

spotlight

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RAISE THE BAR, NOT THE AGE

Why raising the compulsory school age won't reduce dropouts

KEY FACTS: • North Carolina is among the 26 states that have a maximum compulsory age of 16.

• Among the 50 states and D.C., there is no consistent relationship between the maximum compulsory age and graduation and dropout rates.

• States with a compulsory attendance age of 16 have higher average and median graduation rates than states with compulsory attendance ages of 17 and 18. States with a compulsory attendance age of 16 have average and median dropout rates comparable to states with compulsory attendance ages of 17 and 18.

• There is no consistent relationship between compulsory attendance ages and graduation rates among industrialized nations. Students in countries with a maximum compulsory attendance that is lower than the United States often graduate at a higher rate than students in the United States do.

• Raising the compulsory attendance age to 17 would cost North Carolina taxpayers approximately \$8.8 million a year for the estimated 942 students affected by the legislation.

• School systems and law enforcement officials must begin earnestly enforcing existing truancy laws for public school students who have not reached 16 years of age but are chronically absent from school.

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the compulsory attendance age is the age in which students are legally required to attend school. Once they meet the maximum attendance age, students are typically free to drop out of school, enter the workplace, find an alternative route to earn a high school diploma, or earn a General Educational Development (GED) credential. Currently, North Carolina is among the 26 states that have a maximum compulsory age of 16. Nine states set the age at 17, and 15 states and D.C. have a compulsory age of 18 (see Figure 1).¹

Education attendance laws vary by state, but nearly all states have some kind of exemption from compulsory attendance laws.² Students who graduate, have employment, participate in an exit interview, or obtain parents' permis-

sion may be eligible for exemption from the attendance laws.³ Thus, the maximum compulsory attendance age often serves as a guideline rather than an absolute.

Uninformed and Misguided

Among legislators in North Carolina, there is a great deal of misinformation about the effect of raising the compulsory attendance age on student retention. Rep. Angela Bryant, a Democrat who represents the counties of Halifax and Nash, is one the primary sponsors of House Bill 1790, "Raise Compulsory Education Age & Graduation Rate."⁴ If enacted, the bill would appoint a 27-member task force to study the educational, programmatic, legal, and fiscal issues toward raising the compulsory age to 17 by 2009 and age 18 by 2011.

In addition, the task force would be called to "identify best practices to provide racial equity in opportunities to stay in and succeed in school and to eliminate the barriers of racism, classism, sexism and other 'ISMS' that can impact the 16-18 year olds" targeted by the bill.⁵

Rep. Bryant believes that the true value of the bill lies in the fact that it makes "a cultural and institutional statement" about the value of school.⁶ Like other bills proposing to raise the attendance age, House Bill 1790 is steeped in promises but short on details. For example, Rep. Bryant is unsure whether raising the maximum compulsory attendance age would increase the graduation rate, leaving those questions to the task force to study. Nevertheless, she maintains great hope that the bill would increase attendance, thereby increasing the graduation rate. During a recent committee meeting, she reasoned, "we really don't know if it will increase the graduation rate, but we can't increase the graduation rate if the kids aren't there."⁷ While she does not know about the effect of the bill on the graduation rate, Rep. Bryant claims that the bill could reduce instances of HIV and arthritis.⁸

Attendance Age and Graduation Rates

While it would be difficult to assess the effect of compulsory attendance laws on instances of HIV and arthritis, there are a great deal of data that could be used to determine if compulsory attendance age requirements have an effect on graduation and dropout rates. First, there is no apparent relationship between the maximum compulsory age and graduation rates (see Table 1).

While four of the top five states with the highest graduation rate have a compulsory attendance age of 16, a number of states with a compulsory attendance age of 16 have a relatively low graduation rate. Similarly, states with a

