



GEORGIA STATE SENATE SENATE RESEARCH OFFICE

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FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE AGE OF MANDATORY EDUCATION STUDY COMMITTEE (SR 192)

Committee Members

Senator Chuck Payne, Chairman
District 54

Senator John Albers
District 56

Senator Gail Davenport
District 44

Senator Lester Jackson
District 2

Senator Lindsey Tippins
District 37

Prepared by the Senate Research Office, 2021

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STUDY COMMITTEE CREATION, FOCUS, AND DUTIES

The Senate Age of Mandatory Education Study Committee was created by Senate Resolution 192 during the 2021 Legislative Session of the Georgia General Assembly.¹ The Study Committee was tasked with determining whether the age of mandatory attendance in the State of Georgia should be raised from 16 to 17.

Senator Chuck Payne of the 54th served as Chair of the Study Committee. The other Senate members included: Senator Lester Jackson of the 2nd; Senator Gail Davenport of the 44th; Senator John Albers of the 56th; and Senator Lindsey Tippins of the 37th.

The following legislative staff members were assigned to the Study Committee: Andrew Allison, Senate Press Office; Hayley Williams, Senate Research Office; Phyllis Williams, Office of Senator Chuck Payne; and Michael Walker, Office of Legislative Counsel.

¹ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20212022/201996>

BACKGROUND

Georgia is one of only 15 states that allow students to withdraw from school at age 16. During the 2021 Legislative Session, Senator Lester Jackson of the 2nd introduced Senate Bill 3, which sought to increase the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 17. Although the Senate Committee on Education and Youth did not act on Senate Bill 3, the Committee discussed the matter extensively, which ultimately led to the creation of this Study Committee.

Members of the Georgia General Assembly have considered several bills seeking to increase the compulsory attendance age over the years. In fact, more than a dozen bills related to the compulsory attendance age have been introduced in the Senate since 2011 – at least one per biennium. (*Note: the following list is not exhaustive, but is intended to provide an overview of various measures and sponsors over time.*)

2011-2012:

- Senate Bill 14 (Senator Jackson of the 2nd): sought to increase the compulsory attendance age to 17.²
- Senate Bill 49 (Senator Albers of the 56th): sought to increase the compulsory attendance age to 16 1/2.³
- Senate Bill 208 (Senator Fort of the 39th): sought to increase the compulsory attendance age to 17; waivers for students enrolled in community or technical college at age 16.⁴

2013-2014:

- Senate Bill 21 (Senator James of the 35th): sought to expand the age range from 6-16 to 5-17; exception for students enrolled in GED course.⁵
- Senate Bill 57 (Senator James of the 35th): sought to mandate kindergarten enrollment at age five.⁶

2015-2016:

- Senate Bill 56 (Senator Fort of the 39th): sought to increase the compulsory attendance age to 17.⁷
- Senate Bill 60 (Senator Jackson of the 2nd): sought to increase the compulsory attendance age to 17 1/2.⁸

2017-2018:

- Senate Bill 77 (Senator Fort of the 39th): sought to increase the compulsory attendance age to 17.⁹

² <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20112012/108432>

³ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20112012/109157>

⁴ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20112012/112064>

⁵ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20132014/128197>

⁶ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20132014/128428>

⁷ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20152016/145726>

⁸ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20152016/146836>

⁹ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20172018/163646>

- Senate Bill 83 (Senator Jackson of the 2nd): sought to increase the compulsory attendance age to 17 1/2.¹⁰

2019-2020:

- Senate Bill 70 (Senator Jackson of the 2nd): sought to increase the compulsory attendance age to 17.¹¹

SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY AND DISCUSSION

Meeting One – August 12, 2021 (State Capitol)

This meeting outlined the ongoing discussion about raising the mandatory education age for students in Georgia from 16 to 17. Georgia is one of 15 states that currently allow students to withdraw from school at age 16. This Study Committee stems from Senate Bill 3 (2021) that was introduced in the Senate and discussed in the Senate Education and Youth Committee. Senate Bill 3 would increase the mandatory education age from 16 to 17.

The Chairman called on the following individuals to provide testimony:

- Kerry Pritchard, Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE);
- Joe Fleming, Georgia Association of Educators (GAE); and
- Grace Kim, Georgia School Board Association (GSBA)

Ms. Kerry Pritchard testified that GaDOE supports the measure to increase the mandatory education age, but thinks funding would be better used to bolster support services (i.e. counseling and administrative services) in schools, citing the inevitable cost to the state as well as an existing shortage of teachers. Senator Payne asked what the biggest obstacle in raising the mandatory education age and increasing support services. Ms. Pritchard explained that her primary concern is limited resources. She gave an example of the existing shortage of school counselors, with approximately one counselor per 408 students in Georgia. Ms. Pritchard stated that GaDOE would work toward having an updated cost estimate for the next Study Committee meeting. Senator Albers also requested data regarding dropout rates for individual schools and school districts.

Mr. Joe Fleming testified that GAE fully supports the effort to raise the mandatory education age and increasing support services. He stated that GAE does not view these as “either/or” measures, but complementary.

