



Guest commentary: Keep young moms in school

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I have been away from home for far too long. Armed with a law degree, a toddler and a work ethic only a girl raised by an autoworker could muster, I set out to change the world when I left [Detroit](#) in 1996.

I had convinced myself that my home town didn't need me anymore and, lured by the frenetic pace and energy of New York City, I headed east. I settled in Brooklyn, and the rhythm of juggling motherhood and work has occupied almost two decades.

My New York life has been wonderful. My children have thrived. My son is headed to Cornell next fall, and my daughter is vying to become the most amazing adolescent ever. Professionally, I've done well, launching an organization to help teen mothers stay connected to [school](#). Yet, as I approach midlife, I find myself yearning to click my heels three times and land back on Detroit's east side.

It could be crowd fatigue. It could be guilt. It isn't lost on me that I might be part of Detroit's dreaded "brain drain," especially among the black middle class. Likely, though, it's just a bone-deep desire to be

home.

It may not be the Detroit of my childhood, but there's a spiritedness that feels exciting and alive. Detroiters are tackling the nation's most pressing social challenges with such boldness that only those who dared to name a Midwest delicacy after a waterfront amusement park in Brooklyn can do.

Detroit's public [education](#) debate is intriguing. Leading voices have correctly linked sound education with financial stability not only for individuals but communities.

Because of my work with young mothers, I drove around Detroit's east side two summers ago searching for neighborhood groups focused on keeping teen mothers in school and found nothing. I was surprised, given the high incidence of early childbearing. I did find organizations supporting boys. So I've been bugging my Detroit friends ever since to start programs or at least a dialogue about the needs of

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young mothers and their children.

The data to advance the education outcomes of Detroit's young mothers are especially compelling. A year ago, Data Driven Detroit noted that in 2007, a quarter of births in Detroit were to women younger than 20 years old, and many of these young women had failed to complete high school.

During the late 1980s, when I was senior at Southeastern High School, I remember the hushed whispers and talk about girls who had had babies. The adults in our lives predicted their dismal outcomes, and quite a few girls just disappeared from school.

I was as vocal as the next good girl about "the problem" with having a baby before you're ready. I now know better. After two children and an advanced degree, I know one is never fully ready for the heart-changing blow of parenthood. Making sure mothers are well-educated isn't a debate about values or morality; it just makes good economic sense.

As education reform efforts evolve in Detroit, the academic needs of teen mothers must be an integral part of planning and programming. My work has taught me that academic success helps young mothers plan for their futures and delay subsequent pregnancies.

I don't have all the answers. But here's something else: My parents were teens when I was born, and both were pushed out of high school. My family's saving grace was my dad landing a job on the line at

Chrysler, and obviously his employment made a difference for my future. But those high-wage hourly jobs are gone.

So nowadays, teen mothers, like my mom once was, need a solid education foundation more than anything to make Detroit's recovery real.

Benita Miller, founder and executive director of the Brooklyn Young Mothers' Collective, is a native Detroiter. She is a proud graduate of Detroit Southeastern High School.



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