



## Compulsory Attendance Policies: About Age or Intervention?

Over the past decade, SREB state policy-makers have concentrated on decreasing truancy and taking other actions to reduce dropout rates and increase high school graduation rates. Toward this end, some policy-makers have suggested that raising their state's compulsory attendance age (popularly called the "dropout age") to require students to stay in school until age 17 or 18 is an important step. But research suggests that this step is not sufficient by itself.

SREB's Challenge to Lead 2020 Goals for Education called for states to graduate 80 percent of ninth-graders from high school ready for college or career training. This includes the expectation that states will attain four-year high school graduation rates of at least 90 percent in the years ahead. Achieving these goals, in turn, helps states meet the goal that 60 percent of working-age adults have a postsecondary credential by 2025. Therefore, reducing dropouts is necessary.

Raising the compulsory attendance age has received attention at the national level. In 2009, the National Governors Association expressed its support for raising the age to 18 in every state, while in the 2012 State of the Union Address, President Obama called on every state in the nation to require "that all students stay in high school until they graduate or turn 18." Thus, SREB states that do not have a compulsory attendance age of 18 have a reason to consider a change.

However, the current body of research strongly suggests that raising the compulsory attendance age is not sufficient — as a stand-alone policy tool — to increase graduation rates in SREB states, or indeed in any state. In the words of noted dropout expert Robert Balfanz, "it's symbolically and strategically important ... but it's not the magical thing that in itself will keep kids in school."

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## Current status

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Some SREB states raised the compulsory attendance age in the past decade. In the last two years, Maryland (2012) and Kentucky (2013) passed legislation that will increase their compulsory attendance ages in the coming years. But in both states, the changes are in concert with other actions intended to improve academic achievement and high school graduation rates. Maryland will phase in its increase, from age 16 to 18, over several years and accompany it with a process to identify and enact programs, interventions and services that are needed to support the increase. In Kentucky, the increase follows years of efforts to reduce the dropout rate and improve student achievement; in particular, legislation approved in 2000 directed the state Department of Education to implement a comprehensive statewide strategy to address the dropout problem.

In recent decades, support for increasing the compulsory attendance age to increase high school graduation rates was based on a 1991 study published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. The study “Does Compulsory School Attendance Affect Schooling and Earnings?” which explored the links between the age at which an individual begins school, compulsory schooling laws and individuals’ earnings later in life, estimated that up to 25 percent of potential dropouts remained in school due to compulsory attendance laws.

A notable weakness of that study, however, is that it did not measure the effect that factors other than compulsory attendance laws may have had on graduation rates — such as demographic and socioeconomic differences between states, other dropout prevention strategies that were in place, or the degree to which states granted exemptions to compulsory attendance requirements. The positive effect of increased compulsory attendance ages also actually decreased over the course of the study. Further, the study was based on 1960, 1970 and 1980 U.S. Census data. The 2010 data clearly show that U.S. student populations, especially those in the SREB region, are far more diverse than they were then.

Indeed, the newest research directly *contradicts* the assertion that higher compulsory attendance ages will increase graduation rates. The 2012 Brookings

Institution research study “Compulsory School Attendance — What Research Says and What it Means for State Policy” compared the freshman graduation rates of states with compulsory attendance ages of 16 or 17 against those with a compulsory age of 18. After adjusting for demographic factors, the researchers found that the graduation rates of the two groups of states were statistically indistinguishable.

Beyond the findings that show the inadequacy of increasing the age as a stand-alone policy for improving graduation rates is the reality that most states provide exemptions that dilute its power. While students who are mentally or physically incapable of attending school (or who have already obtained their high school diplomas) typically are exempted from compulsory attendance, most SREB states with requirements of age 17 or 18 provide other exemptions as well. (See Table 1.) In a few instances, states permit exemptions for children who are employed. The most common exemption is for students who withdraw from school and enter a program to work toward a GED credential or similar high school equivalency diploma. Though equivalency credentials are an important alternative for a subset of students, those students do not count as high school graduates. (See SREB’s *Transitioning to the New High School Graduation Rate*, 2011.) As a result, providing this exemption negates some of the intended positive effect of mandating school attendance until age 17 or 18.

Research and analysis in recent years on students who drop out before completing their secondary education have provided policy-makers with tools to identify students who are most at risk, as well as ways to help reduce these risk factors. Balfanz and his colleagues at the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, in *On Track for Success*, identify three key predictors of whether a student is at risk of dropping out, termed “the ABCs”: attendance, behavior and course performance. (See Table 2 on page 7.) These predictors, in turn, allow schools to identify and direct their assistance and intervention to at-risk students. If utilized effectively, schools can address problems before they culminate in a student dropping out of school and can get that student on track to obtain his or her high school diploma.