Ms. Grace Kim echoed Mr. Fleming’s comments and offered various data regarding the correlation between dropout rates and incarceration rates.

There was considerable discussion among committee members regarding the benefits of raising the mandatory education age versus increasing support services in schools.

¹⁰ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20172018/163718>

¹¹ <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20192020/180632>

Committee members unanimously suggested that these efforts should not be mutually exclusive and requested data from GaDOE and other attending organizations showing the estimated cost(s) of such efforts to the state.

Meeting Two – August 31, 2021 (Chatham Commissioner’s Office, Savannah, GA)

This meeting continued the discussion about raising the mandatory attendance age for students in Georgia from 16 to 17. Senator Jackson opened the meeting with remarks about Georgia’s dropout age, which was codified in the 1940s when the state’s economy was driven primarily by agriculture. He stated that our state must look past the cost of increasing the mandatory attendance age and look toward the long-term benefits.

The Chairman called on the following individuals to provide testimony:

- Ronetta Gardner, Citizen;
- Mark Stewart, Citizen;
- Coco Papy, Deep Center; and
- Tammy Lawrence, Community Cares

Ms. Ronetta Gardner testified about the importance of a complete high school education to “open the world” to our students by teaching them the skills they need to lead, listen, and research. Senator Jackson agreed, stating that the goal of Senate Bill 3 (2021) is not to increase instances of truancy, but to keep kids in an “educational mode” until they at least reach an age when they can qualify for high paying jobs.

Dr. Mark Stewart, a concerned citizen and dentist in the Savannah area, expressed to the committee his support for raising the age. He shared the story of how his father was able to attend college on a football scholarship, followed by dental school, before returning home. Dr. Stewart then described the ways in which his father’s education changed the trajectory of his life, his family, and his community. Senator Jackson stated that Dr. Stewart’s story is a reminder for the legislature to consider Senate Bill 3 as a life-changing measure. Senator Davenport agreed and acknowledged the need for young people to have examples in their communities to see beyond their circumstances.

Ms. Coco Papy testified that raising the age is a long-term investment in the future workforce and should not be measured by its potential immediate gains. She shared with the committee Deep Center’s initiatives, including the Work Readiness Enrichment Program, which works with underprivileged youths to enhance their career potential and consider what education might look like for them if their lives were different. Ms. Papy also described Deep Center’s Policy Team, which collects data on youths as they enter adulthood. One member of the Policy Team is an attorney with the Capital Defender’s Office, who shared that nearly every client on death row – particularly those with developmental disabilities – were high school dropouts.

There was lengthy discussion regarding the fiscal note for Senate Bill 3 (2021), which estimated a cost of \$12.7 million to GaDOE if all students remained enrolled until age 17.

That estimate was based on enrollment data from 2020. Senator Jackson pointed out that the average cost of keeping one inmate incarcerated is \$20,000 per year, while the cost of keeping one student enrolled in school for an additional year is less than \$5,000.

Meeting Three – September 8, 2021 (Clayton State University, Morrow, GA)

This meeting continued the discussion about raising the mandatory attendance age for students in Georgia from 16 to 17. Chairman Payne provided Committee members with research materials compiled by Chairman Payne, the Senate Research Office, and various state agencies.

The Chairman called on the following individuals to provide testimony:

- Morcease Beasley, Superintendent, Clayton County Public Schools;
- Jamilla Miller-Brown, Principal, Riverdale High School, Clayton County Public Schools;
- Alicia Dunn, Director of Counseling, Enrollment, and Postsecondary Readiness, Clayton County Public Schools;
- Larry Vincent, Executive Director, Development Authority of Clayton County;
- Marshall Jackson, Citizen; and
- Miyeca Smoot, President, Clayton County Education Association

Dr. Morcease Beasley, Superintendent of Clayton County Public Schools, testified in support of raising the age. He shared that Clayton County has an overall graduation rate of 76%, which is up from 55% ten years ago, and two of the eleven high schools in the district have 100% graduation rates. Additionally, the graduation rate for students who have completed at least one career pathway is 95%. Dr. Beasley shared a few of the potential impacts of raising the age, such as improving literacy rates, holding schools and families accountable, developing employable skills, and reclaiming potential dropouts. He explained that dropout mentality begins in the ninth grade year, and if students experience success in ninth grade, they are more likely to graduate.

Dr. Alicia Dunn, Director of Counseling, Enrollment, and Postsecondary Readiness for Clayton County Public Schools, testified in support of keeping students in school until age 17 and spoke about the Perry Center, an outreach program for Clayton County students.

Mr. Larry Vincent, Executive Director of the Development Authority of Clayton County, shared employment data for Georgia and Clayton County. He stated that even coming out of a pandemic, there are far more jobs available than there are qualified workers. He expressed support for raising the age, stating that if more Georgians stay in school and complete degrees and certificates, then there will be more Georgians filling the many jobs available.

Dr. Marshall Jackson also testified in support of the measure and shared his experience working with local youths through fraternity programs, church programs (including math and English courses for kids at the church), and athletic programs. He discussed the impact of peer pressure and its ability to influence kids to drop out because their friends have.

