Staying in School: A Proposal to Raise High School Graduation Rates

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Compulsory Schooling Is Motivated as a Means to Improve Long-Run Well-Being

• “A person who stops attending school at age 16 will always lack the skills and preparation to successfully compete in the workforce and function in society.”
  – Bonnie Watson Coleman, New Jersey State Assembly

• “It’s symbolically important for state laws to indicate that kids shouldn’t be leaving school before they receive a high school diploma.”
  – Sunny Deye, National Conference of State Legislatures

• “When students are not allowed to drop out, they do better.”
  – President Barack Obama
The Effects of One Additional Year of Schooling on Labor-Market Outcomes

- Percent decrease in likelihood of unemployment (mean unemployment rate: 21.8 percent): 3.6%
- Percent decrease in likelihood of being on welfare (mean welfare rate: 5.4 percent): 5.5%
- Percent decrease in likelihood of being below poverty line (mean poverty rate: 28.4 percent): 8.1%
- Percent increase in annual earnings, if working 25+ hours per week: 10.7%
Impact of Compulsory-Schooling on Education

• Raising the school-leaving age from 16 to 18:
  – Increased high school completion by 2.6 percentage points
  – Increased college enrollment by 2.8 percentage points

• Benefits for those affected:
  – Increased present-value lifetime earnings by about $100,000

• Costs for those affected:
  – Additional per-pupil case-worker costs: $4,300
  – Additional per-pupil labor costs: $12,900
  – Additional per-pupil capital costs: $11,600
How Do These Laws Work?

• Youth are particularly predisposed to impulsive behavior.

• Most dropouts regret decision.

• Compulsory-schooling laws provide opportunity and resources to address disengagement, not just through penalties.
Room for Improvement

• Students at margin of dropping out face, on average, significant lifetime returns from completing high school and considering college.

• States should be encouraged to raise the school-leaving age to 18 (allowing for exceptions), while developing programs to reengage at-risk youth.
Examples of Programs to Help Reengage Truant Youth

• **Check and Connect**
  – Support workers meet with students and parents to help plan ways to improve attendance and performance.

• **Career Academies**
  – Small learning communities, combining academic and technical curricula around a career theme with local employer partnerships.

• **High expectations, coaching, tutoring**