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Alton, Brady, Erickson: More work needed on teen pregnancy

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Guest Columnists

Imagine sitting with your friends 20 years ago and spotting a headline in the newspaper about rising teen pregnancy rates. Then imagine that someone suggests that with a modest investment in state dollars, a strong commitment to prevention at the local level and a coordinated statewide effort involving parents, schools and the faith community, we could reduce teen pregnancy by 40 percent over the next two decades. Ahh, the stuff dreams are made of. Impossible, right?

Not so fast. In fact, that is exactly what has happened in South Carolina. Since the early 1990s, the teen birth rate in our state has decreased more than 40 percent, with some of the largest decreases in recent years. There were almost 800 fewer births to teens in our state in 2010 than there were in 2009. This is real progress on one of the most critically important barriers to the health and economic well-being of individuals and communities in our state. It's the sort of progress that has led the Centers for Disease Control to declare teen pregnancy a winnable battle.

How has this happened? Ultimately because young people are making better decisions. More young people are choosing to abstain from sexual activity, and more young people are choosing to use contraception when and if they do decide to have sex. Both of these improved behaviors have contributed to declines in teen birth rates.

Additionally, teen pregnancy has emerged as a critical issue to our state. A 2010 survey reveals that 95 percent of adults agree that we should be doing more to prevent teen pregnancy.

Finally, teen pregnancy is being discussed more openly in the media and has become the central topic of several popular youth-targeted television shows. Rather than debating the merits of such programming, we must acknowledge that this has opened the door for families to discuss these critically important issues. Anything that can get families talking more about love, sex and relationships is a positive.

But while we may be winning the battle, South Carolina has a lot of work left to do. Despite the massive declines, consider that:

- 6,800 teen-agers gave birth in our state last year.
- Three in 10 young girls in South Carolina will get pregnant at least once before turning 20.
- South Carolina has the 12th-highest teen birth rate in the country.
- Our state spends more than \$197 million annually on costs associated with teen childbearing.

When children have children, there are tragic human costs and significant economic burdens placed on our state. The children of teen parents are more likely to be low-birth-weight and experience infant mortality, fewer than 40 percent of teen mothers complete high school, only 2 percent of girls who give birth before 18 receive a college degree, and eight in 10 teen fathers never marry the mother of their first child, perpetuating a cycle of single-parent homes and increasing the likelihood that mother and child end up on public assistance.

The cost of a failed investment is simply too high to not make continued progress.

This fall we were part of a team from South Carolina who attended a National Council of State Legislatures program on teen pregnancy prevention efforts. Our attendance and continued investment in this issue is a clear signal that while we are pleased with progress, South Carolina is still not where we want it to be when it comes to protecting our children. May is Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month, which gives us a great opportunity to celebrate our successes while refocusing our efforts on improving the future for South Carolina's most valuable

resource — young people.

Whether you are a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a mentor or a concerned citizen, we hope you will join us in recommitting to our state's young people, refocusing on this critical issue and reinvesting the time and talents necessary to achieve further reductions. Together we will continue winning the battle.

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