

Alaska State Legislature

Interim: (May - Dec.)
716 W. 4th Ave
Anchorage, AK 99501
Phone: (907) 269-0144
Fax: (907) 269-0148



Session: (Jan. - May)
State Capitol, Suite 30
Juneau, AK 99801-1182
Phone: (907) 465-3822
Fax: (907) 465-3756
Toll free: (800) 770-3822

Senator_Bettye_Davis@legis.state.ak.us
<http://www.akdemocrats.org>

Senator Bettye Davis

SB 9 27-LS0085 "An Act relating to compulsory school attendance; and relating to the crime of contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

SPONSOR STATEMENT

This bill changes the Alaska compulsory school attendance ages from 7-16 to 6-18. At the same time it necessarily amends the criminal statute of contributing to the delinquency of a minor from the maximum age 16 to 18. The legislative intent of this bill is to require all students to start school earlier when their brains are growing and developing at a dramatic rate from birth to age 7 and to stay in school long enough to graduate. This bill allows earlier identification of children with learning disabilities and more time to take successful corrective action. This bill will not preclude parents from homeschooling children, or using charter or alternative schools, or any other of the twelve enumerated exceptions to compulsory education under AS 14.30.010(b), including completion of grade 12 or graduation from a secondary school before age 18.

The Alaska compulsory school age statute is out of date with modern educational practice and thinking. The law has not changed since territorial days when few children attended school beyond 8th grade or bothered to graduate, because most jobs did not require much education. The majority of Alaskan students today are already in school by age six and many by the minimum age five. Head Start and prekindergarten programs are growing in popularity. The state already funds a pilot pre-kindergarten program and SB 6 this year proposes funding such a program statewide.

In 1852 Massachusetts became the first state to pass compulsory school attendance laws, and by 1918 all states required children to receive an education. Today every state and territory requires children to enroll in public or private education or to be home-schooled. Thirty-two states require students to begin their education by age 6 or 5 and to remain in school until 16 or older. Twenty-four states and American Samoa set the minimum at age 6, and eight states and the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands set the minimum at age 5. All children are required to continue their education into their high school years, with twenty states setting the compulsory cutoff age at age 18; eleven at age 17; and nineteen states including Alaska and the Virgin Islands at age 16.

By increasing the school attendance age to 18, this bill should discourage earlier dropouts and reduce juvenile crime, teen pregnancy and other at risk behaviors. Studies have found that students without a diploma earn less than 75% of those with a diploma; they are more likely to live in poverty, go to jail, and have health problems.

The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development reported 8,245 students or 67.7% graduated in 2010 while 3,186 dropped out. The graduation rate of Alaska Native students was 55.4%, a group which experienced twice the dropout rate of all students. These rates remain well below the national average. The National Education Association's first priority two years ago in its "12-Point Action Plan for Reducing the School Dropout Rate" was to "*mandate high school graduation or equivalency as compulsory for everyone below the age of 21.*" It reported:

"Just as we established compulsory attendance to the age of 16 or 17 in the beginning of the 20th century, it is appropriate and critical to eradicate the idea of 'dropping out' before achieving a diploma. To compete in the 21st century, all of our citizens, at minimum, need a high school education."

Opponents to increasing compulsory school age who are concerned about forcing students to be in the classroom against their will argue that these students may become disruptive and require more time and expense on behavior and truancy problems. This bill, however, is directed at more than just "seat time." It is to become part of a larger plan to motivate rather than to punish or ignore students. It aims to help students stay in school long enough to graduate and go on to college or better-paying jobs. Students will want to come to school, stay in school, and graduate, if academic problems are identified early and they helped long before they dropout. For those students who want to work or are not as academically inclined, school districts are encouraged to continue accredited alternative schools and work-study programs to help students earn credits toward a diploma if they must work at the same time. Coupled with early efforts to retain, train, and graduate, this bill can bring hope and success to thousands of Alaskan students who otherwise might not stay in school long enough to graduate or develop to the best of their potential.