
Lowering the age of compulsory education without providing viable options for youths' self-realization and social development "is to invite disaster for youth and for society in general."

A persistent recurring theme in several of the recent reports urging reform in secondary education is the call for changing compulsory school attendance laws so as to lower the school-leaving age to fourteen. The National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, for instance, warned that adolescents must not be forced to attend high schools lest these become custodial institutions: "Earlier maturation—physical, sexual, and intellectual—requires an option of earlier departure from the restraints of formal schooling."¹

While not recommending the immediate elimination of compulsory education laws, the National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education raised "the question of the utility of the last year or two of high school if, in fact, terminal points of development have already been reached by age 15"² and suggested reconsideration of existing statutes. The Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee reflected on the appropriateness of a fixed minimum age criterion for leaving school and beginning work and decided that "a better means can be formed for assuring the rights of the young person to some degree of self-determination while protecting him from exploitation by others."³

While not lowering the compulsory school attendance age, some states are considering, and California has already enacted, legislation that

¹ B. F. Brown, chairman. *The Reform of Secondary Education*. The National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973. p. 128.

² J. H. Martin, chairman. *The Education of Adolescents*. National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976. p. 30.

³ J. S. Coleman, chairman. *Youth: Transition to Adulthood*. Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974. p. 143.

Early School Leaving— An Invitation to Disaster

A. Harry Passow





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will permit students to leave school early if they can first pass a test showing at least minimum competence in basic skills areas. In California, 16- and 17-year-olds who pass the competency test receive a certificate legally equivalent to a high school diploma and may leave high school if they receive parental permission.

The current debate on the appropriate length of required schooling is in sharp contrast to the decades of efforts to raise both the percent of the 5- to 17-year-old population enrolled in school and their regular attendance. At the turn of the century, there were still some states without compulsory attendance laws. Yet by the 1930s, dropouts or early school leavers—"early" meaning withdrawal from school prior to earning a high school diploma—had become a major national concern. In the 1950s and 1960s, large-scale programs were mounted to prevent dropouts from high school and to assist their reentry to schools.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 1971-72, 88.1 percent of the 5- to 17-year-old population was enrolled in school and 90.2 percent of the enrollees attended daily, with the length of the average school year

179.3 days. Since 16 is the age most states have established for compulsory attendance, some 40 percent of high school youth are really attending on a voluntary basis. The NCEES observes that school participation figures—highest in the world—suggest that Americans value education: "Whether the credit goes to a lofty belief in the values of education or a less lofty interest in the custodial role of schooling, a moment's reflection suggests that such expansion implies a major commitment both in time and in resources devoted to educational activities."⁴ Yet, the National Commission on Reform of Secondary Education concluded that "the coercion of compulsory school attendance is no longer working" with an average daily attendance in some urban schools as low as 45 percent with many of those coming to school arriving late and cutting classes.

Compulsory Attendance Laws Enacted

The order issued by the General Court of the Massachusetts Colony in 1642 and amended five years later established the principles on which compulsory education was later based, for these laws declared that all children must be educated, that the parents or the community had to provide suitable education, and that the state could establish schools and even determine what these schools were to teach.

The development of the factory system in Massachusetts in the early nineteenth century, however, resulted in children working in the factories rather than attending school because they were quite capable of handling the machines and their wages were needed by their families. A so-called "factory law" was passed in 1842, but it proved to be ineffective. Truancy and non-attendance were so general that Horace Mann gave special attention to them in his reports. By 1850, public support had been enlisted for passage of the nation's first truancy law. Massachusetts passed a compulsory attendance act in 1852, an act which was amended in 1859. Enactment of compulsory attendance laws, however, did not ensure compliance or enforcement. Other states followed slowly, enacting legislation patterned

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. *The Condition of Education: 1976 Edition*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976. p. 3.

after the Massachusetts model, complete with all its deficiencies.

At the turn of the century, all but six southern states had enacted compulsory attendance laws, although four states had legislation that applied only to part of the state. While compulsory attendance legislation was widely ignored and ineffectively implemented, the then-Commissioner of Education William Harris argued that the laws were useful in establishing a principle accepted by law-abiding parents who constituted the majority.

