



School of Law
Center for Families,
Children and the Courts

**Senate Committee on Education, Health and Environmental Affairs
Testimony of the University of Baltimore School of Law
Center for Families, Children and the Courts**

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SB 239: Education – Age of Compulsory Attendance – Exemptions

* Position: Support

February 24, 2010

Dear Chair Conway and members of the Committee:

The University of Baltimore Law School's Center for Children, Families and the Courts (CFCC) operates a Truancy Court Program in Baltimore City, Anne Arundel County, and Montgomery County and plans to expand the program to Prince George's County and Baltimore County in Fall 2010. The program, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, the Charles Crane Family Foundation, and the Maryland Administrative Office of the Courts, is a collaboration among local school systems, CFCC, and district and circuit courts.

Our experience shows us that a multi-pronged approach is necessary to tackle the problem of school alienation that afflicts far too many of our young people. We urge you to support SB 239, a bill that initially raises the compulsory age of attendance in Maryland's public schools from 16 to 17, and in 2014, to age 18.

A startling number of youth in Maryland fail to complete high school. The Department of Legislative Services puts the annual number of dropouts at approximately 10,000 during the ten-year span between 1998-1999 through 2007-2008. (*Fiscal and Policy Note*, HB 1223, 2009 Legislative Session.)

The link between negative life outcomes and failure to attain a high school degree is well-established. Not only do high school dropouts earn less than graduates, but they are less healthy, more likely to receive public benefits, and more likely to commit crimes. (*The Costs and Benefits of An Excellent Education for All of America's Children*, by Levin, Henry, Clive Belfield, Peter Muennig, and Cecilia Rouse, Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, January 2007, available at http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/research/costbenefits_exed.)

We are no longer an agrarian society or a society in which plentiful industrial jobs allow those without a high school degree to earn a living wage sufficient to support themselves and a family. The skills necessary to compete in a global economy depend on appropriate education. (*From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate*, the Alliance for Excellent Education, DC, August 2008, pp. 13-14.)

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Although increasing the minimum age for compulsory school attendance is not a panacea for the school dropout crisis, it does send the correct message and must be part of a comprehensive strategy to appropriately motivate and educate our youth, while adequately preparing them for their futures. CFCC's Truancy Court Program is a powerful and effective weapon in preventing school dropout, but it is only one component of a complete spectrum of interventions. Increasing the age of compulsory attendance is another important element, as recognized by a task force subcommittee studying the issue in Maryland. (*Attending to Learn: The Implications of Raising the Compulsory Age for School Attendance*, Final Report of the Task Force to Study Raising the Compulsory School Attendance Age to 18, Submitted to the Maryland General Assembly and Governor, 12/1/07, p. 30.)

Students are well aware that they are not legally compelled to attend school after age 16. This knowledge is not, however, coupled with adult judgment. Dropping out is a decision that could have devastating lifelong consequences. Because the law allows it, parents and other adults who want to insist that a youngster stay in school are being undermined by the current state of the law. In fact, parents who come to workshops run by our Truancy Court Program have complained to us about feeling disempowered precisely because the legal mandate for continuing in school expires at age 16.

The fiscal note for this bill calculates substantial expenditures to retain more youth in school, while mentioning that social and other costs would presumably be avoided if young people are educated. While it may cost upwards of \$10,000 per year to educate a student, the yearly cost for incarcerating a youth in a juvenile facility is about seven times that much. (*Attending to Learn*, p. 3.)

Experience elsewhere offers some reason for optimism. The subcommittee studying other states for Maryland's Compulsory Attendance Task Force has found promising results in Louisiana and Texas. After Louisiana raised the age of compulsory education from 17 to 18 in 2001, their graduation rate improved from 63.7 percent in 2000-01, to 69.4 percent in 2003-04. There was a dip in the dropout rate from 9.2 percent in 2000-01 to 6.6% the next year, though it then rose to hover over 7%. (*Attending to Learn*, pp. 32-33.) In Texas, which raised its compulsory attendance age from 17 to 18 in 1996, the subcommittee writes that "The increase in the age requirement and the cooperation of the juvenile court has contributed to increasing the graduation and attendance rates in Texas. Additionally, Texas' dropout rate continues to decline." (*Attending to Learn*, p. 34.)

In states such as Kansas and Utah, the subcommittee has reported that fears regarding an unsustainable price tag resulting from similar legislation have not been realized. (*Attending to Learn*, pp. 31, 33-34.)

We submit that passing this bill is the right thing to do, and that Maryland can experience a substantial net benefit from investing in its young people.

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