

# Raising Compulsory School Age Requirements: A Dropout Fix?

*“Any young person without a high school diploma is at a severe disadvantage in our high-tech labor market, with its accompanying demands for advanced education. We can’t prepare students for the 21st century who aren’t in school. Increasing graduation rates requires a continuum of strategies that engage students, including ensuring their presence in the classroom.”*

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

**T**o compete in the 21st century, students will need a high school education, at a minimum. “Dropping out” before receiving a diploma is costly. Dropouts from the class of 2010 alone will cost the nation more than \$337 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes.<sup>1</sup>

Students drop out of school for a multitude of reasons. While there is no single reason to explain why students drop out, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education, research indicates that difficult transitions to high school, deficient basic skills, and a lack of engagement all serve as prominent barriers to graduation.<sup>2</sup> According to “Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts,” most students regret the decision.<sup>3</sup> According to state leaders, “While they understand that raising graduation rates requires a multi-pronged approach, they also understand that it is more difficult to address the problem if state law permits students to drop out of school before they reach graduation age and sends the message that they can do so.”<sup>4</sup>

For more than a decade, states have been increasing the maximum age for school attendance. Compulsory school attendance refers to the minimum and maximum age required by each state for students to be enrolled in and attending public schools or some equivalent education program as defined by law. According to the Education Commission of the States (ECS), the vast majority of states include an added clause providing for students to be released from compulsory attendance requirements upon graduation of high school, regardless of their age.<sup>5</sup>

## More States are Raising Compulsory Age Attendance

To date, 20 states and the District of Columbia have set the maximum compulsory school attendance age at 18. States that have successfully passed legislation to increase the compulsory attendance age to 18 include Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, South Dakota, and Washington. In addition 12 states recently designated 17 as the maximum age, including which includes the recent additions of Alabama, Illinois, Missouri, North Dakota, South Carolina, and West Virginia.

Raising the compulsory education age has been touted as one of the most widely employed strategies for decreasing student dropout.<sup>6</sup> According to a 2007 Civic Enterprises report, “Many current state efforts to keep young people in school are dealing with the compulsory school age, because there is growing, shared understanding that raising the age requirement is also a way to raise expectations among students, their parents, school authorities, and the general public.”<sup>7</sup>

In general, supporters of raising compulsory school ages believe that these policies will produce the following results:<sup>8</sup>

- Coupled with supports for struggling students, it curtails the drop-out rate (according to one study, 25 percent of potential dropouts remain in school because of compulsory schooling laws).
- It enables students to earn higher wages in the future (because they attend school longer).

- It affords students additional benefits, such as better health and better satisfaction with their lives.
- It reflects the realities of the 21st century, with an increased need for higher levels of education.
- It increases the prosperity of the states and the nation.
- It promotes social mobility by enabling students of poverty to stay in school longer and complete their education.

Opponents of increasing the maximum compulsory age argue that these policies interfere with parents' rights to make educational choices for their children.<sup>9</sup> Critics typically cite the burden on taxpayers and increase in the cost of education. Opponents also suggest that it represents an intrusion of the government into the lives of individuals and fails to retain students who are already disengaged from school. Critics also assert that forcing students to stay in school against their will creates disruptions in the classroom.

### Emerging Lessons

Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Princeton University Economics Professors Joshua Angrist and Allan Krueger found that approximately one-quarter of potential dropouts remain in school because of compulsory school laws. Their findings also revealed that overall enrollment rates among 16 year olds are lower in states that allow them to drop out when they turn 16.

However, states report that implementing these policies does not represent a silver bullet for instantly increasing graduation rates. States caution that "it has become clear that raising the compulsory attendance age should be only one part of a more comprehensive plan to increase graduation rates."<sup>11</sup> They also make the following observations:

- *Raising the compulsory attendance age is not a stand-alone policy:* Programs that support at-risk students and allow for flexible educational opportunities improve results.

