

# ISSUE PAPERS

## 2009 LEGISLATIVE SESSION



DEPARTMENT OF LEGISLATIVE SERVICES 2008

### Compulsory School Attendance Age Gets Continued Attention

In an effort to retain the roughly 10,000 students per year who drop out of high school, legislation has been introduced in each of the last seven years to increase the age of mandatory school attendance in Maryland; however this legislation has not passed. A Task Force to Study Raising the Compulsory Public School Attendance Age to 18 that was established through 2006 legislation submitted its final report in December 2007. The task force acknowledged the hardships faced by those who drop out of high school but did not specifically recommend that the age of compulsory school attendance be increased.

#### 2008 Legislation

Every year since 2002, the General Assembly has considered bills that would have raised the minimum age at which students may drop out of school from 16 to either 17 or 18. An average of more than 10,000 students per year dropped out of Maryland public high schools from the 1998-1999 school year to the 2006-2007 school year, and proponents of the legislation argue that increasing the compulsory age of attendance would help to decrease the number of dropouts and would eventually increase the number of high school graduates in Maryland.

Due at least in part to the high cost of adding a large number of students to the annual enrollment counts, legislation increasing the mandatory attendance age has had little success. However, during the 2008 session, the Senate passed Senate Bill 436, which would have raised the age of compulsory attendance by one year for the 2009-2010 school year contingent on the inclusion of \$45 million in the fiscal 2011 State budget to help pay for the added enrollment. The bill ultimately failed in the House of Delegates, but the Senate's approval of the bill suggests that this issue will persist.

#### Task Force Examines an Increase in the Compulsory School Attendance Age

The Task Force to Study Raising the Compulsory Public School Attendance Age to 18, established by Chapter 449 of 2006, submitted its final report in December 2007. The task force reported that students who drop out of high school face "harsh futures" characterized by lower wages, disproportionate representation in prisons, and shorter overall life spans, according to national studies. The costs to society were also noted, including greater dependency on public assistance among dropouts and high incarceration costs for that population.

The task force also found several factors that would make increasing the age of compulsory attendance difficult, including the significant operating and capital costs associated with the change and the ongoing shortage of qualified teacher candidates. The study estimated

that annual operating costs, including both State and local costs, would increase by \$200 million and that one-time capital costs for portable classrooms would be approximately \$46 million. This financial burden would be unequally distributed among local jurisdictions since each school system has a different dropout rate and differing amounts of available classroom space. As estimated by the task force, Baltimore City, the jurisdiction with the largest number of dropouts, would face the greatest financial burden (\$60 million), while Talbot County would have the least financial burden (\$385,000).

The task force did not specifically recommend that the age of compulsory school attendance be raised but did encourage strong use of student supports to assist students who are at-risk of dropping out. Furthermore, the task force recommended that, if the State does increase the age of mandatory school attendance, it should provide adequate financial support for the endeavor. Other recommendations of the task force included:

- adoption of a statewide dropout prevention initiative addressing different modes of instruction and appropriate strategies for current dropouts and those at risk of dropping out;
- development of alternative pathways to the Maryland high school diploma, including work study beginning in grade 9, a five-year high school program, instruction at times outside the traditional school schedule, and recognition of the GED as a valid credential; and
- assessment of the effectiveness of truancy courts for dropout prevention.