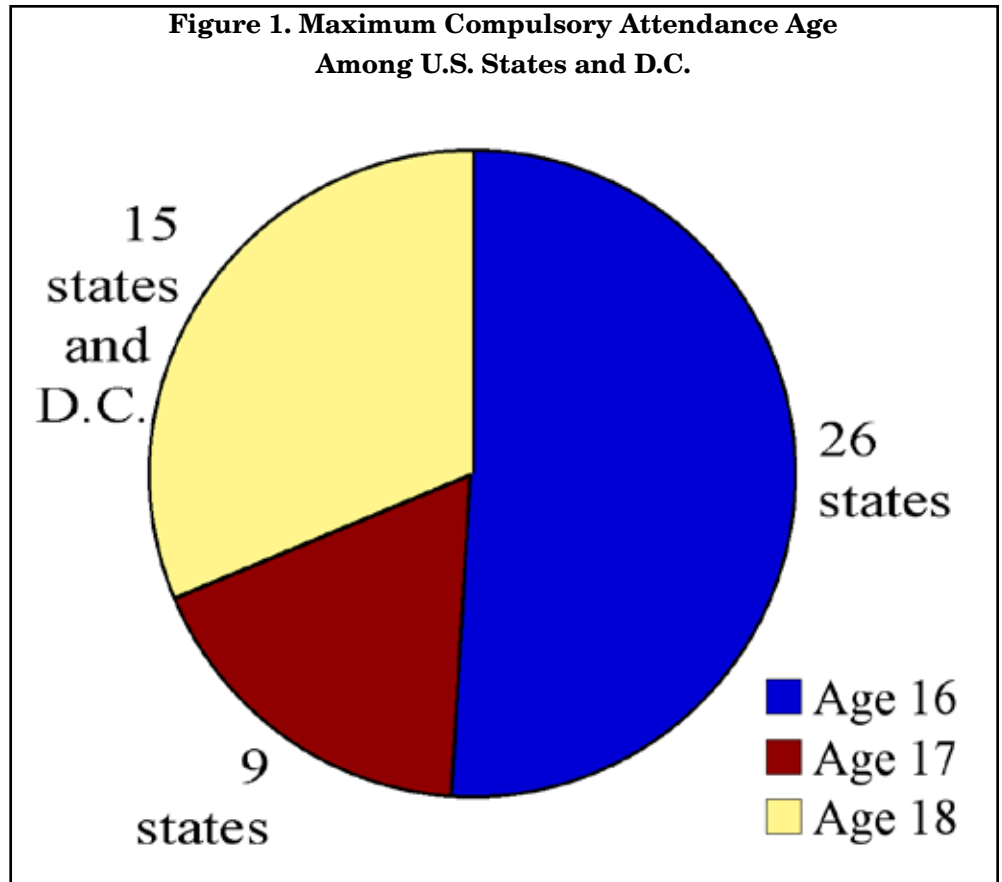


Table 1. Compulsory Attendance Age, Graduation Rate, and Dropout Rate

<i>State (and D.C.)</i>	<i>Max. Compulsory Age^a</i>	<i>Graduation Rate (CPI), 2003^b</i>	<i>Graduation Rate Rank</i>	<i>State (and D.C.)</i>	<i>Max. Compulsory Age</i>	<i>Dropout Rate</i>	<i>Dropout Rate Rank</i>
New Jersey	16	84.5	1	New Jersey	16	1.8	T-1
North Dakota	16	83.1	2	Connecticut	18	1.8	T-1
Iowa	16	82.5	3	North Dakota	16	2.0	3
Vermont	16	81.2	4	Iowa	16	2.1	4
Wisconsin	18	80.6	5	Kansas	18	2.2	5
Connecticut	18	79.3	6	Indiana	16	2.5	6
Pennsylvania	17	79.1	7	Maine	17	2.7	7
Minnesota	16	79.0	8	Vermont	16	2.8	T-8
Idaho	16	77.8	T-9	Nebraska	18	2.8	T-8
Nebraska	18	77.8	T-9	Virginia	18	2.8	T-8
New Hampshire	16	77.7	11	Pennsylvania	17	2.9	T-11
Utah	18	76.7	12	Mississippi	17	2.9	T-11
Ohio	18	76.5	13	Idaho	16	3.1	13
Illinois	17	76.3	14	Minnesota	16	3.2	14
Montana	16	75.8	15	Missouri	16	3.3	T-15
Kansas	18	75.0	16	Kentucky	16	3.3	T-15
Virginia	18	74.9	17	Alabama	16	3.3	T-15
Missouri	16	74.7	18	Tennessee	17	3.3	T-15
South Dakota	16	74.5	19	Ohio	18	3.3	T-15
Maryland	16	74.4	20	California	18	3.3	T-15
Maine	17	74.0	T-21	Montana	16	3.4	T-21
Wyoming	16	74.0	T-21	Rhode Island	16	3.4	T-21
Indiana	16	73.0	23	Florida	16	3.4	T-21
West Virginia	16	72.8	24	South Carolina	17	3.4	T-21
Colorado	17	72.5	25	Texas	18	3.6	25
Rhode Island	16	72.3	26	Massachusetts	16	3.7	26
Massachusetts	16	72.1	27	New Hampshire	16	3.8	T-27
Arkansas	17	71.8	28	Utah	18	3.8	T-27
California	18	71.0	T-29	Oklahoma	18	3.9	29
Oklahoma	18	71.0	T-29	Maryland	16	4.1	30
Arizona	16	70.0	31	South Dakota	16	4.2	31
Kentucky	16	69.7	32	West Virginia	16	4.3	32
Oregon	18	69.0	33	Wyoming	16	4.6	T-33
Washington	18	68.2	34	Michigan	16	4.6	T-33
Texas	18	66.8	35	Arkansas	17	4.7	35
Michigan	16	66.4	36	Hawaii	18	4.8	36
North Carolina	16	66.2	37	North Carolina	16	5.2	T-37
Hawaii	18	63.7	38	New Mexico	18	5.2	T-37
Alaska	16	63.6	39	Illinois	17	5.3	39
New York	16	62.5	40	Georgia	16	5.4	T-40
Tennessee	17	62.2	41	Colorado	17	5.4	T-40
Mississippi	17	60.8	42	New York	16	5.6	42
