

Making it tougher to drop out is a bad idea

By REBECCA KAUFMAN

THE New Jersey Assembly's education and appropriations committee recently approved a bill that would change the age that students can legally drop out of school from 16 to 18. This bill is a poor one, and the Legislature should not adopt it.

As Americans, we are afforded great rights and liberties – including freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. The freedom to make our own personal choices is another liberty we are given in the Constitution. I feel that the government should not put age restrictions on dropping out of school because it infringes on our freedom.

Having graduated from high school not that many years ago, I know many students who dropped out before the age of 18, some disappearing from the public education system before they were 16.

At age 16, you can get your driver's permit and working papers; at age 18, you can enroll in the military; at age 19, you can purchase cigarettes; and at age 21, you can drink legally. Since age-based laws are so prevalent, I believe that the government needs to pick one standard age applicable to all those laws.

Educational age standards have existed in America since 1852, when Massachusetts became the first state to have compulsory attendance laws. By 1918,

all states required that children receive an education.

These compulsory education laws vary widely by state. Almost half the states require students to begin attending school by age 6; others require them to start by age 5; and some set the age as old as 8 when children must begin going to school. However, all children are required to continue their education until they are at least 16.

The problem is that some students are not going to complete high school for a variety of reasons. Forcing them to remain in school not only does not benefit them, it also adversely affects the education of their peers.

Distraction

High school students who have ambitions to graduate and move on to higher education will be distracted by these students. They may not do as well in class as they could have, and the distractions will affect their future college admissions. Students who have no interest in being in the school system make it miserable for everyone else around them, as any teacher can tell you.

Instead of legally requiring students to be 18 to drop out of school, here is a better way to encourage students to stay: make classes more interesting and more relevant for everyone. Read books in English classes that students can relate to. Offer

more electives and university preparation programs. Encourage extracurricular participation and fund more clubs instead of giving all of the available funds to sports programs.

Doing this would address the concerns of Stanley Karp, director of the secondary reform project at the Education Law Center, who argues that "raising the mandatory age would not address the deeper issues of inadequate programming and student apathy."

Individuals who graduate from high school do have a better chance at success and a higher salary. According to a 2007 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2005 the average annual income of an individual without a high school diploma was \$20,000. For an individual with a high school diploma or GED, it was \$29,700.

However, I know individuals with bachelor's degrees who are earning barely \$20,000 a year. The current economic crisis has altered the employment landscape, and there is no assurance one will land a high-paying job with a high school or college degree.

The Assembly also failed to acknowledge that students, after dropping out, can go back to school to get their high school diploma or GED. In 2004, a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education reported that 63 percent of students who

dropped out of high school earned a diploma or GED within eight years of the date they normally would have graduated high school. This shows that after spending several years out of school, many drop-outs mature and realize that to succeed in life, they need a diploma. They make the decision to go back and finish school – without the government forcing them to do so.

Some will ignore the law

Students who want to drop out are not going to stay in school, even if a law is passed requiring them to do so.

This affects both the schools and taxpayers, because those students forced to remain in school will cause a decline in the quality of education in the school system.

Although the bill is well-intentioned, the Assembly should not pass it.

A better approach for the Legislature would be to improve the quality of education in our schools and make sure that each child in the state receives the best education possible in an environment that promotes learning.

That initiative would benefit everyone.

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