- *Raising the compulsory attendance age produces mixed results:* Some states experience a dramatic increase in truancy following enactment of higher compulsory education age; the same students still failed to attend, but they were considered truant instead of being counted as dropping out.<sup>12</sup>

### NEA Policies and Positions

NEA believes in the value of academic preparation, school attendance, and social interaction for meeting the requirements of high school graduation. The Association's *12-Point Action Plan for Reducing the School Dropout Rate* calls for mandating high school graduation or equivalency as compulsory for everyone below the age of 21.

### Raising Compulsory School Age Attendance Gains National Spotlight

During President Barack Obama's 2012 State of the Union, he challenged states that have not raised their compulsory school ages to require all students to stay in school until they turn 18 or graduate. According to President Obama, "when students don't walk away from their education, more of them walk the stage to get their diploma. When students are not allowed to drop out, they do better."

States that have realized success in improving graduation rates have used a variety of reforms. Most notably: making increased graduation rates a priority; creating smaller learning communities in large high schools; and raising compulsory school age.<sup>13</sup>

As data show, the country cannot afford the costs of students dropping out of school. The personal, social, and economic consequences of these decisions have ripple effects on families, communities, and for the nation at large. Trends indicate that more states are likely to increase their compulsory school age attendance as part of a collection of comprehensive education reforms.

State (Shaded line indicates change)	Maximum Compulsory Attendance, 2002	Maximum Compulsory Attendance, 2011
Alabama	16	17
Alaska	16	16
Arizona	16	16
Arkansas	17	17
California	18	18
Colorado	17	17
Connecticut	18	18
Delaware	16	16
District of Columbia	18	18
Florida	16	16
Georgia	16	16
Hawaii	18	18
Idaho	16	16
Illinois	16	17
Indiana	16	18
Iowa	16	16
Kansas	18	18
Kentucky	16	16
Louisiana	17	18
Maine	17	17
Maryland	16	16
Massachusetts	16	16
Michigan	16	18
Minnesota	16	16
Mississippi	17	17
Missouri	16	17
Montana	16	16
Nebraska	16	18
Nevada	17	18
New Hampshire	16	18
New Jersey	16	16
New Mexico	18	18
New York	16	16
North Carolina	16	16
North Dakota	16	17
Ohio	18	18
Oklahoma	18	18
Oregon	18	18
Pennsylvania	17	17
Rhode Island	16	16
South Carolina	16	17
South Dakota	16	18

State (Shaded line indicates change)	Maximum Compulsory Attendance, 2002	Maximum Compulsory Attendance, 2011
Tennessee	17	17
Texas	18	18
Utah	18	18
Vermont	16	16
Virginia	18	18
Washington	17	18
West Virginia	16	17
Wisconsin	18	18
Wyoming	16	16

## References

<sup>1</sup> "High School Dropouts in America," Alliance for Excellent Education. September 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts," Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates. March 2006.

<sup>4</sup> "Raising the Compulsory School Attendance Age: The Case for Reform," Civic Enterprises. 2007.

<sup>5</sup> "Compulsory School Age Requirements," Education Commission of the States. June 2010.

<sup>6</sup> "Increasing the High School Graduation Rate," Blueprint for Kentucky's Children. March 2010.

<sup>7</sup> "Raising the Compulsory School Attendance Age: The Case for Reform," Civic Enterprises. 2007.

<sup>8</sup> "Raising the Compulsory School Attendance Age," National Association of Secondary School Principals. May 2010

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 10 Angrist, Joshua D. & Allan B. Krueger (1991). Does Compulsory School Attendance Affect Schooling and Earnings? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, CVI (4), 979-1014.

<sup>11</sup> Bahnपुरi H. & Reynolds, G. (2003). Learning Point Associates. Understanding and Addressing the Issue of High School Dropout Age: Executive Summary.

<sup>12</sup> Illinois Task Force on Re-enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School. Interim Report. January 2007.

<sup>13</sup> "Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic," Civic Enterprises, Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, and the America's Promise Alliance. November 2010.

## Resources

### Alliance for Excellent Education

<http://www.all4ed.org/>

### Education Commission of the States

<http://www.ecs.org>

### National Center for Educational Statistics

<http://nces.ed.gov/>

### U.S. Department of Education

<http://www.ed.gov/>