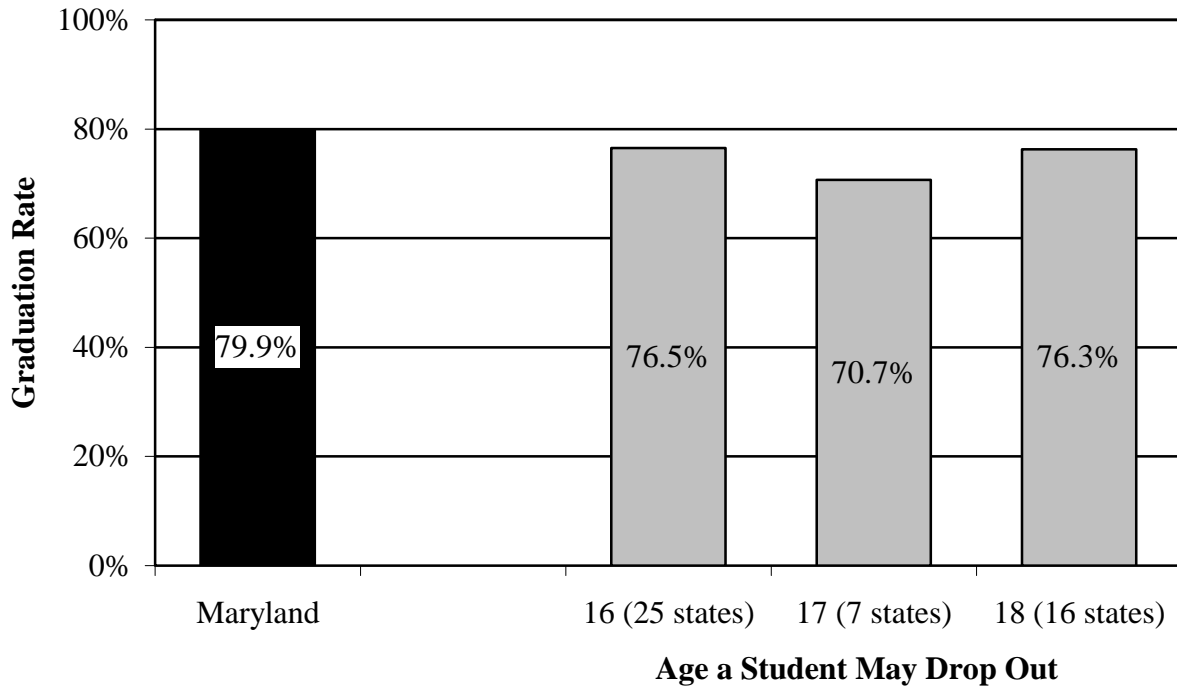
## Compulsory School Attendance Policies in Other States

Currently, the minimum age at which students may drop out is 16 in 23 states, 17 in 9 states, and 18 in 18 states and the District of Columbia. Since 1996, 8 states have raised the age of compulsory attendance to either 17 or 18 years-of-age. Most statutes provide for various exceptions allowing a student to leave school earlier than the required age. For example, the majority of states have exceptions for students who have completed the high school graduation requirements and have received a high school diploma or its equivalent. Other states grant exceptions for students with temporary illnesses or injuries; students with physical, mental, or emotional disabilities; students who get parental consent to drop out; and students who live a certain distance from a school, bus stop, or public highway.

The final report of the Task Force to Study Raising the Compulsory Public School Attendance Age to 18 suggests that some states have raised the compulsory attendance age with some retention success when community services for students at-risk of dropping out have been provided in combination with the age change. However, **Exhibit 1** shows no real difference in average statewide graduation rates between states that allow students to drop out at 16 and those that do not allow students to drop out until they reach 17 or 18. Although further review of the

policies and demographics in other states would be necessary before any firm conclusions could be drawn, these data suggest that simply raising the compulsory school attendance age may not yield immediate increases in high school graduation rates.

**Exhibit 1**  
**Average Four-year High School Graduation Rates**  
**by Age of Compulsory School Attendance**  
**2005-2006 School Year**



Note: 2005-2006 graduation rates were not available for two states (PA and SC) and the District of Columbia. Compulsory attendance ages from the 2005-2006 school year are used in the chart in order to align with the most recent available graduation rates. Unweighted averages of graduation rates in states within each compulsory attendance age group are shown.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics and the final report of the Task Force to Study Raising the Compulsory Public School Attendance Age to 18.