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Law urged to make teens stay in school

The Boston Globe**By James Vaznis, Globe Staff | October 21, 2009**

Massachusetts students would be required to stay in school until age 18 under an ambitious proposal, part of a broader effort to halve the state's high school dropout rate, to be announced today by a special state commission.

With approximately 10,000 Massachusetts students quitting school each year, some as young as 14 years old, commission members say the state can no longer afford to ignore the dropout crisis, especially when striving to develop a more highly educated and skilled workforce.

For more than a decade, the state's dropout rate has remained stagnant. According to the most recent data available, 3.4 percent of students statewide quit school during the 2007-08 academic year, while several urban districts have rates nearly triple that. Under current state law, students can legally drop out by choice at age 16, and students as young as 14 can withdraw from school with permission from the superintendent for medical reasons, employment, or to do nonwage work at home.

If these dropouts never return to receive a diploma, they can become a huge drain on the state's economy. They are less likely to have a job and are far more likely to go to jail or depend on public assistance than residents who have graduated from high school, according to the commission's report, which is being released this afternoon.

"This whole report is a call to action," said Paul Reville, the secretary of education and chairman of the commission, which was created under a 2008 law to develop dropout prevention strategies. "It's critical work. We can ill afford the waste, loss, and tragedy these persistent rates represent."

In the coming months, the Patrick administration plans to put together legislation to raise the compulsory school age, a measure that will be tied to creation of an array of programs aimed at preventing students from dropping out and reaching out to those who have. By April this year, 19 states required students to stay in school until 18, according to the Education Commission of the States. The group includes New Hampshire, where the change took effect this year.

Some strategies recommended by the commission include hiring case managers to make the school experience more personal for these students, creating internships so students clearly see the connection between the classroom and potential careers, and using standardized test scores and other data to gauge, as early as elementary school, whether a student runs the risk of not finishing high school.

Given the state's dire budget predicament, Reville said, gaining the funding needed to push the effort forward could be a challenge. Already, sluggish state revenues have forced a sharp reduction in funding for dropout prevention this year.

But Reville emphasized that fighting for these students is worthwhile. "We are not going to hold back because of a budget crisis and say this problem doesn't exist," he said.

While the commission did not put a pricetag on its proposals, the report pointed out that overall enrollment in alternative education programs at local high schools would more than double, from 4,500 to 12,000, as more students stay in school.

Some members of the Legislature have expressed skepticism in the past about raising the age of school leaving, worried about the cost associated with creating programs for these students or further exacerbating problems that many districts already have with truancy. Those concerns led to passage of the bill that created the commission.

But others in the Legislature strongly support raising the attendance age. Representative Garrett Bradley, Democrat of Hingham, has already filed a bill to raise the maximum attendance age, which will be the subject of a hearing next month.

Reville said he has not examined that legislation yet, but anticipates that it will need to be reworked to encapsulate all the panel's recommendations.

Representative Martha M. Walz, a Boston Democrat who cochairs the Joint Committee on Education, has not yet taken a position on Bradley's bill, but said she was encouraged that the commission had given the age change a favorable recommendation and had suggested other programs and resources that could help these students succeed in school.

"My gut instinct tells me keeping students in school until age 18 is the right way to go if we can address underlying reasons that cause them to drop out and create programs that address their need," Walz said.

Students drop out of school for a wide array of reasons. Some grow frustrated because of consistently poor academic performance in school, particularly those not fluent in English and those who require special education, according to the report. Other students say they don't have time for school because they need to help their families earn income.

The commission also found that some students said they did not stick with school simply because no one seemed to care whether they did.

Compared with the national average, Massachusetts loses a smaller share of students. According to the most recent federal data available, from 2007, the national high school dropout average was 8.7 percent.

But rates in several Massachusetts urban districts often exceed or hover around the national average. In the 2007-08 school year, Lawrence lost 12.9 percent of its students; Fall River, 12.5 percent; Holyoke, 11.6 percent; Springfield, 9.7 percent; and Boston, 7.6 percent.

Reducing dropout rates is one part of the state's strategy to boost the state's high school graduation rate, which for the class of 2008 stood at about 81 percent. Dropouts accounted for about half of the students who did not earn a diploma in four years, while most of the others in that group opted for a fifth year of school.

Each dropout, over his or her lifetime, costs more than \$118,000 in government expenditure and other benefits, according to research conducted a few years ago by Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies.

Some districts are already working on reducing dropout rates. Boston opened a "re-engagement center" last month where high school dropouts can receive extra support as they resume their quest for a diploma.

Thomas Scott, executive of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, said that decreasing the dropout rate is a good goal, but that the state needs to put money behind the policy. "You have to invest in this population for them to stay in school," said Scott. ■