Among the arguments advanced by the opponents of compulsory attendance legislation were some not unlike those advanced by today's proponents for lowering the age of school leaving. The arguments included: (a) a new crime—truancy—is created; (b) the liberty of parents is interfered with; (c) the state arrogates new powers unto itself; (d) compulsory school attendance is un-American in that it is not adapted to free institutions; and (e) attendance is just as great without such laws.⁵ Gibbons observes that enforcement of such laws raises a number of issues concerning individual rights: "(a) the right of adults and children to freedom from unnecessary state control, (b) the right of all to education of equal quality, and (c) the right to certain minimum guaranteed outcomes from the years of required schooling."⁶

Tyack has described the history of compulsory school attendance as having had two phases. The first began in the mid-nineteenth century and lasted until about 1890 by which time most states had enacted laws that were either unenforced or unenforceable but, nevertheless, the common school grew and attracted increasing numbers of children. The idea of compulsory attendance was debated, and laws were enacted without concern for the organization needed to implement the concept. In the 1890s, at about the time of the publication of the so-called Report of the Committee of Ten, which is viewed as the watershed of secondary education, a second phase began in which serious attention was paid to the organizational apparatus needed to enforce compulsory attendance. As Tyack points out, it was during this second phase that "schools grew in size and complexity, new techniques of bureaucratic control emerged, ideologi-

cal conflict over compulsion diminished, strong laws were passed, and schools developed sophisticated techniques to bring truants into schools."⁷

Protecting and Educating Children

Ensign has pointed out that in the nineteenth century, teachers and schools were not among those advocating laws for the protection and education of children. Teachers seemed anxious about receiving "in their well-ordered classes those who, by taste or necessity, placed foremost the bread-winning pursuits."⁸ Rather, it was the philanthropic agencies at first and, as they became more influential later, the labor organizations that were concerned with restricting the employment of children and having them attend

⁵ W. S. Deffenbaugh. "Compulsory Attendance Laws in the United States." *Compulsory School Attendance*, Bulletin 1914, No. 2. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1914. p. 10.

⁶ M. Gibbons. *The New Secondary Education*. Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa, 1976. p. 21.

⁷ D. B. Tyack. "Ways of Seeing: An Essay on the History of Compulsory Schooling." *Harvard Educational Review* 46(3):359; August 1976.

⁸ F. C. Ensign. *Compulsory School Attendance and Child Labor*. New York: Arno Press, 1969. p. 234.

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schools. The philanthropic agencies were concerned with industrial exploitation robbing children of even the basic elements of an education; labor was worried about children competing for adult jobs at lower wages.

While child labor laws often preceded or followed the enactment of compulsory attendance laws, few states coordinated legislation relating to child labor and school attendance or the enforcement of such laws.

State departments of education and national and state teachers organizations joined the push for compulsory education much later than did the labor organizations and philanthropic agencies. Doyle suggests that education's support for compulsory attendance should be viewed as "the triumph of professionalism"—the growth of an educational bureaucracy with its attendant self-interests. Only through compulsory education could elementary and secondary schools establish a monopoly that would enable the education profession to grow by compelling individuals to purchase their product.⁹

There were a variety of motives advanced to explain compulsory education, only some of which were humanitarian and in the general societal interest. At the turn of the century when high schools experienced tremendous growth, it was argued that compulsory education was essential for unifying the varied and heterogeneous population and "Americanizing" a nation of immigrants. At the same time, many parents viewed the schools as the main vehicle for social and economic mobility. This, coupled with the view that the state had an obligation to provide an equal opportunity for education, contributed to the push for compulsory education.

Field has suggested that educational expansion in the mid-nineteenth century should be viewed in terms of human-capital formation vis-à-vis structural reinforcement. The former notion suggests that industrial change brought about a need for technicians, skilled workers, and professionals with an increase in public education representing a response to a changing labor market. The latter argues that social disorganization created by the manufacturing system resulted in the elite establishing and supporting public education as the "means to ensure the stability of social arrangements from which they profited."¹⁰

Tyack proposes various interpretations of compulsory education, each of which can muster evidence of causality: "growth of new state rules and apparatus, religious differences expressed in political conflict, the rise of large organizations and related ideologies, the individual and social rates of return on schooling, and changes in the social relations of production and schooling."¹¹

Reforming Secondary Education

The proposals for reforming secondary education that would involve lowering the age of compulsory attendance advance a number of arguments for doing so. Some reports argue that compulsory education is an abridgement of the rights of individuals, compelling them to attend a monopolistic, self-perpetuating enterprise that subjects them to regulations that affect both what they are to learn and how they are to behave. It is argued that youth are now maturing two and a half years earlier than youth were at the time compulsory attendance laws were enacted and that such compulsion is now anachronistic.

Some reports suggest lowering the school-leaving age primarily to facilitate the removal of those youngsters who are unmotivated, disruptive, or problems. Some argue that the high rate of absenteeism both from school and from classes has made a mockery of compulsory attendance laws so that their enforcement is far too costly for the poor results achieved when students are returned to school and class.