Table 1

Compulsory School Attendance Ages and Exemptions in SREB States, 2013-2014

State	Compulsory Age <sup>1</sup>	Exemptions <sup>2</sup>
Alabama	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 16 or older and enrolled in a church school</li> <li>• “Legally and regularly employed” and holds a work permit</li> </ul>
Arkansas	17	16 or older and enrolled in an adult education program
Delaware	16	NA
Florida	16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holds a certificate of exemption from district school superintendent</li> <li>• Parent without access to child care</li> </ul>
Georgia	16	NA
Kentucky	16 <sup>3</sup>	NA
Louisiana	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 16 and enrolled in an adult education or GED program, meets hardship conditions</li> <li>• 17 and enrolled in an adult education or GED program</li> </ul>
Maryland	16 <sup>4</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Married</li> <li>• In the military</li> <li>• Financially supports his or her family</li> <li>• Attends an alternative education program</li> </ul>
Mississippi	17	NA
North Carolina	16	NA
Oklahoma	16	NA
South Carolina	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has completed grade eight, is employed and that employment is court-determined as “necessary for the maintenance of [the child’s] home”</li> <li>• 16 or older, enrollment determined to be disruptive, unproductive or not in the child’s best interest, and enters employment under court supervision</li> </ul>
Tennessee	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 17 and attending a home school</li> <li>• Continued enrollment determined by local school board to be detrimental to school order and discipline and not of substantial benefit to the child</li> <li>• Enrolled in a GED program</li> </ul>
Texas	18	16 or older and enrolled in an equivalency program
Virginia	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot benefit from education as determined by juvenile court or principal and superintendent</li> <li>• 16 or older and attending a GED program, receives career guidance counseling, enrolls in a program leading to a career-technical credential, and takes a personal finance and economics course that satisfies state graduation requirements</li> </ul>
West Virginia	17	Has completed grade eight and is granted a work permit

“NA” indicates Not Applicable: these states do not provide additional exemptions beyond those indicated in footnote 2.

<sup>1</sup> The age at which a student is permitted to discontinue school enrollment.

<sup>2</sup> This table does not include exemptions such as students who are mentally or physically unable to attend school, students who have completed a high school education or are enrolled in an institution of higher education, or students in a private or home-based educational program in lieu of public school enrollment.

<sup>3</sup> The Kentucky Legislature approved Senate Bill 97 in 2013 to permit local school districts to increase the compulsory attendance age to 18 beginning with the 2015-16 school year. Once 55 percent of school districts statewide adopt the increased compulsory attendance age, the remaining school districts must adopt the increased age within four school years. This threshold was met within months of the law’s passage, and as a result, all school districts statewide will have a compulsory attendance age of 18 no later than the 2017-18 school year.

<sup>4</sup> The Maryland General Assembly approved Senate Bill 362 in 2012, which increases the compulsory attendance age to 17 on July 1, 2015, and to 18 on July 1, 2017; the exemptions to compulsory attendance requirements become effective July 1, 2015.

Sources: State legislative code and state departments of education.

## Less stick, more carrot

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A compulsory attendance age policy is a minimal requirement in that it only requires a student to attend school to a certain age. As a stand-alone policy, it does not directly address whether that student graduates or meets college- and career-readiness standards. Rather than forcing students to remain in the education system until an arbitrary age, new research is exploring how states can encourage students to continue their education and prepare themselves for college and careers. Toward this end, researchers have identified *why* students drop out, *how* schools and educators can identify those students before they drop out, and *what* policy-makers and education professionals can do to keep them from dropping out at all. Armed with the knowledge of why many students drop out of school — the ABCs — policy-makers need to ensure that state policies support early identification of students at risk of dropping out and provide those students with services so they are more likely to stay on track to graduation.

Tennessee, which from 1999 to 2009 experienced the greatest increase in graduation rates of any state in the nation, has taken a broad and somewhat decentralized approach. The state has encouraged local education agencies to modify their attendance and behavior policies in ways that increase or reinforce

the importance of these policies locally, and it has facilitated local implementation of specific interventions and programs that address student deficiencies or reward student excellence in attendance and behavior. Further, the state disseminates evidence-based strategies to improve school completion rates

*“Over the decade, Tennessee put up a lot of barriers to keep students from dropping out and created a lot of incentives for students so they would stay in and graduate.”*

— Kevin Huffman  
Tennessee Education Commissioner

and provides technical assistance to each local education agency for identifying and implementing practices that are appropriate to the local environment. These practices include: data systems to identify at risk students; adult mentoring for students; extended day and other additional learning opportunities; individualized and personalized instruction; graduation coaching and individual student graduation plans; and curricula that link academics directly to college and career readiness.

