

**Ex-ante Evaluation of a Policy Increasing the Compulsory School Attendance (CSA)
Age From 16 to 18 in the State of New York; specifically looking to see if such a
policy will decrease withdrawal prior to graduation and enhance high school
completion rates**

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Written for Assemblywoman Michelle Thomas

I. Problem Definition: High school dropouts face serious disadvantages when compared with those who graduate. Factors such as higher unemployment rates reduce dropouts' overall quality of life. Society also incurs a significant cost when students drop out. Because they cannot find jobs, dropouts may require more taxpayer supported social services.

Policy problem: Determine if increasing the CSA age from 16 to 18 will decrease the incidence of withdrawal prior to graduation and enhance high school completion rates in New York State.

Analyst's problem: Explore the causes and consequences of dropping out of high school. Determine, using data from other states, the extent to which increasing the CSA age affects dropout and completion rates. Identify costs/benefits to determine if it is in New York's best interest to implement such a policy. Explore alternative programs, and compare their costs/benefits with the proposed policy.

II. Background Information

Legislative history: State level: By 1918, all states had instituted some form of CSA law.³ The CSA age range has been under much debate lately with over 40 bills considered in 2001 alone.¹⁵ In 2000, 14 states had their CSA age set at 18.²⁴ *see appendix A. Since then, Louisiana has passed legislation increasing the CSA age from 17 to 18 (H.B. 19). In New York, legislation increasing the CSA age from 16 to 17 (A.B. 5702 and S.B. 4131) and from 16 to 18 (A.B. 1485) was passed to House and Senate Education Committees in 1999. A bill increasing the CSA age to 17 (S.B. 8071) successfully passed both the House and the Senate but was vetoed by Governor Pataki in 2000. A bill increasing the CSA age to 18 (A.B. 6096) was referred to the Assembly Committee on Education in 2001. City school districts and school districts with at least 4,500 residents may increase their CSA age to 17 if they so decide (NY CLS Educ 3205).²⁵ Several school districts including NYC, Syracuse, and Buffalo have already taken advantage of this option.¹³ A bill currently in the Senate Committee on Rules would extend that power to every school district in the state (S.B. 3061). Another bill in that same committee would increase the CSA age to 17 (A.B. 6122).²⁵ **Federal level:** Traditionally, the responsibility of education has rested with the states. When President George W. Bush signed the "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001 (PL 107-110) into law, however, he

significantly increased the role of the federal government in education policy. For the first time in history, states will be held accountable for dropout rates.⁷ In 2001, the federal government began funding the Dropout Prevention Demonstration Program at \$5 million dollars. On September 30, 2002, this program became the School Dropout Prevention program, and \$10 million dollars has been allocated for 2002. This is the only federal program that deals explicitly with dropout prevention.²

Political Environment: Proponents: school superintendents, the New York Legislature, and the New York State School Board Association (NYSSBA). Superintendents contend that such a policy will lower dropout rates.⁴ The NYSSBA initially turned their tremendous lobbying power against legislation increasing the maximum CSA age. Changes in the Family Court Act, however, have relieved their fears that districts will be unable to enforce the new policy.^{8/11} The state legislature argues that increasing the CSA age serves the individual by improving his/her chances for a successful life through completion of high school. This, in turn, serves society by keeping people off welfare and out of jail.¹⁹ Although the state legislature has tremendous power and has approved bills increasing the CSA age, Governor Pataki has subsequently vetoed them.²⁵

Opponents: Governor Pataki and the Home School League Defense Association (HSLDA). Governor Pataki holds veto power over proposed bills. He is reluctant to mandate a statewide policy when the vast majority of school districts (540 out of 682) already have the power to increase the maximum CSA age to 17.¹² The 70,000 families of the HSLDA oppose any legislation that takes the power to choose educational pathways away from families.¹⁰

III. Research Design

Objectives of the research: Explore the causes of dropping out. Establish that dropping out imposes negative consequences on both society and the individual. Determine the extent of New York's dropout problem. Determine the effects of policies increasing the CSA age, especially in regards to changes in the dropout and completion rates. Perform a cost/benefit analysis of such a policy, and compare the results with alternative policies.

Outline of Informational needs: Causes of dropping out will be taken from the Southwest Education Development Laboratory webpage. Consequences of dropping out will be determined using articles and statistics found through Proquest and the Bureau of the

Census. The extent of New York's dropout problem will be assessed using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and a New York State Education Department report. The effects of policies increasing the CSA age will be researched using information from state websites, Lexis-Nexis, and NCES. Information on alternative programs will be obtained through articles found on Proquest.