Alabama	16	60.7	T-43	Nevada	17	6.0	43
Delaware	16	60.7	T-43	Delaware	16	6.1	44
Louisiana	18	60.6	45	Washington	18	6.5	45
District of Columbia	18	58.9	46	Arizona	16	6.7	46
Florida	16	57.5	47	Alaska	16	7.0	47
New Mexico	18	56.7	48	Louisiana	18	7.9	48
Georgia	16	56.3	49	Wisconsin	18	N/A	N/A
Nevada	17	55.9	50	Oregon	18	N/A	N/A
South Carolina	17	52.5	51	District of Columbia	18	N/A	N/A

**Table 2. Summary of Table 1: Average and Median Graduation and Dropout Rates
by Maximum Compulsory Attendance Age**

Maximum Compulsory Attendance Age	Average Graduation Rate	Median Graduation Rate	Average Dropout Rate	Median Dropout Rate
16 years old	71.7	72.9	4.0	3.55
17 years old	67.2	71.8	4.1	3.4
18 years old	70.4	71.0	4.0	3.5
U.S. and D.C. Average	69.6	72.3	4.0	3.4

compulsory attendance age of 17 or 18 have graduation rates that rank toward the top and the bottom of the list. In this way, an attendance age of 18 provides no guarantee of a better graduation rate than a compulsory attendance age 16 or 17.

The same is true with dropout rates. States with a compulsory attendance age of 16 do not necessarily have high dropout rates (see Table 1). One of the two lowest dropout rates belongs to a state (New Jersey) that has a compulsory attendance age of 16. On the other hand, the state with the highest dropout rate in the nation (Louisiana) has a compulsory attendance age of 18.

Given the fact that no observable relationship can be established between attendance age and dropout rate, North Carolina’s low graduation rate and high dropout rate have little to do with the compulsory attendance age. Legislation aimed at increasing the compulsory attendance age to 17 or 18 will do little to solve North Carolina’s graduation and dropout crisis.

Taken as a whole, states with a compulsory attendance age of 16 have higher average and median graduation rates than states with an attendance age of 17 and 18 (see Table 2). Similarly, states with a compulsory attendance age of 16 have average and median dropout rates comparable to states with an attendance age of 17 and 18.

