

Findings and Considerations from Research Conducted by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy and Related Bill Provisions

Raise the Age, Lower the Dropout Rate? Considerations for Policy Makers (Spring 2009)

This policy brief provides a summary of compulsory attendance laws in Massachusetts, an overview of trends in compulsory attendance laws across the U.S., a summary of the common arguments for and against the policy, a review of research examining the effectiveness of this policy in reducing dropout rates, and considerations for state policymakers. Key findings and considerations are described below.

Key findings:

- There is little research showing that laws requiring students to stay in school until age 18 are effective in reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates. Evidence that does exist is dated.
- Simple comparisons of dropout rates in states that have and have not raised the age of compulsory attendance have limitations (e.g. do not account for the array of other dropout prevention strategies that may be in place.)
- Raising the age is typically one component in a more comprehensive effort to reduce the number of dropouts thus it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of this one particular policy. Our review did not reveal any state-level analyses of laws requiring students to stay in school until age 18 that statistically controlled for other factors that affect dropout and graduation rates.

Considerations based on our study findings:

Consider empirical evidence. Our review revealed little research to support the idea that an increase in compulsory age decreases dropout rates and increases graduation rates.

Raising the compulsory attendance age is not a silver bullet. For some, there may be reasons for legally requiring students to stay in school until age 18 that outweigh the lack of empirical evidence on this policy's impact. However, the most prominent advocates of the policy acknowledge that raising the compulsory school age alone will not result in fewer dropouts and more graduates. They argue that this policy must be coupled with other actions to help at-risk students progress through high school.

- ***Bradley H.1906 and Cabral H.142:*** Both raise the compulsory attendance age to 18 with no additional action.
- ***Walz H.1964:*** Couples raising the compulsory attendance age to 18 with other actions including requiring districts with dropout rates greater than 2% to develop a comprehensive approach to addressing the dropout issue and submit a district-wide action plan to DESE.

Address student disengagement and alienation from school. Research has shown that dropping out of high school is a gradual process of disengagement. Loss of interest in school, poor relationships with teachers and impersonal learning environments are among the factors that lead to the decision to drop out. Developing structures and practices for engaging disconnected and discouraged students in a positive learning environment is a critical first step to ensuring that students persist and graduate.

- ***Chang-Diaz S.185, sections 7, 9:*** *The Graduation Coach Initiative provides at-risk students with a caring adult who will encourage, mentor and challenge students to academic success.*

Improve attendance monitoring and early intervention systems. Absenteeism is an early indication that a student may be at risk for dropping out and thus should be closely monitored. Massachusetts law (Chapter 76, Section 2) currently states if a student is absent for seven full days or fourteen half days within any period of six months, his/her parent/guardian will, on complaint by a supervisor of attendance, be punished by a fine of not more than twenty dollars. Policymakers should consider updating this provision to require the student and his/her parent/guardian to meet with school officials to discuss both the school and non-school related reasons for the

student's absence and develop a plan to address them. Policymakers should also consider requiring that the intervention occur after fewer absences.

- **Walz H.1964, section 7:** *Requires school-level program to notify parents about absences and requires school staff to meet with parents to develop attendance plans for chronically absent students.*
- **Chang-Diaz S.185, section 2:** *Requires all schools to use the state's Early Warning Indicators Index (EWII) to identify at-risk students.*
- **Chang-Diaz S.185, sections 7, 9:** *The Graduation Coach Initiative provides at-risk students with a caring adult. Among other tasks, the coach will monitor student attendance and meet with parents to develop an "individualized family engagement plan" to increase family involvement in the student's academic life and in the school community.*

Increase alternative educational options. For some students, the traditional structure of high school simply does not fit. Students with family obligations, children of their own, and those who need to work full-time are sometimes not able to adhere to the schedule of a traditional school day. Another subset of students who leave school early is those who have severe behavioral issues and leave either by choice or by invitation. Other students leave school because they feel unsafe and distracted due to the chaotic environment of their school settings. For all of these students, alternative programs and nurturing school environments must be in place if these students are to persist to graduation.

