The Complexity of Compulsory Attendance

Perhaps the most notorious school-skippers, real or fictional, are Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer — characters brought to life by their similarly adventure-seeking creator, Samuel Clemens, or Mark Twain. Tom and Huck (and Twain) were all about escape and freedom. When Huckleberry Finn went to live with the Widow Douglas, she took him for a son and allowed him to civilize him. We all know how successful she was. Huck could not be civilized. All he wanted to do was head out for a smoke and get out of his rigid, confining clothes.

Huck has never been alone in wanting to live free. There have always been many like him, and that is why we have compulsory education laws. Early “civilized” communities recognized that the only way to keep students in school up to a certain age was to make them go. (Massachusetts was the first, in 1852, to mandate compulsory attendance for children between the ages of 8 and 14.) Compulsory attendance laws specify the age for starting school and the age at which students may follow Huck outdoors for adventure without getting dragged back in by the ear. In doing so, these laws not only make the kids go to school, but put pressure on parents to get them there.

Pressures for Change

Since A Nation at Risk came out in 1983, an increasing number of lawmakers have attempted to curb the “adventures” of young people by raising the age at which students may leave school. In 1960, four states set the age at 18. That number had increased to just five by 1970, but by the end of 2006, 16 states required students to attend school until the age of 18 or graduation, whichever comes first. (For a look at compulsory schooling laws in all the states, visit www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/66/07/6407.pdf.)

Today, perhaps the greatest pressure to keep kids in school longer is coming from the No Child Left Behind Act. NCLB establishes graduation rates as one of the measures that determine whether a school makes adequate yearly progress. While each state sets its own graduation rate target, the law holds schools accountable for meeting that state-set target. This in turn puts pressure on practice to make sure students graduate. They can’t graduate if they don’t attend, and many won’t attend unless we “make ‘em.”

Do These Laws Work?

Critics say that forcing students to attend school is counterproductive, that students who don’t want to be there often become disruptive influences. They claim that it’s more important for schools to improve the educational experience for students who are disengaged or so far behind their peers that they cannot see a way to catch up. For too many students, the light has gone out, and they see no reason to attend. A system of credits based on seat time, or Carnegie Units, does not lend itself to helping students make up for time lost during months or years of adolescent disengagement.

Proponents say that raising the compulsory attendance age decreases dropout rates, juvenile crime, and teen pregnancy, while it produces graduates who — because they hold at least a high school diploma — can earn higher wages over the course of their lifetimes.

In 1990 the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) published a little-known study that estimated that 25% of potential dropouts remain in school because of compulsory schooling laws. The authors based that estimate on Census Bureau data rather than on state- or school-provided calculations of the dropout rate (or graduation rate). Readers are no doubt familiar with current literature that suggests that state, district, and school calculations lack credibility. Once high-quality student information systems are in place everywhere, we’ll have better data. Meanwhile, though NBER’s estimates are somewhat dated, such data are at least based on credible measures.

Recent State Activity

Every year a few state legislatures address the issue of compulsory school age. In the 2006 session, Tennessee changed its compulsory attendance age from 7 to 16, to 7 to 17. However, the bill affects only blind children. Had it applied to all children, it would have added two years of education. New York legislators proposed lowering the age at which a child must start school to age 5, but that bill did not pass. And Iowa lawmakers proposed raising the upper age to 18, but that, too, failed.

A number of years ago, to address the accusation that forcing students to attend school is counterproductive, Colorado lawmakers discussed doing away with the compulsory schooling law altogether. That proposal made it to committee hearings but later died. In 2006, the Colorado legislature raised the state’s age for leaving school from 16 to 17.

In Maryland, the 2006 legislature considered two separate measures. One would have raised the compulsory age to 18 for the city of Baltimore only. The other would have raised it to 18 for all students. Both bills were amended to require a task force to look into what it would take to implement them, provide professional development opportunities, and foster cooperation among governmental agencies to support successful im-

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IMPLEMENTATION. The task force report is due by December 2007.

Similarly, the 2006 Vermont legislature asked the state commissioner of education to look into the possibility of increasing compulsory attendance to age 18 and to present information to the legislature in January 2007.

In 2004, Nebraska increased the age of compulsory attendance to 18, but included an explicit provision that parents be allowed to choose to remove their children at age 16. This is not an unusual provision, as nearly all state compulsory education laws include certain provisions under which students are excused from attendance (needing to work, for example, or to meet other family needs). In this case, however, it appears that the home-schooling community was involved in trying to ensure that parents clearly have the option of home schooling their children past the age of 16.

OTHER OPTIONS

In 2004, the Tennessee Office of Education Accountability published a study that offered three alternatives to raising the compulsory age. First, the report suggested that policy makers could choose to more clearly limit the absences that a student can accumulate before he or she must be referred to the judicial system. For example, Tennessee law required superintendents to notify parents after students missed five days without an adequate excuse. But the law provided no standard for when districts had to refer students and their families to attendance officers or to the judicial system. A growing number of states have defined “habitual truancy” clearly setting the bar for the acceptable number of absences, but many more states have not done so. One might assume that compulsory education laws have always contained this type of provision, but prior to the 1990s they simply did not.

Second, the Tennessee study noted that lawmakers could choose to provide the option for students to attend an adult school by reducing the age at which students can participate in such schools from 17 to 16. The third alternative offered was to require the state board to provide local boards of education with guidelines for developing attendance policies.

ADDRESSING THE LEVEL OF DISENGAGEMENT

No matter what state compulsory attendance laws do to improve attendance, much of the attendance and dropout problem stems from student disengagement. The 2005 High School Survey of Student Engagement found that 42% of the regular education students and 49% of the vocational education students reported that they spend no time in school-sponsored activities. Fifty-one percent of Latino students and 41% of African American and American Indian students answered this way. Only 47% of all students agreed that they would select the same high school again if given the opportunity. Just 59% said that their school places quite a bit or very much emphasis on treating students fairly, and 67% said that people at their school, overall, accept them for who they are. That means that one out of every three students does not feel accepted at school. No wonder they want to leave.

THE IMPACT OF PERCEPTION

Other research suggests that perceived academic competence may play an even more important role than engagement in shaping academic outcomes. A 2006 study from MDRC, School Context, Student Attitudes and Behavior, and Academic Achievement: An Exploratory Analysis, found that clear and high academic expectations and active and connected learning strategies may not in and of themselves be sufficient to increase students’ sense of involvement in learning and their belief that they can do well. If students view academic standards as unattainable, say the authors, they are unlikely to feel that they can be successful. And they will be less engaged in schoolwork.

One of the most memorable findings from the MDRC study is that the supportive influence of school context may be more immediate than long-term. The authors note that supportive relationships with teachers and clear behavioral norms, along with perceived academic competence, were much stronger in a given year than they were across years. So a positive initial experience is not enough. These good influences fade from one year to the next. To be successful in the long term, the study’s authors say students need supportive teachers and high-quality instruction throughout high school.

Raising the compulsory school age may be a good start in keeping students in school, but the real challenge lies in addressing the needs of each lack Finn and each Tom Sawyer in each classroom, each day, each year. They still might not want to be “civilized.” But we just gotta keep workin’ on ‘em.