



VERMONT PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION
MEMO
From the Desk of Jay Nichols

To: Senate Education Committee

Subject: Testimony on S.233 Mandatory School Age

Date: 1/19/18

Thank you for allowing me to share the overall perspective of the Vermont Principals' Association, especially our high school principals who work most closely with the student population targeted with this bill.

I surveyed high school leaders during the past 24 hours. Over 80% who responded to my email query favor the legislation. However, they favor it with lots of concerns around proper implementation.

Those who did not favor the legislation are mostly concerned with the resources and supports necessary to make sure these students do actually attend school and do not disrupt the learning of other students who want to be there.

Here are perspectives of responding principals and assistant principals as to the pros and cons of this legislation for your committee to consider with specific quotes.

Pros:

1. We are in favor of this legislation due to the health and lifetime earnings/productivity benefits that accompany the completion of high school.
2. I was the designated employee to monitor truancy and to attend truancy court in a school that I worked for. If a student is 16, or close to the age of 16, the judge was clear that there was not much that could be done to force the student to attend school since they were or would soon be able to make the decision to drop out on their own. Parents would also respond that there was not much that they could do because their child could decide to drop out on their own at the age of 16. I felt that once a child was close to that age, the system gave up on them if they gave up on themselves. The age of 16 is too young for this decision to be made.
3. I'm in favor of this legislation. I've worked in New Hampshire and I can tell you that that ruling has helped kids.
4. I would want to know what supports are going to be put in place for students that are between 16-18 to help parents get their students to school, as most of the students are the same size, if not bigger, than their parents, and this poses a problem. I work with many many parents that want their students to go to school, but the students refuse to get out of bed, etc... The parents call the school, the school sends the truancy officer, and the student stays in bed, because no one is going to go hands-on with a 16-year-old to get them to school. Will the law hold the student responsible, instead of the parents, if it truly is a student issue and not a parent issue? While I agree in theory with this completely, I worry that the implementation of this, if passed, will be next to impossible to implement well.
5. When I worked in NH, at Fall Mountain, we went through the same thing. I thought they were crazy, keeping students for two extra years who did not want to be there. It would only lead to more discipline problems and disruptions to the learning of students who wanted to be there. Well they passed the law and none of that materialized. In fact, it had the opposite effect. By taking the option off the table students had no option other than to get serious and work, because they were stuck there and had no choices. Most students who drop out at 16 won't be mature enough to know how this decision is going to follow them and influence the rest of their lives. We also don't have the level entry jobs they used to be able to fill as the need for a more highly educated workforce has increased. Having students stay and complete their degree is the smart thing to do, as it will give them more options as they move through life.
6. I support the age increase to 18. Having dropping out on the table for a 16 year old when school is feeling difficult is not helpful. A good flexible pathways program should more than meet the needs of those who have traditionally dropped out at age 16. My feeling is that dropping out at 16 a dated idea that is connected to the notion that one can get a job without completing high school.
7. I am writing to offer my complete support of Senate Bill 233. High schools in Vermont are to create relevant, flexible learning opportunities for all learners. The common expectation remains that most students will complete high school in four years. Some students may advance in their studies and do so sooner, but the reality is that with our most resistant and reluctant learners we have but two years, and in some cases even less before a child can make a decision to throw it all away. At our school, we work closely with the (County Name) Restorative Center Truancy Project and have witnessed many

success stories with their support coordinated with the actions taken by our State's Attorney's office. The only catch is that if a student is at or near the age of 16, then the likelihood of a communal intervention decreases considerably. Well before Act 77 School Name High School partnered with Central Vermont Adult Basic Education, Green Mountain Technology and Career Center, JobCorps, and other educational enterprises to create pathways for students who may not find their best fit in a brick and mortar setting. If SB 233 were enacted, this would only ensure that student choice would remain yet there would be teeth to ensure all students graduate. I am strongly encouraged by SB 233 and would be happy to speak in person with committee should it so desire.

8. I think this would make sense. I think it is particularly feasible given: a) the opportunities for rethinking traditional education with Flexible Pathways, and, b) when schools have structures in place that can support all different kinds of learners. For instance, (High School Name) has some alternative opportunities in the building and on different campuses across the city that specifically address the learning needs of our students. I think with that kind of mindset, we should be able to get students to maintain their education to age 18, and really to graduation.
9. I want to let you know that I am completely on board with the raising of the age from 16 to 18. This is my first year here in VT, and I have to say that I was quite shocked to hear, upon arriving, that 16 is the cutoff age. While truancy is not a large problem at _____ High School, we do face challenges with a number of students, and the inability to hold parents, and students, accountable for non-attendance is very challenging. While not a lot is certain in educational research, and most studies are littered with phraseology such as "We are virtually certain", and "It is highly likely that", the research surrounding attendance and academic performance is unequivocal: kids who attend school outperform those who do not, and attendance problems can be directly linked to a higher incidence of dropout behavior, which is itself tied to a host of damaging life outcomes.
10. I am in favor of raising the age to 18. I don't believe students are mature enough to have the option to drop out at 16.

Cons:

1. I hope the State's Attorneys have weighed in on this legislation? I know that here in Addison County we sometimes wait up to a year (or longer) for a case to get to the court systems before we are able to obtain help from their office, and this is with no students being truant that are over the age of 16 if they do not attend school. I wonder the stress that this will put on the system if we increase the age?
2. A very quick and thin analysis of our drop out patten is that drop outs usually come from situation where they are significant mental health, social, or substance issues. These issues prevent the students from being able to be physically and emotionally present. Until Vermont steps up to the plate with a more comprehensive system of supports for these issues is available we will spend time chasing the 17 and 18 year olds around.
3. Most really unmotivated at-risk students whom have chosen not to be engaged at school over the age of 16 soak up time money and energy to pretty much no avail. School at that

point is not the answer something else deeper more thought out and intentional needs to be built for this group. Simply stated from many years dealing with this ..my perspective..basically a waste of time..