- **Walz H.1964, section 11:** *Requires districts with annual dropout rate greater than 2% to develop a comprehensive approach to dropout reduction including offering alternative education options. Requires DESE to publish guidance and provide technical assistance including several research-based alternative options.*
- **Chang-Diaz S.185, section 6:** *Dropout notification letters must include a list of alternative education options.*

Examine and consider eliminating some of the existing exemptions that permit 14- and 15-year-olds to leave school prior to graduation. Massachusetts law (Chapter 76, Section 1) includes an exemption from compulsory attendance requirements for youth between 14 and 16 who meet the requirements for the completion of the 6th grade, hold a permit for employment and are regularly employed for at least six hours per day or have written permission from the superintendent of schools to engage in non-wage-earning employment at home. It may be that some of these exemptions make it easy for students to drop out of school prior to age 16 and should be eliminated. Policymakers should also consider whether the state should play a role in monitoring the use of exemptions.

- **Walz H.1964, sections 2, 4, 6:** *Removes employment exemptions for 14- and 15-year olds.*
- **Cabral H.142:** *Removes employment exemptions for 14- and 15-year olds.*

Examine and consider updating the process for legally leaving school. Massachusetts law (Chapter 76, Section 18) specifies the conditions under which students age 16 or older may legally leave school. The law requires that a student's parent/guardian meet with the school committee prior to the student permanently leaving school. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the reasons for the student permanently leaving school and plans for an alternative education program or other placement. Policymakers should consider requiring that the student and his/her parent/guardian meet with a team of school staff including the principal, guidance counselor and other applicable staff and that the meeting follow a standard protocol. The protocol might include questions for both the student and the parent about the school and non-school related factors that led to the student's decision to drop out; general questions about the student's experience in school; and include counseling on the implications of dropping out. Policymakers should also consider whether the state should play a role in ensuring that the meetings take place.

- **Walz H.1964, section 8:** *Amends the process for legally leaving school and requires DESE to develop a model protocol for conducting exit interviews.*

Examine the fiscal impact of increasing the age of compulsory school attendance. Students will not benefit from an unfunded mandate. The costs that would be associated with an increase in the compulsory school attendance age should be examined prior to passing legislation. Maryland is among the states that have examined the fiscal impact of raising the compulsory age of attendance to 18. Maryland estimated that the total additional cost for providing educational and related services to the 10,500 dropouts who would return to school would exceed \$200 million per year. We urge Massachusetts policymakers to appoint a group to study the fiscal impact of implementing this policy.

- *Related bill provisions: None.*

Informed by our work in compiling this policy brief, we identified several issues that should be addressed if raising the age of compulsory attendance is to have an impact on keeping at-risk students in school and making progress toward a high school diploma:

Enforcement. Without enforcement, raising the age will have little or no influence on keeping students in school.

- ***Puppolo H.156, section 1:*** *Authorizes sheriffs' departments to engage in truancy programs at the request of the Superintendent including apprehending truant students and transporting them to locations determined by the Superintendent.*

Dropout recovery. If increasing the compulsory age of attendance means that young adults who have already dropped out will be required to return to school because they have not reached age 18, a procedure should be in place for contacting and re-enrolling them in school or an appropriate alternative.

- ***Walz H.1964, section 11:*** *Requires districts with annual dropout rate greater than 2% develop district-wide action plan to reduce dropout rate that includes a description of the outreach and referral strategies that will be used for students who have dropped out.*

Increase capacity to serve youth who would return to school. There is some evidence to suggest that the Commonwealth does not have the capacity to serve the number of young adults who would re-enter the school system if the compulsory age were raised to 18.

- *Related bill provisions: None.*

Expansion and professional development of school staff. An increase in the compulsory attendance age should include a plan for expanding the number of teachers and support staff needed to serve additional students as well as additional training to both new and existing staff on how to more effectively engage at-risk students and prevent them from dropping out.

