



Building a Grad Nation

**Progress and Challenge in Ending
the High School Dropout Epidemic**

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✓ Setting Clear and High Academic and Graduation Standards

✓ *Increasing Compulsory School Age Requirements*

In our previous research, students identified "too much freedom" as a key factor that enabled them to drop out of high school, and poor attendance is a strong predictor of dropping out.³⁶ Most states originally enacted compulsory school attendance laws between 1870 and 1910, a time when fewer than 10 percent of 17-year-olds graduated from high school, due in large part to the fact that a high school education was not a prerequisite to participating in the mainstream workforce.³⁷ Over the last year, extensive research has been conducted at the state level that highlights the growing gap between the areas where states are experiencing job growth and the educational levels of their populations.³⁸ Students required to attend high school for an additional year experience a 12 percent increase in earnings. These students are also less likely to report being unemployed, having health problems, being depressed, and working in lower-skilled jobs. They are also more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction with their lives overall.³⁹ Many states have responded to these issues by raising the compulsory school age to send the message to students that graduating from high school is absolutely essential.

Since 2002, 12 states have raised the compulsory school age from 16 to 17 or 18.⁴⁰ Currently, 21 states have a compulsory school age of 18 and 32 states have a compulsory school age of 17 or 18.⁴¹ In some states that have a compulsory school attendance age of 17, like Tennessee and West Virginia, students must remain in school until they are 18 to keep their driver's license.

A 1991 MIT and Harvard study shows that raising the compulsory school age acts as a constraint on dropping out.⁴² Of the 6 states that increased the compulsory school age

between 2002 and 2008, two states (Illinois and South Dakota) experienced increases in their graduation rates. Only Nevada experienced a decline.

Despite broad movement on raising the compulsory school age, this movement has not been uniformly embraced within the states. Over the last year alone, 13 states have introduced legislation to raise their compulsory school age to 17 or 18 that has stalled or died in committee.⁴³ Among the states that were unsuccessful in raising the compulsory school age, opposition from home school educators, parents, students, local businesses, and advocacy groups; an inability to determine if an increase in graduation and attendance rates or decrease in dropout rates can be attributed to increasing the compulsory school age; and the fiscal estimate were cited as critical barriers.⁴⁴ In some states where officials cited raising the compulsory school age law as a key tool to set clear expectations at the state level and to drive anti-truancy efforts locally, they also indicated that they feared in some cases parents were home schooling their children to get around the compulsory school age and to enable them to enter the workforce full time at an earlier age.

Combating Chronic Absenteeism

In the past few years, there has been growing awareness that communities with low graduation rates often have very high rates of chronic absenteeism from the early elementary grades forward. Recently, a number of communities have begun to organize to establish the norm that every student should be in school every day. Both Baltimore and New York City have launched joint efforts involving the school system and city agencies to create multi-pronged efforts to provide the range of supports needed to get more students to attend school on a regular basis. In addition, a new national effort called Attendance Counts has launched a website to spread best practices.⁴⁵ The federal government and most states and districts, however, do not track or report chronic absenteeism (commonly defined as missing a month or more of school) at the school or district level, instead focusing on aggregate attendance that can often mask serious chronic absenteeism challenges.

36 Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., & K. B. Morison (2006). *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research Associates. For the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

37 U.S. Bureau of the Census (2002). *Mini-historical statistics: Education summary — enrollment*. Accessed at: www.census.gov/statab/hist/HS-20.pdf.

38 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (2009). *Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

39 Oreopoulos, P. (2003) *Do Dropouts Dropout Too Soon? International Evidence From Changes in School-Leaving Laws*. National Bureau of Education Research Working Paper No. 10155.

40 One state, Minnesota, has lowered its compulsory school age from 18 to 16. Data compiled by the Education Commission of the States.

41 Ibid.

42 Angrist, J.D. & A.B. Krueger (1991). Does Compulsory School Attendance Affect Schooling and Earnings? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 106(4): 979-1014.

43 Home School Legal Defense Association statistics.

44 See: Maryland State Department of Education (2007). *Attending to Learn: The Implications of Raising the Compulsory Age for School Attendance*. Final report of the Task Force to Study Raising the Compulsory Public School Attendance Age to 18. Submitted to the Maryland General Assembly and Governor.

45 www.attendancecounts.org