Research agrees that increasing the compulsory attendance age does not guarantee an increase in the graduation rate or a decline in the dropout rate. Professor Rosemary J. Avery of Cornell University analyzed dropout and graduation rates before and after four states raised their compulsory attendance age.¹¹ In her analysis, none of the states increased their graduation rate (see Table 2). Dropout data for Minnesota and Wyoming also showed no improvement attributable to the change.¹²

Avery also noted the additional costs required to raise the compulsory attendance age, including hiring and training new teachers, building more classrooms and larger facilities, and providing transportation for the initial increase in student enrollment.¹³ The likelihood that some students would drop out of school regardless of the change means that investments in teachers, facilities, and transportation would go to waste. Thus, she concluded,

Raising the compulsory school attendance age would not be a cost effective mandate in terms of achieving its intended goals. Statistical data support that a change would not significantly increase the high-school completion rates and reduce dropout rates. Also, there are sizable costs associated with implementing such a program including spending on new teachers, facilities, and transportation for projected, but not necessarily enduring, increases in student enrollment.¹⁴

Given the lack of evidence that this policy change is effective, North Carolina should seek other policy avenues for increasing the graduation rate or lowering the dropout rate.

Table 3. Completion Rates Before and After an Increase in Compulsory Attendance Age

<i>State</i>	<i>Year of change</i>	<i>Average completion rate two years before change</i>	<i>Average completion rate two years after change</i>
Texas	1996	79.3%	79%
Kansas	1996	91.6%	91%
Minnesota	1998	95.3%	92%
Wyoming	1998	89.4%	87%

Compulsory Attendance Age: An International Look

Most industrialized nations maintain a compulsory attendance age requirement for their youth. At 17 years old, the average compulsory attendance age in the United States is higher than that of most other nations (see Table 4). On average, schools in the United States require their children to stay in school one year longer than the international average. Students in the United States are required to stay in school two years longer than students in Japan.

There is no observable relationship between compulsory attendance age and graduation rates among nations (see Table 4). Students in countries with a maximum compulsory attendance age lower than that of the United States often graduate at a higher rate than students in the United States do.

Attendance Age and Fiscal Impact

Proposals to increase the maximum attendance age in North Carolina have neglected to outline the fiscal impact of such a policy. Other state legislatures have analyzed the costs associated with raising the compulsory attendance age and have found that the costs of retaining additional students were substantial.

- A 1998 fiscal note from the state of Kentucky found that the cost of retaining 50 percent of the students who would not return to school on their own initiative (5,200 students) would be \$15,204,800.¹⁹ The cost doubles if none of the students (10,400 students) would return to school on their own initiative. Given the substantial costs associated with the change, the Kentucky legislature did not pass the bill that would have increased the compulsory attendance age.
- A detailed 2006 fiscal impact report from the

Table 4. Compulsory Attendance Age and Graduation Rates among OECD Nations

<i>Country</i> ¹⁵	<i>Maximum Compulsory Attendance Age</i> ¹⁶	<i>Graduation Rate (2004)</i> ¹⁷
Norway	16	100
Germany	18	99
Korea	14	96
Ireland	15	92
Japan	15	91
Denmark	16	90
Finland	16	90
Switzerland	15	89
Czech Republic	15	87
Hungary	16	86
Iceland	16	84
Slovak Republic	16	83
France	16	81
Italy	15	81
Poland	16	79
Sweden	16	78
New Zealand	16	75
United States	17	75
Luxembourg	15	69
Spain	16	66
Turkey	14	53
Mexico	15	38
<i>OECD average</i> ¹⁸	16	81

Table 5. Cost of Dropouts Predicted to Remain in School

<i>Age</i>	<i>2005-06 Dropouts²⁴</i>	<i>Estimated number of dropouts unlikely to return²⁵</i>	<i>Affected by increase in attendance age to age 17²⁶</i>	<i>Additional Cost²⁷</i>
14-15 years	1,676	1,257	N/A	N/A
16 years	5,474	4,106	411	\$3,690,369
17 years	7,073	5,305	531	\$4,767,849
18-20 years	8,551	6,413	N/A	N/A
Total	22,774	17,081	942	\$8,458,218

state of Colorado indicated that state and local government would incur \$1.9 million per year in additional costs related to retaining 265 students affected by the change in the compulsory attendance law.²⁰ The expenses included additional costs for monitoring truancy cases (\$369.81 per student) and added state and local per-pupil funding (\$6,800 per student).