- *Related bill provisions: None.*

Act Out, Get Out? Considering the Impact of School Discipline Practices in Massachusetts (May 2010)

This policy brief describes the purpose of school discipline policies, summarizes findings from recent research on the effects of removing students from school for disciplinary reasons (henceforth disciplinary removal), summarizes the legal background for disciplinary removal, and presents key findings from an analysis of statewide discipline data. The brief concludes with a series of considerations for state policymakers and leaders of Massachusetts' schools and districts. Key findings and considerations are described below.

Key findings:

- Disciplinary removal may exacerbate Massachusetts dropout problem.
- Out-of-school suspension may be over-used in Massachusetts.
- Massachusetts schools use out-of-school suspension for children as young as four years of age.
- There are disproportionately high rates of disciplinary removal among Massachusetts students of color and students from low-income families.
- General education students who have been removed from school for disciplinary reasons are not consistently provided with opportunities for alternative education.

Considerations based on our study findings:

Hold schools and districts accountable for appropriate use of disciplinary removal. There are several reasons to consider holding Massachusetts schools and districts accountable for the use of disciplinary removal: the over-use of out-of-school suspension, the disproportionate rates of removal among students of color and students from low-income families, and the potential negative academic consequences for students who are suspended and expelled. Disciplinary removal should be reserved for the most serious behaviors and schools should be held accountable for the appropriate use of suspension and expulsion.

- ***Chang-Diaz S.185, section 5:*** *Regulates the suspension and expulsion of students being punished for a non-felonious act including the right to an appeal, and requiring decision-makers to exercise discretion, consider ways to re-engage the student in the learning process, and avoid using expulsion as a punishment until all other punishments have been employed.*
- ***Wolf H.177:*** *Annually requires superintendents to notify Commissioner of all disciplinary exclusions and alternative education options provided. Requires Commissioner to analyze this data and investigate schools with a significant number of exclusions of more than 10 days.*
- ***Wolf H.178:*** *Revises the hearing process for exclusions and reserves exclusion for the most severe misconduct*
- ***Sannicandro H.01949 & Spilka S.00238:*** *Makes misapplication of school discipline by school staff subject to disciplinary actions and redefines "hostile environment" to include "institutional bullying," the inappropriate use of educational policies and practices that result in school-based arrests.*

Require school districts to report details on the nature of "unassigned" offenses that result in students being suspended and expelled from school. Currently, school districts are only required to report the nature of offenses that involve illegal substances, violence and criminal activity. As a result, all other incidents resulting in a suspension or expulsion appear as "unassigned" in the ESE database. Consider expanding the set of codes currently used for reporting disciplinary incidents so that all offenses that could potentially result in a suspension or expulsion are included. Requiring districts to report the nature of all offenses that result in disciplinary removal will help to ensure that out-of-school suspension and expulsion are reserved for the most serious behaviors.

- ***Walz H.1964, section 11:*** *Requires districts to report to DESE specific reasons for all suspensions regardless of duration or type, and all permanent exclusions.*
- ***Wolf H.177:*** *Annually requires superintendents to notify Commissioner of all disciplinary exclusions and alternative education options provided. Requires Commissioner to prepare an annual report on disciplinary removal.*

Report school discipline data to the general public annually. As part of the state's accountability system, policymakers may wish to consider annually reporting to the general public: the number of in-school suspensions,

out-of-school suspensions and expulsions at each grade level; descriptive statistics on the duration of each type of disciplinary removal by grade level; and the percentage of incidents resulting from each type of offense, including those that threaten student safety (e.g. violence, weapons) and those that do not (e.g. attendance issues, inappropriate language). The rate of repeated disciplinary removal should also be reported along with an indicator that provides insight into the cumulative days of school that were missed as a result of repeated disciplinary removals. All of this information should be disaggregated by the same student subgroups required for No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reporting. Disaggregation by these student subgroups will enable the Commonwealth to monitor and call attention to the disproportionality of disciplinary removal rates.

