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Overview

More than 150 years have passed since Horace Mann helped Massachusetts establish a statewide system of education that eventually led to the requirement that all children attend public school. In 1852, Massachusetts became the first state to pass compulsory school attendance laws, and by 1918, all states required children to receive an education.

Compulsory Education Requirements

Today, every state and territory requires children to enroll in public or private education or to be home-schooled. More than half—32 states—require students to begin their education by age 6. Some states' set their age requirements as low as age 5 and as high as age 8. All children are required to continue their education into their high school years, with 26 states setting the cutoff age at 16. The remaining states require students to stay in school through age 17 or 18.

Compulsory education laws vary greatly from state to state. While some states use a student's date of birth to determine the beginning and ending dates for compulsory education, other states require a student to begin school if he or she will turn 6 during the school year and require a student to remain in school until completion of the school year in which he or she turns 17. Four states—Arizona, Montana, Vermont and Wyoming—require students to remain in school through a specified grade. Most states allow parents to petition their local school board or principal for a waiver of these requirements under certain circumstances, such as enrollment in a vocational education program or an institution of higher education or early completion of required coursework.

Kindergarten Enrollment

States and territories also set a minimum age for children to enroll in kindergarten, which is typically one or two years earlier than the compulsory education age. Every state or territory with a policy on this issue has established age 5 as the minimum age. However, six states—Colorado, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania—leave this decision up to local education agencies. In addition to the age requirement, each state also sets a date by which students must have attained the specified age in order to attend kindergarten. The cutoff dates range from August 1 in Indiana and Missouri to Jan. 1 in Connecticut and Vermont.

The School Age Debate

School attendance ages are often controversial. Many early childhood experts argue that if policymakers establish early cutoff dates for kindergarten, they should also establish aggressive school readiness programs to ensure students' success. Others argue that because there has been an increased emphasis on early childhood development and school readiness, we should continue to challenge children at a younger age. Some experts assert that age may be an arbitrary indicator or measure of a child's ability to succeed in school and should not be used at all. Others point out that when a state considers legislation, such as Nebraska, allowing younger children to enter kindergarten, policymakers must understand that there is likely to be a large increase in the number of children entering kindergarten during the first year of the new policy, thereby straining already tight school district budgets and increasing the need for teachers.

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The age through which students must attend school can also be controversial. To encourage more students to attend institutions of higher education and to decrease dropout rates, juvenile crime and teen pregnancy, some state legislatures have increased the school attendance requirement to age 17 or 18. Opponents are concerned about forcing students to be in the classroom against their will. They say that these students may become disruptive and may require teachers and principals to spend more time and resources disciplining such students for disruptive or violent behavior and truancy. They also point out that there probably will be a greater need for funding, teachers and classrooms for alternative education.

State Action

Many state legislatures continue to debate school attendance policies. During the 2005 legislative session, Indiana changed their kindergarten enrollment date from July 1st to August 1st. During the 2004 legislative session, at least seven states enacted legislation regarding compulsory education. Alaska extended the required school age for a child who is six years of age on or before Sept. 1 following the beginning of the school year, and who is under the age of 20 and has not completed the 12th grade. Illinois increased the compulsory school age from 16 to 17 years of age, with certain exceptions. Kansas and Kentucky will both, under specific circumstances, grant exemptions from compulsory attendance. Nebraska changed the mandatory ages for compulsory education beginning in the 2005-06 school year to age of 6 by Jan. 1 of the current school year through the age of 17, with certain exceptions. In New York, local school districts will have the power to require minors from 16 to 17 years of age to attend full time day instruction. Finally, Virginia strengthened the mechanisms for enforcement of the compulsory school attendance law.

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