- A 2006 fiscal note from the state of Florida estimated that the cost of increasing the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18 would initially cost taxpayers \$311.1 million and require recurring annual operating cost of approximately \$89 million. While this figure was a best-case scenario (i.e., a complete cessation in school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 18), retaining just 25 percent of the dropouts would cost the state an estimated \$77.8 million initially and \$22.3 million annually.²¹
- A 2007 fiscal note from the state of Iowa showed that the state would be required to allocate approximately \$1.4 million for the first year and \$1.5 million for the second year of increasing the maximum compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18.²² The fiscal note estimated that the state would have to provide services for 258 additional students at a cost of \$5,546 per students for the first year and \$5,768 per student for the second year. It did not estimate the increased legal and court costs associated with the change, but said that “Raising the age for compulsory school attendance may create issues for truancy with the potential for mediation, civil penalties and court involvement.”²³

In North Carolina, it would cost at least an additional \$8.46 million a year to cover the additional cost of services for an estimated 942 students that would be affected by an increase in the compulsory attendance age to 17 years old (see Table 5). A bill to increase the attendance age to 18 would incur even greater costs.

As noted above, it is difficult to estimate the court costs required to review and adjudicate additional truancy cases. Researchers at the Colorado legislature estimated that an increase in the compulsory attendance age would require an additional \$370 per student in legal costs. Applying that figure to North Carolina, the legislature would have to appropriate nearly \$350,000 a year to the state’s courts to cover for the increased burden that the increase would place upon our justice system. Thus, raising the compulsory attendance age to 17 would cost North Carolina taxpayers approximately \$8.8 million.

Conclusion

An April 2007 poll by the J.W.P. Civitas Institute found that 72 percent of respondents supported an increase in the mandatory attendance age from 16 to 18.²⁸ This finding suggests that the public is misinformed about the effect of the compulsory attendance age on student retention. Wayward legislators, school system officials, and public school advocacy groups, in particular, say that an increase in the attendance age would compel students to stay in school.²⁹ Yet this notion is not informed by research that shows otherwise. There is very little to be gained by forcing unruly or

indifferent students to stay longer schools that are not meeting their needs.³⁰

Efforts to reach out to students at risk of dropping out must begin in the elementary and middle school grades. In particular, school systems and law enforcement officials must begin earnestly enforcing existing truancy laws for public school students who have not reached 16 years of age but are chronically absent from school. When parents and young public school students are not held accountable for violating truancy laws, the state engages in a de facto endorsement of chronic absenteeism.