- **Wolf H.177:** *Commissioner is required to collect and report publicly the disaggregated school discipline data at the state and district level for all student subgroups.*

Expand the array of options available to schools for dealing with disruptive behavior and support school-wide preventative approaches. Legislative initiatives should encourage schools to adopt school-wide, preventative approaches. Legislative initiatives should also encourage schools and school districts to provide an array of disciplinary alternatives that can be used in place of suspension and expulsion. Programs that assist schools in increasing their options for addressing disruptive behavior can be expected to reduce reliance on out-of-school suspension and expulsion, thus increasing students' opportunity to learn and decreasing the risk of negative consequences associated with disciplinary removal.

- **Wolf H.177:** *Requires Commissioner to analyze exclusion data, investigate schools with a significant number of exclusions of more than 10 days and recommend models that incorporate intermediary steps prior to the use of exclusion.*

Provide education services for all suspended and expelled students. While Massachusetts does not guarantee a student's right to public education, there are states that do. For example, Mississippi, New Jersey and West Virginia reject the notion that access to education is contingent upon a student's behavior and consider it necessary to provide an education to suspended and expelled students. Court decisions in these states recognize a dual duty for public education: create safe educational environments, while educating all students. This is achieved by requiring alternative education for suspended and expelled students.

- **Wolf H.178 and Walz H.1964, section 5, 11:** *Requires principals to provide students who are suspended for 10 or fewer consecutive days an opportunity to make academic progress during the suspension. Requires principals to develop an education service plan for all students who are suspended from school for more than 10 consecutive days to ensure these students have the opportunity to make academic progress during the suspension.*
- **Chang-Diaz S.185, section 5:** *Students in grade 3 and below, and students reading at grade 3 level and below, cannot be suspended or expelled for 10 consecutive days or more without access to alternative education options. Students age 16 or younger must be offered alternative education options if suspended or expelled for more than 10 consecutive school days.*

Examine racial/ethnic and socioeconomic status disparities in school discipline as part of the strategy for reducing the state's dropout rate and closing the achievement gap. The subgroups of students who are suspended and expelled at disproportionately higher rates than their peers are the same subgroups of students who drop out of Massachusetts schools at higher rates and lag behind in academic achievement. Research reviewed for this study suggests that the use of disciplinary removal may contribute to the achievement gap while other studies have shown a relationship between suspension and dropping out. Taken together, these findings suggest the need for Massachusetts to take a closer look at the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic status disparities in school discipline as part of the strategy for reducing the state's dropout rate and closing the achievement gap.

- **Garry H.979:** *Convenes a special committee to conduct a study of adolescents at risk however the study described in the bill does not specifically address the issues described above.*

Meeting the Challenge Reports (February 2009 and March 2011)

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy conducted two studies that sought to identify promising policies, practices and programs in a small sample of schools that have steadily made progress in reducing their dropout rates. The first study culminated in a policy brief entitled *Meeting the Challenge: Promising Practices for Reducing the Dropout Rate in Massachusetts Schools and Districts* (February 2009). The second study, conducted 2 years later, examined the financial implications of promising dropout reduction strategies and culminated in a policy brief entitled *Meeting the Challenge: Fiscal Implications of Dropout Prevention in Massachusetts* (March 2011). Key findings and considerations from these policy briefs are described below.

Key findings:

Approaches identified by school and district leaders as critical to their success in reducing dropout rates include:

- Use of data to identify students at risk of dropping out.
- Personalize school by building stronger relationships between at-risk students and at least one adult in the school (e.g. advisory programs) and building stronger student to student relationships (e.g. peer-mentoring programs).
- Provide academic supports including extra help during and after school.
- Provide credit recovery programs for students who have fallen behind academically.
- Support students non-academic needs (e.g. social and emotional support).
- Support students transitioning from 8th to 9th grade.
- Programs to strengthen the connection between high school and college and careers.
- External partnerships to provide programs and services for at-risk students.
- Provide alternatives to traditional high school.

