

**Policy Brief**  
Does Raising the Compulsory School  
Attendance Age Increase Graduation Rates?

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## **Executive Summary**

In 2009, 46,7000 students did not graduate from high school in North Carolina (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Over their lifetimes, these students will earn \$12.1 billion less than they would have as high school graduates (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Additionally, researchers have found that high school dropouts are particularly susceptible to crime, health problems, and dependence on social services, all of which are costly and detrimental to the state. North Carolina, which faces a graduation rate 10 percentage points below the national average, suffers particularly from this dropout crisis (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008; Diplomas Count, 2010). In light of the problem, state policy makers and advocacy groups are considering possible dropout prevention strategies, one of which is raising the compulsory school attendance age above 16.

North Carolina is one of 31 states that allows its students to drop out of school prior to age 18, before most have had the opportunity to obtain a high school diploma (Princiotta, D. & Reyna, R., 2009, p. 14). When most states enacted these school attendance laws over a century ago, the economy was primarily agrarian and fewer than 10 percent of 17-year-olds earned a high school diploma. States maintain low school-leaving ages for a variety of reasons, including the financial burden of increasing school enrollment rates. However, as the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy demands increasingly higher education levels, many states including North Carolina are looking into raising the compulsory school attendance age as a means of increasing high school completion (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Streeter, 2007).

However, existing research regarding the impact of the legal dropout age on graduation rates is mixed, and proponents of the policy change can show only modest effects at best. Further, it is difficult to assess the influence of raising the compulsory attendance age alone

given that many states have coupled these changes with complementary initiatives. If North Carolina raised the age, the state would face challenges in implementation and enforcement, as well as opposition from some educators, parents, students, and advocacy groups. There are also numerous fiscal concerns associated with this policy: researchers estimate the short-term cost of increased enrollment to be \$373 million over five years.

Despite these reservations, the North Carolina State Board of Education has recommended raising the legal dropout age (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2010). The purpose of this brief is to address Action for Children North Carolina's research question: What is the effect of raising the compulsory school attendance age on graduation rates in other states?

Given the lack of substantial evidence regarding the policy's effectiveness and the significant costs associated with its implementation, we do not recommend that Action for Children North Carolina advocate for an increase in the compulsory attendance age. Having focused our research on the direct effects of this policy, we have not assessed the relative effectiveness of raising the age among other dropout prevention strategies. We recommend significant further research into alternative strategies that might be used to address North Carolina's dropout crisis.

## **Empirical Findings**

One method used to study compulsory school attendance age and high school dropout is examining correlations between the legal age and the percentage of students dropping out at each grade level. In a three-year study of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core Data, Landis and Reschly (2010) observed a weak, but statistically significant correlation

between higher compulsory attendance ages and lower percentages of dropouts in ninth and tenth grade (p. 14).

Other studies examining before-and-after data from states that have raised the compulsory attendance age have shown mixed results. Oreopolous (2005), using U.S. Census Bureau data on over 1.2 million Americans ages 16 to 24, found that recent changes in the school-leaving age had a small but still significant impact on high school completion rates. Raising the age above 16 decreased the dropout rate by between 1.2 and 2.1 percentage points and increased, on average, a student's length of schooling by between 0.12 and 0.16 years (p. 10-11). However, using more recent NCES data, Landis and Reschly (2010) found that states that raised their compulsory attendance age did not, on average, experience a greater decline in dropout than states that maintained the legal age at 16.

A number of researchers have performed studies looking specifically at individual state policy outcomes. For instance, Burkhauser (2002) examined Kansas and Texas, both of which raised the compulsory attendance age to 18 in the 1997-98 school year, from 16 and 17, respectively. In Kansas, the dropout rate fell less than one percentage point by the 2000-01 school year (p. 4). In Texas, the dropout rate did not change in the following year, but actually grew in 1999-2000 (p. 4). Burkhauser concluded that increasing the compulsory attendance age is "only slightly successful in decreasing dropout rates" (p. 6).

Though higher age requirements are slightly correlated with the timing of dropout, they do not appear to promote high school completion (Landis & Reschly, 2010). Preventing dropout and promoting graduation may not be the same goal. A task force report to the North Carolina Assembly, which collects four-year cohort graduation rates for states that have raised their compulsory attendance age to 18, found that this policy change did not universally increase

graduation.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Wisconsin is the only state for which graduation rates rose; in Virginia, they fell dramatically (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 7).

State	2000-2001 graduation rate	2005-2006 graduation rate
Hawaii	77.7%	75.5%
Ohio	81%	79.2%
Virginia	83.8%	74.5%
Wisconsin	84.8%	87.5%

(p. 7)

These studies are limited, however, because they cannot take into account a number of potentially confounding variables. States' economic conditions, for example, may have independently affected graduation rates. It is also impossible to view the effects of raising the age in complete isolation since many states couple policy changes with programmatic supports like anti-truancy initiatives. Despite these limitations, the data does point to a trend: raising the age in other states has not increased high school graduation.

### Compliance and Complementary Programs

Research shows that, in practice, only a fraction of habitually truant students are held accountable. In states with a leaving age of 18, 6.8% of 17-year-olds have already left school (Oreopolous, 2005, p. 6). In several states, only general guidelines for determining habitual truancy are provided, attendance officers have large caseloads, and, in the short term, schools have little immediate financial incentive to improve attendance (Palmisano & Potts, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> All data printed in this table are reported in the North Carolina Assembly report, though neither the source nor the year of legislation is listed.

