
Does raising the state compulsory school attendance age achieve the intended outcomes?

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Key findings

Seeking to reduce student dropouts, truancy, and disciplinary actions, some states have raised the compulsory school attendance age. But there is insufficient evidence to build a case for or against doing so. Despite divergent views on the merits, recent studies conclude that if states enact stricter compulsory attendance age laws, they should do so in conjunction with complementary retention and dropout prevention policies that create a comprehensive approach.

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Summary

The United States and other industrialized countries have used compulsory school attendance legislation to encourage high school students to stay in school. In recent decades many states have raised the compulsory school attendance age to 17 or 18, in most cases from a previously mandated 16. The chief arguments favoring the change are that it will reduce dropout rates, signal to children and their families that dropping out is unacceptable, and more than compensate for the higher costs of educating students longer through lower spending on social programs, public safety, correctional services, and other state programs and functions. Arguments against increasing the age are that costs will rise, that requiring older teens to remain in schools against their will causes disciplinary and safety problems for other students, and that doing so usurps parents' rights to make education decisions for their children.

Maryland recently raised its compulsory school attendance age from 16 to 18 in two stages: from 16 to 17 at the beginning of the 2014/15 school year and from 17 to 18 at the beginning of the 2016/17 school year (Maryland Senate Bill 362, 2012). The Maryland State Department of Education, a member of Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic's School Completion and Engagement Research Alliance, requested technical assistance from Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic in fulfilling reporting requirements to the legislature and in implementing the policy changes.

Against this background, this review addresses the following research questions:

- What changes have occurred in dropouts, truancy, and disciplinary actions in states that raised their compulsory school attendance age during 2002–11?
- What broader social outcomes have been identified in studies using national datasets?
- How have these states measured changes in these expected outcomes?

What changes have occurred in dropouts, truancy, and disciplinary actions in states that raised their compulsory school attendance age?

Eleven states raised their compulsory school attendance age during 2002–11: Alabama, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, South Dakota, and West Virginia. Online searches and outreach to state public information officers uncovered a few studies on outcomes related to a higher compulsory school attendance age, but many of the studies were methodologically flawed. Ultimately, the findings of the research literature are mixed on resulting changes in dropout, truancy, and disciplinary actions. Studies simply do not provide conclusive, empirical evidence for or against increasing the compulsory school attendance age. However, despite divergent views on the merits of raising the compulsory attendance age, recent studies tend to conclude that if states take this route, they should do so in conjunction with other retention and dropout prevention policies to create a comprehensive approach.

What broader social outcomes have been identified in studies using national datasets?

Because so few studies were found, the search was expanded to research using national datasets and reporting on changes in broader social outcomes. A few studies found positive financial and social outcomes associated with higher compulsory school attendance ages:

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higher adult earnings and average lifetime wealth and lower unemployment, teenage pregnancy, and mortality rates. However, some of the studies have limited utility in today's policy debates because their datasets cover periods when economic conditions and student demographics were very different from today's. Other studies found little positive impact, negative outcomes, or mixed results following increases in compulsory school attendance age.

How have these states measured these changes?

This study found no state-specific studies aimed at measuring changes in dropouts, truancy, and disciplinary actions following a rise in the compulsory school attendance age, so no data elements used by other states can be reported here. However, some suggested data elements for future analyses are presented in the full report.

Next steps

The review of publicly available documents suggests that despite considerable interest in the effects of raising the compulsory school attendance age at the time state legislatures are considering the policy change, interest wanes once the policy is implemented. And states have not collected data that would enable student outcomes to be examined.

Implementation of Maryland's compulsory school attendance requirements enacted in 2012 offers an opportunity to break this pattern. A well-designed study of student outcomes following implementation of the new law could inform policymakers in Maryland and other states that may consider such increases. Longitudinal analyses, one for the change from age 16 to 17 and another for the change from age 17 to 18 and both covering multiple years—for example, from three years before to three years after the age increase takes effect—could track numbers, rates, and percentages of students ages 15, 16, 17, and 18 for the following indicators:

- Dropouts.
- Truancy.
- Bullying, harassment, or intimidation.
- Referrals to alternative education options.
- Suspensions, also disaggregated by type of offenses.
- Expulsions, also disaggregated by type of offenses.

To facilitate analysis, researchers should document implementation dates for the higher compulsory school attendance age and other statewide policy changes that might affect dropout, truancy, and disciplinary action rates, such as new dropout prevention strategies and new antitrucancy programs. The impact of raising the compulsory school attendance age can be evaluated most accurately by an experimental study that compares groups with different compulsory attendance ages so that the findings lend themselves to causal conclusions. For example, states could stagger implementation over several years, as Maryland recently did, choosing counties and districts randomly for successive waves of implementing the higher age requirement.

Reference

Maryland Senate Bill 362. (2012). *Education—age for compulsory public school attendance—exemptions*. Retrieved November 27, 2012, from <http://mlis.state.md.us/2012rs/bills/sb/sb0362e.pdf>

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