Chang-Diaz S.185, sections 7, 9: *The Graduation Coach Initiative provides at-risk students with a caring adult who will encourage, mentor and challenge students to academic success. Responsibilities of the coach include: working with the student's family to develop an "individualized family engagement plan," providing advice and support, providing connections to school and community services/supports (such as tutoring, credit recovery and academic remediation) and ensuring the students successful transition from 8th to 9th grade.*

Considerations based on our study findings:

Continue to promote, provide and seek ways to expand data collection and analysis tools for schools and districts. Districts develop rubrics, checklists and other tools to identify at-risk students based on district- and classroom-specific indicators, and provide training to staff on how to use them. These tools have been valuable but the cost of developing them can be substantial. Schools/districts often do not have the capacity to develop tools for collecting and analyzing data.

- ***Chang-Diaz S.185, section 2:*** *Requires all schools to use the state's Early Warning Indicators Index (EWII) to identify at-risk students. Requires DESE to offer guidance and support to districts on how to collect, review and use the EWII to best serve students.*

Work to establish sustainable funding streams for district's dropout prevention initiatives. The sustainability of dropout reduction strategies is a major concern of districts. A heavy reliance on grant funding forces district/school leaders to make difficult choices about which programs to fund or cut. Consider establishing a formula-based model in which districts are provided with additional funding based on the number of their students identified by the Early Warning Indicator Index as High Risk.

- *Related bill provisions: None.*

Strengthen the ability of districts to establish partnerships. Districts rely on strategic partnerships to build their capacity to provide a variety of student services, from mental and physical health supports to college and career preparation. The state can play a role in identifying community partners and connecting districts with those businesses, colleges/universities, other state and city agencies, and community organizations that can provide staffing and additional resources to support at-risk students. A district staff person is also required to maintain those partnerships after they have been established.

- **Walz H.1964, section 11:** *Requires districts to work with teams of community stakeholders to develop a comprehensive approach to address the dropout issue. Alternative education options may be delivered by non-profits approved by the school districts.*

Expand alternative education options. For some students, the traditional school structure does not fit. Consider supporting the expansion of alternative education options for students whose needs are not met by the traditional high school schedule and setting.

- **Walz H.1964, section 11:** *Requires districts with annual dropout rate greater than 2% to develop a comprehensive approach to dropout reduction including offering alternative education options. Requires DESE to publish guidance and provide technical assistance including several research-based alternative options.*
- **Chang-Diaz S.185, section 6:** *Dropout notification letters must include a list of alternative education options.*

Facilitate outreach to dropouts. Districts lack clear guidelines and coherent systems to contact and re-enroll recent dropouts. In order to reach the goal set by the state's dropout commission to reduce the dropout rate in half by 2014, dropout recovery may be necessary. Policymakers may wish to consider creating clear guidelines or protocols for schools to follow for re-connecting with students who have dropped out, or engage community partners to assist with these efforts. Consider establishing a database with the names and last known addresses of dropouts and provide access to this database to representatives from agencies whose purpose is to engage and enroll high school dropouts in education and training programs.

- **Walz H.1964, section 11:** *Requires districts with annual dropout rate greater than 2% develop district-wide action plan to reduce dropout rate that includes a description of the outreach and referral strategies that will be used for students who have dropped out.*

About the Rennie Center

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy has a mission to develop a public agenda that promotes significant improvement of public education in Massachusetts. We envision an education system that educates every child to be successful in life, citizenship, employment and life-long learning. The Rennie Center fosters thoughtful public discourse and informed policy making through non-partisan, independent research, civic engagement, and effective action. We inform legislators, policymakers, and practitioners in Massachusetts through: 1) research on promising practices, research that informs policy decisions and research that sets a new direction for education policy, 2) public convenings and stakeholder meetings, and 3) targeted engagement and outreach to education leaders, the media, and the broader public. We focus our research on areas critical to Massachusetts' most vulnerable students -low-income students, minority students, English learners and those with special needs.

All of our publications are available on our website www.renniecenter.org

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