Additionally, administrators are often reluctant to pursue court action, especially when they believe a student's return to school would be disruptive for other children. To encourage compliance, states may choose to implement complementary programs aimed at decreasing truancy. Many effective anti-truancy programs promote school-based interventions at an early age that involve parents and provide necessary community supports outside of school that keep students engaged (Bridgeland et al., 2007).

Additionally, research has shown that raising the age has a limited effect on graduation rates when states exempt significant numbers of students from the law. Most state statutes include numerous exemptions made for students with certain disabilities or religious beliefs, or those who live a certain distance from school. In some states, only parental consent is required to receive an exemption (Attending to Learn, 2007). Other states require express permission from parents and school authorities (Bridgeland et al., 2007). Indiana, for example, allows students to leave school early only after parents and a school principal complete a formal withdrawal process that makes explicitly clear to students and their families the likely consequences of dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2007). Should North Carolina raise the age, policy makers must consider how different types of exemptions might affect the policy's influence.

### **Associated Costs and Benefits**

Raising the legal dropout age is linked to significant increases in educational spending. To start, raising the age will require funding support for additional truancy counselors and officers to adequately enforce the law. Additionally, if raising the compulsory attendance age is coupled with proper enforcement and schools experience higher student attendance, they will face costs associated with hiring more teachers, building more classrooms, and arranging

additional transportation. The North Carolina General Assembly report estimates that if North Carolina changed its compulsory attendance age beginning in 2011, school-related costs would increase by \$373 million over five years, approximately \$243 million of which would come from the state (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2010 p.13).

In Maryland, a task force convened by the State Department of Education projected that, based on annual averages from previous years, 21,044 students would drop out of high school during the 2007-08 academic year. Had all of these students stayed in school, state policy makers would face the following needs and associated costs:

Additional staff: 1,108  
Additional classrooms: 571  
Annual cost of additional pupils: \$200,015,000  
One-time cost of additional portable classrooms: \$45,660,000  
(Attending to Learn, 2007, p. 7)<sup>2</sup>

Of course, such expenses vary by state, but these figures provide an important framework for estimating the policy's financial impact.

Finally, many high school dropouts have behavioral, emotional, physical, or academic problems, and the majority come from low-income households. Raising the compulsory attendance age would increase the need for guidance counselors, teaching assistants, special education instructors, and free-and-reduced lunch funding. Teachers may also require additional professional development, equipping them to address specific needs of those who are at risk of dropping out (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Streeter, 2007, p. 7).

However, there is a growing consensus that the long-term costs of the dropout problem warrant measures to help students stay in school, and many researchers have attempted to

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<sup>2</sup> This estimation assumes that per pupil expenditures will increase by 1.5% per year (Attending to Learn, 2007, p. 13)

demonstrate the monetary gains that the state would realize if graduation rates increased. For instance, had North Carolina's projected 41,362 dropouts graduated with the class of 2008, they would have earned an additional \$10.8 billion over their lifetimes (Amos, 2008, p. 37). Had all students in the class of 2006 graduated, the state would have saved \$492 million in health-related expenses (Amos, 2008, p. 39). Increasing the male high school graduation rate by only 5% would save the state economy \$233 million in crime-related costs and lost wages each year (Amos 2008, p. 38).

This diverse set of outcomes suggests that the long-term benefits, financial or otherwise, of decreasing the dropout rate outweigh the short- and long-term costs of increased enrollment. However, as empirical findings demonstrate, raising the compulsory attendance age does not alone guarantee higher graduation rates. Many other confounding factors beyond the legal dropout age must be considered when looking more closely at these financial projections.

## **Conclusion**

Though raising the legal attendance age has reduced dropout rates in some states, the effects are generally small and vary significantly, largely due to low compliance with compulsory attendance law. Without strong enforcement systems or complementary programs to address increased enrollment of at-risk students, raising the compulsory attendance age will likely have little impact on school completion and could be disruptive to schools. Further, these initiatives are costly, and must be taken seriously if the proposed increase in compulsory attendance laws is passed.

Because we cannot accurately predict the burdens that this policy change would pose for schools and the state budget, further research into fiscal implications is necessary. In its initial report to the General Assembly, a North Carolina working group recommends the following:

“Form a task force to complete a comprehensive long range study of the impacts of raising the compulsory attendance age, including policy and cost benefit fiscal analyses, spanning a period of at least a year, in order to garner input from a variety of stakeholders, including students currently in school as well as those who have dropped out.” (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2010, p. 14)

In its presentation to the State Board of Education, the working group also proposed a pilot program to test a compulsory attendance age increase in various districts across the state and create complementary enforcement programs in the affected schools (Brown, 2010).

We recommend careful consideration of this upcoming report and the results of the pilot program. Both should indicate if the state can properly enforce raising the age, if it is equipped to handle the added financial and personnel burden from an increase in attendance, and if the policy is effective in raising graduation rates in North Carolina. Additionally, further analysis of evidence-based dropout prevention strategies is necessary to determine the best policies for increasing graduation rates in North Carolina.

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## Appendix

(Princiotta, D., & Reyna, R., 2009, 14)