## What states can do

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In a series of reports, SREB has advised states on how to take steps to keep students in high school. SREB’s 2011 report *Maximizing Education Data Use in SREB States* detailed how SREB states have led the nation in implementing statewide longitudinal data systems. It also pointed out that states must make effective use of these systems — including “identify[ing] students who might be at risk of not completing education goals.” The 2011 report *On Track for Success* called for states to utilize data systems to create **Early Warning Indicator and Intervention Systems**, characterized by multiple features including:

- quickly identifying when a student is at risk of dropping out

- quickly directing appropriate services (known as interventions) to a student that focus on the student’s short-term and long-term needs for academic success
- frequent monitoring to determine whether interventions are succeeding, and
- quickly modifying or replacing interventions that are not succeeding.

Ideally, effective early warning systems operate as a continuous feedback loop that provides education professionals with the information they need to identify and assist students who are at risk. This means the early warning system operates in “real time” —

schools update the relevant attendance, behavior and course performance data on a regular basis (ideally, every day or every week) and immediately analyze the data and put it to use as needed. Not only does such a system allow schools to identify at-risk students and provide them with help as soon as possible, but it can help prevent schools from wasting scarce time and resources on interventions that are not succeeding.

*On Track for Success* recognized Louisiana and Virginia as national leaders in implementing statewide early warning systems. Louisiana established the Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS) in 2004 as the first statewide early warning system in the nation; DEWS now has the ability to provide daily reports to school counselors of newly identified at-risk students. In 2010, the Virginia Board of Education established the Virginia Early Warning System (VEWS) as part of a statewide initiative that holds all high schools to rigorous graduation rate benchmarks. While the Board encourages all schools to use VEWS, beginning in 2011-12, it required high schools that did not meet the graduation rate benchmarks to use VEWS, establish a school improvement team, and implement a state-approved, three-year improvement plan.

Kentucky also has implemented a statewide early warning system as one of its strategies to reduce dropout rates. Known as the Persistence to Graduation Tool, it is part of the statewide student information system and allows schools to identify individual students who may not be on track to graduate. The state also furnishes its Persistence to Graduation Evidence-Based Practices Toolkit to help districts provide students at risk of dropping out with services and interventions that have a proven record of success.

A school district — or even individual school — can implement an early warning system. In 2009, the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools district launched a multi-faceted reform initiative, called MNPS Achieves, to improve student achievement across all groups of students. One facet is the creation of a districtwide early warning system; the district has steadily expanded the scope and use of its early warning system as it has expanded to more schools across the district. Similarly, schools in Knox County, Tennessee, are making use of a districtwide data system (developed in partnership with local businesses) that includes an early warning system.

While early warning systems are an ideal tool for states and schools to identify students at risk of dropping out and direct appropriate assistance to those students, states or schools may not be able to establish and effectively use such systems in a short period of time. Fortunately, state policy-makers can use other policy levers — ones that don't necessarily require early warning data systems — to improve graduation rates.

The work of the Everyone Graduates Center has shown that certain academic performance characteristics are good predictors of whether a student will drop out prior to completing high school, including: not reading at grade level by the end of grade three, failing an English or math course at any point from grade six through grade nine, or being retained in grade nine. Several SREB states that have enacted **policies to address these crucial areas** — either by targeting assistance to students who need the most help or working to improve academic outcomes for all students — have seen significant growth in their graduation rates.

Several SREB states, including Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas — all of which had graduation rate gains from 1999 to 2009 that exceeded the national average — have established initiatives aimed at **improving reading** among students in early grades.

Texas (1996) and Florida (2002) were among the first states nationwide to adopt early grades reading initiatives. Both states administer annual student reading proficiency assessments in early grades to identify students who do not meet proficiency standards. Schools provide those students with an array of interventions, such as individualized academic improvement plans, individualized supplemental reading instruction during the school day, tutoring services, reading instruction outside of regular school hours and summer reading instruction. Florida statutes require elementary schools to retain students who, at the end of grade three, do not meet reading proficiency standards. While grade retention is an extreme intervention measure, studies have found that grade three retention rates decline over time if these students receive extra support to make up their reading deficiencies. As these initiatives mature, students retained in grade three often continue to improve academically in grade four and beyond.