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End Notes

1. Kyle Zinth, "Compulsory School Age Requirements," Education Commission of the States, August 2006, pp. 1-3.
2. North Carolina's General Statute §115C-378 states, "Every parent, guardian or other person in this State having charge or control of a child between the ages of seven and 16 years shall cause such child to attend school continuously for a period equal to the time which the public school to which the child is assigned shall be in session."
3. Zinth, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
4. General Assembly of North Carolina, Session 2007, House Bill 1790, "Raise Compulsory Educ. Age & Grad. Rate." Sponsors: Representatives Bryant, Bordsen, Wainwright, Jones (Primary Sponsors); Brown, Carney, Faison, Rapp, Ross, and Womble.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Testimony before the House Education Committee, May 8, 2007.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Zinth, pp. 1-3.
10. The CPI is the Cumulative Promotion Index, a method of calculating state graduation rates created by Christopher Swanson of the Urban Institute. According to "Getting Honest about Grad Rates" by Daria Hall of The Education Trust, the CPI compares the number of 10th graders in one year to the number of 9th graders in the previous year to estimate the percentage of 9th graders who were promoted. The same calculation is performed for the other grades and multiplies these four ratios to arrive at an estimated graduation rate. CPI is used by such organizations as the Harvard Civil Rights Project and the Education Commission of the States. The graduation rates used in this analysis are taken from "Diplomas Count: An Essential Guide to Graduation Policy and Rates," *Education Week* [Special Report], June 22, 2006.
11. Rosemary J. Avery, "Policy Analysis on the Efficacy of Increasing the Compulsory School Attendance Age in Terms of Decreasing Withdrawal Rates Prior to Graduation as Well as Increasing High School Graduation Rates," Cornell University, October 4, 2002, pp. 1-16.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-4. "In terms of event dropout rates, only data were available for Minnesota and Wyoming: respective rates for 1997-98, before implementation, were 4.9% and 6.4%. Respective rates for 1998-99, after implementation, were 4.5% and 5.2% (See Appendix, Item E). The data indicate declines in event dropout rates for both states, with Wyoming satisfying the evaluative criteria for efficacy (1.2% decrease). However, this data contradicts the data for the HSCR's for these states because the HSCR's and dropout rates should be inversely related over a given time period. Also, the 0.4% decrease witnessed in Minnesota was part of a three-year downward trend, beginning in 1996, when the rate was 5.5%. This lends support for the hypothesis that the decreases in rates from 1998-99 were not solely due to the change in the SLA, rather were more likely a result of other dropout prevention measures implemented earlier. All in all, there is no immutable statistical support for the efficacy of raising the SLA to 18 years in terms of raising the HSCR's and lowering the event dropout rates" (p. 4).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
15. Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, "Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2006," 2006. Only OECD countries with an available upper secondary graduation rate were included.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
18. This is the average of all OECD countries for which data are available, including countries not listed here.
19. Jerry R. Bailey, "State Fiscal Note Statement for HB 113: An Act relating to compulsory school attendance," Legislative Research Commission, Commonwealth of Kentucky, March 3, 1998.
20. David Porter, "SB06-073: State and Local Revised Fiscal Impact," Colorado Legislative Council, April 24, 2006.
21. "Senate Staff Analysis and Economic Impact Statement: CS/SB 772," Children and Families Committee, State of Florida, March 8, 2006.
22. Dwayne Ferguson, "HF 6 – Compulsory Attendance Age Fiscal Note," Fiscal Services Division, Iowa Legislative Services Agency, February 21, 2007.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
24. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), "Dropouts by LEAs, School Years, Grades, Ages, Races, Genders and Reasons, 2005-2006," Education Statistics Access System, accessed April 2007, 149.168.35.67/wds/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx. The total includes students in grades 7-12. The ESAS systems reports a different total than the Annual Dropout Event Report for School Year 2005-06 because it does not include charter schools. According to the dropout report, 22,943 students in grade 7-12 dropped out in 2005-06, compared to 22,774 reported by the ESAS.
25. *Ibid.* Due to poor data collection and reporting, the state dropout report does not indicate how many students return to school after dropping out. Thus, I use the Colorado Legislative Council's estimate that 75 percent of dropouts do not return to school, and therefore are not covered by state funding.
26. *Ibid.* According to Colorado Legislative Council analysts, one study showed that compulsory attendance laws retained 10 percent of potential

dropouts. See Joshua D. Angrist and Alan B. Krueger, "Does Compulsory School Attendance Affect Schooling and Earnings?" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 106, No. 4. (November 1991), p. 992. I follow the CLC and apply this rule to North Carolina dropouts.

27. Per-pupil expenditures for the 2005-06 school year. See NCDPI, "2005-06 Selected Financial Data," Division of School Business, November 2006, www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/resources/data. The per-pupil expenditure is an estimate based on the 2005-06 state averages of \$7,596 per pupil for educational services and \$763 per pupil for capital expenditures. Assuming yearly increases in per-pupil expenditure of four percent, the estimated per-pupil expenditure will be \$8,216 by the 2007-08 school year. The per-pupil expenditure for capital expenses has fluctuated over the last few years, so I use the current amount in the estimate. The total per-pupil expenditure used is \$8,979.
28. John William Pope Civitas Institute, "April 2007 Decision Maker Poll," 2007, jwpcivitasinstitute.org/keylinks/polls.html. The results may have been skewed by the introductory clause of the question. The question asked: "In light of the 32 percent dropout rate, do you support or oppose increasing the mandatory school attendance age from 16 to 18 years of age?" The introductory clause states incorrect information. The 32 percent remainder of North Carolina's 68 percent four-year (cohort) graduation rate is not the actual dropout rate because a portion of the remainder includes students that graduate in more than four years. The annual dropout rate is around 5 percent, and the state does not calculate a four-year dropout rate. More importantly, the dropout rate statistic creates a context favorable to the policy change being proposed.
29. Q.v., "N.C. lawmakers want to raise minimum drop-out age," WWAY TV3 Online, April 24, 2007, www.wwaytv3.com/node/1355.
30. For an excellent primer on the arguments for and against raising the compulsory attendance age, see Chloe Gossage, "Should North Carolina Raise the Compulsory Schooling Age?," Legislative Policy Briefing, J.W.P. Civitas Institute, March 1, 2007, jwpcivitasinstitute.org/keylinks/pol_an.html.