4. Keeping students in school is sound, however, research shows that students will make the decision to drop out before 9th grade. Knowing this information, how could we possibly retain reluctant 16 & 17-year olds who have struggled throughout their educational experience. What supports will be in place for students that have clearly demonstrated that the traditional high school setting is not suited for their learning needs? We are already challenged with students from trauma who are entering 9th grade and finding few options to meet their social, emotional and academic needs. In reality how can we prevent students from leaving school who have jobs, vehicles and little family support. Would there be sanctions to ensure compliance? Without proper supports, we would not recommend passage at this time.

And some maybes:

1. In isolation, raising the age to 18 is not a good option. However, if Flexible Pathways were actually funded, then students could pursue options that kept them from being disenfranchised. This seems counterintuitive to the Gov's expectations to reduce the education budget.
2. My comment is, unless funding is specifically provided to support student choice in staying engaged in the K-12 system, what good is raising the mandatory age. Options to be fully funded: Fully online programs, Apprenticeships, Dual Enrollment, CTE, Work-based learning
3. How will a change affect truancy proceedings? What about enforcement mechanisms?
4. I would always favor an older age in a perfect world. The challenge is that getting support from DCF and the courts is challenging once a student goes beyond 15 or so. Many of the kids who are dropping out are not being willfully defiant. Their family or living situations are often dysfunctional or generationally impoverished. There is also a huge increase in homeless, disaffected youth. So, 18 is a great theory, but it will only work if there are social service supports to help schools reach out and engage families and those 16-18-year olds. We have increased our graduation rate here in School Name from 65 to about 90 % in five years because we have committed lots of resources to reach out and we have intentionally forged relationships with DCF and the courts. It is a really big financial and time commitment that I hope will be sustainable. It also forced us to look at proficiencies and flexible pathways for non-traditional learners, like many of our dropouts were.

And a Response from a Current New Hampshire Principal:

Yes, the state did put together an "early warning" system for schools to help identify the students likely to drop out so we may offer services. Outside of this the state did not provide any financial benefit to support programming for at risk students, and combined with the requirement that high

schools have zero drop outs has come with *challenges*. The districts most lacking in resources are the same ones with the most potential dropouts, and are the same districts most in need of drop out prevention programs. The state puts together the drop out data by district and publishes it on their website, then asks districts with higher than average numbers to develop programming - to be paid for with local budgets already stretched thin. As a result of all of this, districts have little incentive to pull in 16 and 17 year old who were not attending their last district and may have moved to a new district - because space is limited in their alternative programs and the new "at risk" student will likely be counted as a drop out for the new district. Residency rules are also very tight in NH and in many cases a parent will move to a new town and leave their "at risk" students look for places to live in the town the parents moved out of - prompting that district to demand the new district enroll the student to get them off their rolls. The student is not considered homeless and is caught between two districts who are quarreling over their enrollment status - thus exacerbating their "at risk" status.

My advice for any state looking at this would be to provide financial support for alternative education programs based on the needs of the district. I would also advocate for states to phase in this program with a particular birth year at least 5 years prior to when that cohort is to turn 18. In NH we allowed students to drop out and then had to pull them back in when the law went into effect - not an easy task. All this being said, I think it is a good idea to keep kids in school until they are 18 as this gives us more time to help them complete an education, because we know the consequences for them and our communities when they don't complete high school.

I hope this helps

Concluding Thoughts

- **The Vermont Principals' Association supports the concept behind the proposed legislation, with caveats listed below, as written because:**
 - 16-year old children should not be allowed to make a decision of such monumental consequence that will affect the rest of their lives at such a young age
 - By removing the "easy" option of dropping out of school for 16 and 17-year old students they will be less likely to give up on their education and themselves
 - Leaders overall in New Hampshire have stated that the similar law change there has been a success
 - There is compelling research demonstrating greater economic, social, and emotional satisfaction and wellbeing for students who graduate from high school, as opposed to those who do not, throughout their lives
- **Important Caveats:**
 - Resources will be necessary for this law change to be successful, such as, but not limited to:
 - Truancy laws will have to be enforced by States Attorneys' and state judges
 - Financial and policy resources and continued supports for Flexible Pathways to graduation will be required

- Boards, Superintendents, and Principals will need the flexibility necessary to provide out-of-the box opportunities to meet individualized student needs.
- Schools (and perhaps parents) should not be held liable for students who refuse to attend. School officials are not going to physically force students to attend school and parents are unlikely to do so as well
- Strongly consider tying a Vermont Driver's License to either graduation from high school or active enrollment in high school or an approved educational program. A driver's license is a great motivation to attend school and graduate and is something that virtually all youth care greatly about

Recommendation:

Put together a study committee to develop recommendations and potentially an implementation plan with the goal of possibly making legislative changes to go into effect as early as the 2019-2020 school year. The Study Committee should be comprised of members from the following stakeholders (at a minimum): Vermont Principals' Association, Vermont Superintendents' Association, Vermont School Boards Association, Vermont Council of Special Educators, the Agency of Education, Career Centers, States Attorneys' Office, Judges, Truancy Officers, House Education Committee, Senate Education Committee, and the Administration.