been unwed mothers and didn't have anywhere to go. We want to wrap our arms around them and do everything we can because that kid is coming, and we want to put them both in the best position we can."

Dixon is right morally. But he also is right legally. Michigan law requires school attendance until age 16 — and until 18 for the children of parents who receive state aid. That goes for pregnant girls, too.

"If your kid has one leg, you need to have a school where they can go," said Asenath Andrews, the former principal at Catherine Ferguson who, until retiring last month, spent nearly three decades guiding a program that for many students has been the difference between a life of poverty and a life of hope.

"I can't tell you how many times people have said, 'Nobody told her to get pregnant,' " Andrews said of critics. "No, they didn't, but now she deserves an education."

Andrews, who initially was a teacher, became principal at Ferguson 28 years ago. As she determines her third act, we have to acknowledge that her retirement is a loss for Detroit because no one worked harder to help young girls than Andrews. No one understood more that education can be the difference between poverty and hope for a girl raising a child.

Does a special school celebrate teen motherhood or is it a necessary tool to change what, in some neighborhoods has become an accepted way of life?

"The beginning of poverty for these young women and their children is dropping out of school pregnant, or as a teen mother," Andrews said. "They'll be 29 before they finish high school, if the statistics don't change. That means they're 10 years behind their peers at everything, and they will probably have more than one child. It's compounded over time."

If schools like Ferguson and Pathways don't exist, some program must to follow the law and to ensure that all students can be educated. It's not something we ought to do. It's something we must do.

Living in this country without an education is a slow death. Living in poverty is a misery no one should endure.

The worst part is watching young girls and boys embrace it with impulsive behavior and stupid decisions.

No, the worst part is watching those boys and girls have children who will live the same way and continue to nurture generations of misery for decades to come.

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