

## **Superintendent Highlight - PREP Academy**

**10.16.2017**

Hello, my name is Mark Haag, Superintendent of the Lenawee Intermediate School District. In this update, I would like to highlight a program that is offered by the LISD that serves a very specific group of students with unique needs and many may not be familiar with. The program is the LISD PREP Academy. LISD PREP Academy is an alternative school for pregnant and parenting teens in Lenawee County. Students have the opportunity to take classes to earn their high school diplomas from their resident school districts. The curriculum and graduation requirements closely match those of the local districts and the State of Michigan.

The LISD PREP Academy is a collaborative effort between all 11 local school districts and the LISD to meet to address some of the unique factors of teen parents and help provide the supports that may be ensure a successful outcome for all involved. The program is open to students who do not turn 20 before September 1st of the current school year. The program is funded through an agreement between the local district and the LISD where the State Aid for the student is transferred to the LISD and any costs above that amount is funded through the LISD General Services budget. The LISD PREP Program is housed in its own facility located on the East Side of the TECH Center Campus.

This program is in its 24th year and has seen 263 students graduate from the program along with all of the 11 local districts. For the first 23 years, this program operated under the direction of Mrs. Deb Rhodaberger, a certified counselor and educator. Other staff members include teachers, school social workers, child care workers and other professionals whose number vary depending on the enrollment in the program. Mrs. Rhodaberger provided much needed direction, care and support in this program since its inception, and her leadership and care will be greatly missed with her retirement.

The new director for this program is Ms. Beth Abbott, who is also a certified counselor and has experience working in the mental health profession in the Lenawee County area.

Research is clear that teen mothers are a very at-risk population to complete high school and/or further career skill training along with further education. This type of education is key for our young people to be successful in today's world, whether they are parents or not. That being said, teen pregnancy is condition that does not discriminate, and over the years students come to our program with a wide array of needs and situations.

One huge advantage of this program, compared to completing school through a more traditional setting, is the supports that are provided for childcare along with parent education programming. We realize several challenges are present for young parents, especially if trying to complete school in a traditional setting. Some teen mothers have childcare available during the regular school day, often through their own families, while

others may not. In addition to the access to free childcare, it is equally as important that mothers get the opportunity to interact with their children during the day and develop the confidence and skills in caring for an assisting with the development of their child.

Some students may access this program only through their pregnancy, and complete school before the child is born. Others may have more schooling to complete so it becomes key to have these supports in place for infants and as they develop into toddlers. By being located on the TECH Center campus, this provides easy access to the career and technical education (CTE) programs at the LISD TECH Center and even dual enrollment opportunities through Jackson College. Since the program is housed in Adrian (a central location within Lenawee County), transportation can be a barrier for some students. Some students choose to transport themselves, but free transportation is available through Dial-a-Ride and Lenawee Transportation.

There have been many success stories with this program, including students who not only attain their high school diploma that may not have otherwise done so, but also CTE certifications and transition to further education at a college or university setting. Much like the traditional school setting, not all stories are this successful, and if a high school diploma is not earned some still are able to complete a GED (General Education Diploma) which may still be a positive ticket for employment and future success. At the very least, even if these credentials are not earned we believe that the students learn a great deal about properly caring for their children, personal finance and living skills and hopefully start their families with a stronger foundation than they would without the LISD PREP Program.

Over time, like all of education, other options that include some of the academic work being offered in online and/or hybrid format have been important transitions that have led to more flexibility and success for students. Unlike some online programs, at LISD PREP we believe we can provide a strong mix of the academic and social/emotional supports that students need to help create better conditions for success.

One thing that the students have shared with me firsthand over the years that they view, as a positive is the support and bonds that are formed with their peers. One student last year shared “I still have other friends from my school, but nobody else can relate to what I am going through as a young mom like another young mom can.”

Over the last 25 years, teenage pregnancy may look a little different in terms of society’s acceptance and perceptions, but the reality is it can be a lonely and difficult situation. Regardless of age, parenting is tough work and I would argue the most important work many of us have. There is an old saying that “there is no manual for parenting”, which I still believe is true but we believe and have heard stories every year that without this program many young ladies would not complete or continue their education.

As a veteran of close to 25 years of graduations, I can assure you that the LISD PREP Academy graduation ceremony and hearing firsthand the stories from students and their extended families that this program fills a need and is a success story for Lenawee County. We continue to provide this educational service in Lenawee County as we view the success of our teen mothers as a concern, and it is a service that would be tough to duplicate or offer in individual school settings. We are able to collaboratively have a better chance of success with this unique population of students, no different from other programs that are offered in a centralized format.

If you would like more information about this program, I would encourage you to contact Beth Abbott at 517-263-1917 or me directly at 517-2651628 or [mark.haag@lisd.us](mailto:mark.haag@lisd.us).