Methods:

1. ***Causes and Consequences of dropping out:*** *Explore the reasons why children drop out of school *Investigate how education impacts lifetime earnings, employability, and health. *Investigate the impact that dropouts have on society.
2. ***Extent of New York's dropout problem:*** *Compare New York's dropout/completion rates with national rates. *Examine the distribution of dropout rates across the state. *Examine longitudinal data in order to observe trends in dropout rates over time.
3. ***Effects of policies increasing the CSA age:*** *Determine which states have recently implemented policy increasing the CSA age. Compare their dropout/completion rates before/after the change. Watch for externalities/implementation problems associated with the policies.
4. ***Alternative programs:*** *Review programs that attempt to improve dropout/completion rates by targeting "at risk" students, reducing class size, providing individual counseling. * Policy increasing the CSA age will be considered effective if it lowers the dropout rate and improves the completion rate by at least 2% without the assistance of supplemental programs. Conclusions will be drawn regarding comparisons between costs/benefits of policy increasing the CSA age and costs/benefits of alternative policies/programs. *

IV. Research Results and Analysis

Reporting of results:

Causes and Consequences of dropping out: The most common reasons given for dropping out are dislike of school and poor academic performance.¹⁶ Other reasons include working, married, pregnant, home responsibilities, and expulsion. Since the 1970s, the positive correlation between education and lifetime career earnings has increased. On average, high school graduates annually earn \$5,928 more than non-high school graduates. Over a lifetime, graduates average \$212,000 more than non-graduates.

²³ *see appendixes C and D. Approximately 50% of dropouts between the ages of 17 and

24 are unemployed or have low paying jobs. Of those dropouts who are white and employed full-time, only 36.1% earn enough to live above the poverty line. Only 6.8% of black dropouts employed fulltime earn enough to live above the poverty line.¹⁴

Dropping out imposes marginal social costs in that dropouts are more likely to use social services and have higher rates of incarceration.⁵ According to one study, higher levels of educational attainment are also linked to better physical and mental health.¹

Extent of New York's dropout problem: The national event dropout rate in 1998/99 was 5.0% while the NY event dropout rate was 4.1%.^{24/20} In NY, the average completion rate from 1997-99 was 85.2%.²⁴ Using the average completion rates from all states during these years, the national average was 85.5%. In 1998/99, the dropout rate was 7.1% in NYC, 3.4% across the four large city school districts, and 2.3% across all other public schools in the state.¹⁸ Event dropout rates are up slightly in NY (+ .7% since 1996/97), but there has been a general downward trend since the late 1980s.²⁰ *see appendix B.

Effects of policies increasing the CSA age: In June 1997, Texas passed a bill effective for the 1997/98 school year that increased the CSA age from 17 to 18 (S.B. 247).²⁵ The dropout rate did not change between 1996/97 and 1998/99. In 1999/00 it fell from 1.6% to 1.3%.²¹ *see appendix E. The completion rate fell from an average of 79.3% (1994-96) before implementation of the policy to an average of 79.2% (1997-99) after implementation.²⁴ In May 1997, Kansas passed a bill effective for the 1997/98 school year that increased the CSA age from 16 to 18 (S.B. 38).²⁵ The dropout rate has fallen steadily from 3.04% before the increase in 1996/97 to 2.15% in 2000/01.¹⁷ *see appendix F. The average completion rate has not changed.²⁴ Immediately after the implementation of this policy, Topeka Unified School District 501 noted a 33% increase in reported truancies. They also noted that even more truancy went unreported.⁶

Alternative policies: The Phoenix Union High School District has dealt with their dropout problem by starting an alternative high school that focuses on small classes, individual counseling, and mentoring. They have also increased their efforts to target and help "at risk" students in other schools throughout the district. Their efforts resulted in a 9% decrease in the dropout rate between 1994 and 2000.⁴ Kansas City's First Things First (FTF) program is aimed at struggling urban schools and attempts to lower dropout rates and increase completion rates by developing small "learning communities." These

communities have small teacher-to-student ratios and foster teacher-student interaction. The program began in 1998 and Kansas City reported a 50% reduction in dropout rates between 9th and 10th grade along with a 20% increase in the completion rate in 2000.⁹

Analysis: Three years after implementing policy that increased the CSA age to 18, Texas reported a .3% reduction in the dropout rate and a .1% increase in the completion rate.^{21/24} Four years after implementing a similar policy, Kansas reported a .89% reduction in the dropout rate, but no change was reported in the completion rate.^{17/24} Both policies failed to meet our targeted 2% improvement in dropout and completion rates, therefore, neither can be considered effective. Kansas' dropout rate has been declining steadily, so the policy might have some effect in this regard. Because the completion rate is not increasing in parallel, however, we may infer that the policy keeps students in school another two years while still failing to graduate them. Since graduation is the key to avoiding the negative consequences discussed above, the policy is still unsuccessful. *see appendix I for discussion of the appropriateness of using reported measurements.