Several reports suggest that today's high schools do not and cannot provide a complete "context for the accomplishment of many important facets of maturation." The National Commission argues that "authentic learning can take place in a wide variety of settings, many of them remote from the schoolhouse" so that a variety of educational options and alternative programs

⁹ W. Doyle. "Education for All: The Triumph of Professionalism." See: O. L. Davis, Jr., editor. *Perspectives on Curriculum Development 1776-1976*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1976. pp. 17-75.

¹⁰ A. J. Field. "Educational Expansion in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts: Human-Capital Formation or Structural Reinforcement." *Harvard Educational Review* 46(4): 521; November 1976.

¹¹ Tyack, *op. cit.*, p. 388.



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must be provided within and outside the high school. The reports conclude that high schools are especially weak in preparing youth for and providing a transition to the world of work and adulthood.

Gibbons suggests that the fact that so many students do stay on voluntarily beyond the compulsory age may mean that the peer culture draws some students to school, even if they do not attend classes when they get there, or that the school may attract students because "it is not the adult world, which can be threatening and lonely, and which may offer no jobs or only dull, menial jobs even more boring than a dull classroom."¹²

A Dearth of Alternatives

Clearly, the proposal to lower the compulsory attendance age to fourteen and the efforts to

make it possible, and even desirable, to leave high school before graduation have very serious implications for youth, educators, and society in general. The high school has indeed been a viable alternative for many youth who otherwise would be exploited by industry or government or who had no other real options. If 14-year-olds are not turned on by educational programs in the school, if they are problems for the staff, and if they interfere with the learning of their peers, then those educational processes and programs need changing so that meaningful learning and development are enhanced. The real possibility exists for schools intensifying their pushout efforts, thereby ridding themselves of those who are perceived as damaging the learning environment for others.

¹² Gibbons, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

Presently, there is a dearth of alternatives for youth, with exploitation of youth in unskilled work experience hardly a real option. There is a frightening prospect of large numbers of youth not enrolled in school, not provided with viable educational alternatives, and unable to find jobs that will be personally satisfying and start them on career ladders. The social and economic consequences of large numbers of youth having left school with only minimal competencies should cause policymakers to pause and consider the impact on society of lowering the school leaving age without developing meaningful alternatives.

Moreover, the children of the poor and those from ethnic and racial minority groups are most likely to suffer from such a policy. The urban areas that have the greatest concentrations of problems with the education of youth have the most limited resources for dealing with these challenges. Unless major reforms are made that provide for meaningful employment and alternative educational opportunities, once again minority groups will be even more disadvantaged.

Flexibility Is Needed

As with all elements of the educational process, flexibility is needed in implementing the concept of compulsory education. However, to simply lower the age of compulsory attendance without examining the potentially serious consequences for youth and society is as foolish as ignoring the needs for reform in the ways youth are currently being educated and socialized.

The National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education observed that an assumption that has shaped the high school is that "it could serve as a major if not sole instrument with which to cure our social ills" and that it alone (assuming a cooperative family) "could shape personalities, mold attitudes, raise ambitions, train skills, and impart knowledge in settings severely out of touch with other educational forces including the media and the peer culture."¹³ All of the above things need be done in the education and socialization of youth, but they can only be done when secondary schools serve as the core and the catalyst for arranging and mediating learning in optimal settings, whether in the school or in the community.

Discussion of compulsory education requires a consideration of the purposes of secondary education. What should adolescents and youth be compelled to participate in? The various reports on reform do consider the purposes of secondary education and, when explicit, set forth objectives not unlike those broad areas in the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. However worded, the purposes of education are—or should not be—restricted to the development of marketable skills to smooth transition to the world of work. Secondary schools exist to provide opportunities for self-realization and social development that will enable the individual to fill a variety of roles in society: citizen, family member, worker, and so on. Featherstone saw the high school as "the chief instrument in society for building up and making available to all youth those resources for symbolizing and generalizing experience which are the distinctive attributes of the truly educated mind."¹⁴

As such, the high school must be the catalyst for developing a variety of educational options and alternative programs within and outside the school, linking its opportunities to those of other educative agencies—the home, the church and synagogue, the community, the media, and so on. By helping to create such optional programs for self-realization and social development, schools will serve adolescents and youth better. Lowering the age of compulsory education without providing such viable options is to invite disaster for youth in particular and for society in general. [FL]

¹³ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹⁴ W. B. Featherstone. *A Functional Curriculum for Youth*. New York: American Book Company, 1950. pp. 42-43.



A. Harry Passow is Jacob H. Schiff Professor of Education and Director of the Division of Educational Institutions and Programs, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City.

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