As researchers have continued to demonstrate and stress the importance of early grades reading, SREB states have taken further action in recent years. In 2012, Florida mandated the 100 elementary schools with the lowest performance on the statewide reading assessment to provide an extra hour each day of intensive reading instruction beyond the regular school day. Also in 2012, North Carolina established the North Carolina Read to Achieve Program to ensure that all students read at or above grade level by the end of grade three. The program includes a comprehensive plan to improve reading achievement in all schools statewide and requires schools to retain students in grade three who do not demonstrate adequate reading proficiency.

In 2013, Mississippi established the Literacy-Based Promotion Act to improve the reading skills of kindergarten through grade three students so that every student completing grade three is able to read at or above grade level. The act requires school districts to provide intensive reading instruction and intervention to students who exhibit substantial deficiencies in reading. A student whose reading deficiency is not remediated by the end of grade three may not be promoted to grade four except in cases of good cause.

The 2009 SREB commission's report on adolescent literacy, *A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States*, recognized that while SREB states have been among the nation's leaders in improving student reading achievement in early grades, it is crucial that states work to raise student reading achievement at *all* grade levels. The Alabama State Department of Education established the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) in 1998 to improve student reading achievement in early grades; the state has since expanded the scope of ARI to improve student reading from kindergarten through grade 12 with the goal of all students reading at least on grade level. In addition to reading coaches at every elementary school who help improve and promote reading proficiency in the kindergarten-through-grade-three window, ARI helps teachers and schools identify students in all grades who struggle with reading and provide assistance to improve those students' reading abilities.

While not as widely implemented as ARI, the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative

(AMSTI), established in 2002, similarly works to improve math and science proficiency at all grade levels. In addition to increasing academic achievement across all grade levels, ARI and AMSTI together address reading and mathematics achievement in the grades six-through-nine window. Indeed, the 2011 SREB publication *A New Mission for the Middle Grades: Preparing Students for a Changing World* reported on research that has demonstrated "that students who lose interest in school in the middle grades are likely to flounder in ninth grade — and later drop out." A key point of the report is that states need to identify systematically the middle grades students who are most likely to drop out and provide interventions that will instead help them succeed.

In addition to providing interventions targeted to struggling students, the report makes other recommendations for state actions on improving student retention and, ultimately, promoting high school completion. One is requiring middle grades students to develop **academic and career plans**. In 2006, Florida required each middle grades student to complete a personalized academic and career plan prior to promotion to high school; likewise, during the 2006-07 school year, South Carolina required that each middle grades student develop an individual graduation plan prior to promotion to high school. In 2009, Virginia began incorporating into its statewide curriculum requirements for each student to have an individual academic and career plan by the end of the eighth grade.

In response to research that shows how crucial ninth-grade success is to successful high school completion, some states have focused on actions to help ease the transition from middle grades to high school. The 2009 SREB publication *Gaining Ground on High School Graduation Rates in SREB States: Milestones and Guideposts* highlighted the success of Tennessee and Arkansas in addressing the issue of **high school transitions**. The report recognizes Tennessee for successful local implementation of ninth-grade transition programs and freshman academies and recognizes Arkansas's use of its statewide accountability system to identify schools in need of additional support while providing supplemental services to students who need to improve their academic skills.

## States need to focus on actions that bring results

The compulsory attendance age may serve as an important symbol of a state's collective desire for all students to earn a high school diploma and be prepared for college or career training. However, education leaders and policy-makers need to take positive actions beyond raising the age to achieve this goal. In recent years, policy researchers have yielded abundant evidence that for many students, the important factor in whether they complete high school is not the age to which the state requires them to stay in school. Rather, the key factors are whether the state — through its districts, schools and educators —

takes action to engage students actively in their learning, to identify when students are struggling and, when needed, to provide help that keeps them on track to graduate.

Research based on successes at the local and state levels provides states with proven, practical and replicable tools to confront the very real problem of high school dropouts and to improve graduation rates. If policy-makers and education leaders are indeed serious about improving graduation rates, then they need to ensure that they are putting these tools into use.

Table 2

ABC Dropout Indicators	
Attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absent for 20 days or more days in one school year</li> <li>• Absent for 10 percent of school days in one school year</li> </ul>
Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two or more behavior infractions in one school year</li> <li>• Sustained mild misbehavior</li> </ul>
Course Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inability to read at grade level by the end of grade three</li> <li>• Failing an English or math course in grades six through nine</li> <li>• Two or more failures in ninth-grade courses</li> <li>• Not earning on-time promotion to grade 10</li> </ul>
<p>Source: Balfanz, Robert, et. al., <i>On Track for Success: The Use of Early Warning Indicator and Intervention Systems to Build a Grad Nation</i>.</p>	

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