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Should North Carolina Raise the Compulsory Schooling Age?

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North Carolina is among a slim majority of states with a compulsory schooling age of 16, meaning that a student can choose to leave school on their 16th birthday. Nine states have a compulsory age of 17 and 15 states have a compulsory age of 18. In the southeast, South Carolina and Tennessee have compulsory ages of 17 and Virginia has a compulsory age of 18.

Why raise the compulsory age?

The most compelling argument for raising the compulsory school age from 16 to 18 is not based on student results, but on societal standards. The state's compulsory age was raised from 14 to 16 in the 1940s when the 12th grade was added. In the 21st century, when a high school degree or equivalent is the minimum requirement for so much of the labor force, state legislators must ask themselves whether it is appropriate to send students the message that it is acceptable to conclude their education at age 16.

There are other arguments surrounding the compulsory school age debate. These issues should be understood and if necessary addressed in any legislation that raises the compulsory age:

1. Increasing the compulsory age will not, by itself, significantly decrease the dropout rate.

- A 2002 study from Cornell University found slight decreases in the high school completion rates and ambiguous results for dropout rates in four states that increased the compulsory age from 16 to 18 in the late 1990s. The study also found that, on average, states with compulsory ages of 18 had lower high school completion rates and higher dropout rates than states with compulsory ages of 16.
- In 2005-06, two-thirds of 16-year-old dropouts did not complete the 9th grade. At age 18, even if they completed their next two grades on time, those same students could still drop out without completing the 11th grade. Only 10 percent of 16-year-old dropouts had the potential to complete high school before turning 18.
- There would be a decrease in the dropout rate in the first two years following an increase in the compulsory age, as some of the students who would have dropped out at 16 stay in school until age 18. The rate would increase again when the first group of students under the new law reached 18.
- Some students drop out below the legal age now. It is reasonable to assume that some students would still drop out at 16 under a new law.

2. There is the potential for negative impact on other students and state resources.

- Requiring unwilling 16 and 17-year-olds to attend school may lead to more disruption in the classroom, affecting the other students in the class. Ultimately, the disruptive students could receive suspensions, thus taking them out of the school setting in spite of the increase in the compulsory age.
- Alternatively, some people argue that keeping these students in school will keep them off the streets and out of trouble.
- More students mean more money, particularly for teachers and physical space. The five largest urban districts, which already face space and teacher recruitment challenges, have a disproportionate share of dropouts as well.

3. The compulsory schooling age does not address the reasons that students drop out.

- Students who drop out do so because the education system is not meeting their needs. Extending their tenure by two more years in the same environment cannot be expected to produce different results.
- Studies show that alternative education programs and other methods that provide more flexible options for drop-

outs than traditional schools are more effective in reengaging students and preventing dropouts. These programs can be coupled with an increase in the compulsory schooling age.

- Over the last two years, the percentage of students who drop out to attend a community college has increased, reaching 12 percent this year and the number one reason other than attendance that students give for dropping out. While these students are counted as dropouts, they have not abandoned the educational system. They have simply found a venue that is better suited to their needs.

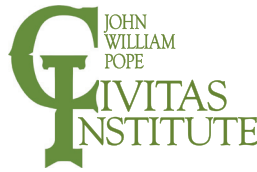
4. A compulsory schooling age of 18 is inconsistent with criminal law.

- Beginning at age 16, juveniles are treated as adults or quasi-adults in several state laws. In the criminal justice system, a 16-year-old is an adult. Also at age 16, for example, a youth can obtain a provisional driver's license, marry with a court order or parental consent, and drop out of school.

5. There are education organizations on both sides of this policy debate.

- Nationally, homeschool organizations oppose this type of legislation. Homeschool parents argue that the compulsory age is a restriction on personal freedom, and that their students frequently complete the high school curriculum well before age 18. Other states that have raised the compulsory age have allowed parents to legally withdraw their children from school at age 16. An exemption for homeschooled students is also an option.

- The State Board of Education advocates an increase to age 18, and the National Education Association recommends mandating high school graduation or equivalency for everyone below the age of 21.



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