Costs and benefits: In 1998/99, NY public schools spent an average of \$10,371/pupil.²⁰ *see appendix H. By estimations, NY can expect to pay over \$300 million in additional school resources if they implement a policy increasing the CSA age. *see appendix G for calculation. The state may also have to spend taxpayer money on programs that enforce the new policy. Implementing this policy at the state level will take away the individual school districts' power to increase the CSA age if they see fit. Students and their families may incur opportunity costs if added school time means that they are unable to work as many hours. Finally, implementing this policy will keep a lot of students in school who do not want to be there. These students may take up a disproportionate amount of teachers' time, bring violence into the school system, and disrupt learning for the rest of the class.¹⁵ On the other hand, data from Kansas provides some evidence that this policy may keep students in school longer even if it fails to graduate them. Proponents of the policy point out that letting troublemakers drop out of school only frees them to make trouble in the community.¹⁵

Policy externalities and implementation problems: Truancy rates soared in the Topeka school district especially during the first year. In that case, attendance review boards were created to enforce the new attendance laws.⁶ Enforcement programs may be costly,

and the court system may also have to deal with an increased caseload as parents are brought in who fail to comply with the new law. Teachers will have to adjust curricula to accommodate larger classes and lower achieving students. Overcrowding may cause educational quality to suffer.¹⁵ Finally, dropouts who were formally committing violence in the streets may instead bring violence into the classroom. Alternative education programs may have to be added to deal with these potentially disruptive students.⁴

V. Conclusions

Proposed policy: The costs of failing to complete high school are heavy for both society and the individual. If policy increasing the CSA age to 18 actually improved completion rates, the benefits would indeed be great. This policy, however, has been shown to be completely unsuccessful in increasing completion rates and only slightly successful in decreasing dropout rates. Because of this, costs heavily outweigh the one benefit of keeping some troublemakers off the streets for another few years.

Alternative policies: The Kansas FTF program provides some indication that policy increasing the CSA age may be effective when supplemented by programs that offer alternative learning environments for “at risk” students.⁹ CSA age policies force children to remain in the school building, but they can only attain the benefits of education if programs are in place to help them once they are there.⁴ Both FTF and the program in the Phoenix Union High School District focus on smaller class sizes as well as alternative education and mentoring, two “successful strategies” recognized by the NDPC.²² These programs have had enormous success in decreasing the dropout rate and may have fewer barriers to implementation than policy increasing the CSA age.

VI. Recommendations: I do not recommend that Ms. Thomas seek to implement policy increasing New York’s CSA age without a guarantee that mandatory supplemental programs will be implemented simultaneously. Unfortunately, this modification renders the policy even less politically viable and much more expensive. I recommend that “supplemental programs” targeting “at-risk” students, reducing class size, and providing alternative education be implemented without increasing the CSA age. In order to maintain a reasonable budget, these programs should target areas of New York with the highest dropout rates such as New York City and the four other large school districts.

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Appendix A: Ages for compulsory school attendance, special education services for students, policies for year-round schools and kindergarten programs, by state: 1997 and 2000. *This table was taken from the NCES website.*²⁴

Appendix B: Public High School Annual Dropout Rates by Location, 1986-87 through 1998-99.

This graph was taken from A Report to the Governor and the Legislature on the Educational Status of the State's Schools.²⁰

Appendix C: Mean annual earnings for person aged 18 and over, by level of education: 1992.

*This graph was taken from a Bureau of the Census statistical brief entitled, “More Education Means Higher Career Earnings.”*²³

Appendix D: Estimates of worklife earnings, by level of education: 1992 (in thousands of dollars).

*This graph was taken from a Bureau of the Census statistical brief entitled, “More Education Means Higher Career Earnings.”*²³

Appendix E: Texas Annual Dropout Rates from school years 1992/1993 through 1999/2000

*This table was created in Microsoft Word with information taken from the Texas Education Agency's AEIS reports.*²¹

School Year	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00
Dropout Rate	2.8	2.6	1.8	1.8	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.3

Appendix F: Kansas Annual Dropout Rates from school years 1996/1997 through 2000/20001

*This table was taken from the Kansas Department of Education website.*¹⁷

STATE TOTALS			
Year	Headcount	Number of Dropouts	Dropout Rate
2000-2001	215,960	4,649	2.15%
1999-2000	216,093	4,974	2.30%
1998-1999	216,159	5,802	2.68%
1997-1998	215,183	6,042	2.81%
1996-1997	211,192	6,420	3.04%

Appendix G: Calculation of monetary cost of implementing policy increasing CSA age to 18

- In 1998/99, New York public schools spent an average of \$10,371/pupil.²⁰
- In the fall of 1999, 1, 270, 888 students were enrolled in New York public schools grades 7-12.²⁰
- In New York, annual dropout rates are based on the proportion of students who leave school in grades 9-12.¹⁸ (1,270,888/6 = 211,815 students/grade * four grades (9-12) = 847,259 students)
- In 1998/99, New York's event dropout rate was 4.1%.²⁰ (847,259 students * 4.1% = 34,738 dropouts * \$10,371/would-be dropouts = **\$360,263,798**)

Appendix H: State Revenues per pupil and expenditures per pupil in public elementary, middle, and secondary education. New York State. 1994-95 to 1998-99
*This table was taken from A Report to the Governor and the Legislature on the Educational Status of the State's Schools.*²⁰

Appendix I: Discussion of the appropriateness of using reported dropout/completion rates.

There is variation in how states calculate and report dropout/completion rates. This variation does not invalidate our conclusions, however, since we are not making inter-state comparisons. We are comparing the state only with itself over time, making sure that intra-state measurements are constant. Both national rates and New York rates are “event” dropout rates and so are comparable.