There was lengthy discussion regarding wraparound services across all stages of public education. Dr. Beasley told the committee that having students for an extra year would provide an opportunity to increase wraparound services since Clayton County Public Schools are more “resource rich” than they have been in many years. Dr. Beasley and Riverdale High School Principal Jamilla Miller-Brown expressed strong support for wraparound services and gave examples of successful programs for at-risk kids in their district. Ms. Miller-Brown also mentioned social workers in local school districts, who have the difficult job of tracking down students who are nearing the dropout age. She stated that raising the age would at least make it easier for social workers to deal with their caseload with a bit more leverage. Ms. Miyeca Smoot, President of Clayton County Education Association, also testified in support of raising the age, but emphasized the greater need for wraparound services to focus on the “whole child” and encouraged earlier intervention with students in elementary and middle school in addition to high school.

Meeting Four – September 22, 2021 (Chamber of Commerce, Cobb County, GA)

The Chairman called on the following individuals to provide testimony:

- Gretchen Walton, Compliance and Legislative Affairs Officer, Cobb County Schools;
- Dr. Kevin Daniel, Chief of Staff for Cobb County Schools; and
- Dr. Nicole Holmes, Chief Academic Officer, Cherokee County Schools

Ms. Gretchen Walton and Dr. Kevin Daniel testified on behalf of Cobb County School District. Ms. Walton stated that the district conducted research which found that if student success is measured by graduation rates, raising the compulsory attendance age does not meaningfully impact those rates. Ms. Walton and Dr. Daniel also raised the following questions:

1. What is the goal of raising the compulsory age? Dr. Daniel stated that, if the goal is to see more kids graduate, then research shows that students who are engaged are more likely to stay in school and earn a diploma. He suggested that increased engagement would have a stronger impact on graduation rates.
2. If research shows that raising the age will not accomplish the goal of student success, what will? Ms. Walton testified that President Obama in 2020 asked for the federal compulsory attendance age be raised to 18. The U.S. Department of Education researched the effectiveness of such an effort and found that there is insufficient evidence to support or reject the positive impact of raising the age. Ms. Walton suggested that a comprehensive approach would be more effective.
3. Are there other laws or regulations that would also need to change? For example, requirements for getting a learner’s permit, driver’s license, or a work permit?
4. How would a mandatory age increase be enforced, and by whom? Ms. Walton stated that the first step in determining this would be to examine the effectiveness of enforcing truancy cases as it is. She stated that if truancy enforcement is currently effective, and there are adequate resources, then expanding enforcement would be feasible.
5. What grade are most dropouts in when they reach age 16? Alternatively, how many credits do those students typically have at age 16? Do they have enough credits to

graduate by age 20? Ms. Walton explained that some students choose to drop out at age 16 because they have very few credits, making it mathematically impossible or improbable for those students to complete enough credits to earn their diploma before they turn 20, which is Georgia's statutorily defined maximum attendance age.

Senator Jackson reiterated that Georgia's current attendance age took effect in the 1940s and is antiquated. He also stated that parents are responsible for their children until age 18, so enforcement should not be a major obstacle. Ms. Walton stated that it is more difficult now than ever to track kids down and enforce truancy laws. She stated that Cobb County has a very low dropout rate, but has three full-time truancy specialists. Senator Davenport mentioned that school districts should already have processes in place for truancy enforcement and asked why an increased compulsory age would create such a burden. Ms. Walton responded that there are social workers assigned to each school district, but there may be fewer social workers available where resources are limited.

Senator Payne asked about Cobb's stance on increased wraparound services. Ms. Walton stated that many districts with limited student populations are in better positions to provide meaningful wraparound services, but in a highly populated district like Cobb, it is not always realistic to intervene.

Dr. Nicole Holmes testified that the need for intervention begins in middle school rather than high school. She also questioned whether increasing the age to 17 rather than 18 would make a meaningful impact on student success, as the goal of keeping students in school longer is to increase exposure to opportunities that would allow them to enter the adult world, secure employment, and ideally reinvest in the community.

Ms. Walton shared with the committee information about Cobb Horizon, which provides students with options for nontraditional high school experiences. Senator Payne asked why that wouldn't be an effective way to reel in habitually absent students who would otherwise drop out at 16. Ms. Walton stated that the problem with those students is that they will continue to be disengaged outside of school hours. Ms. Walton shared her experience leading an effort to intervene and prevent dropouts. She stated that in many cases students have unique circumstances outside of school – some are learning English as a second language, some have unstable home environments, and some are disabled or seriously ill.

Dr. Holmes and Ms. Walton agreed that engagement is vital for any efforts to increase graduation rates. Dr. Holmes also emphasized the need to focus heavily on earlier intervention because by the time students reach ninth grade they may be a "lost cause" and are already planning to drop out as early as possible.

Senator Tippins offered an explanation for why this bill has not passed in previous sessions and emphasized the importance of considering unintended consequences. He stated that there are many questions that require answers and the issue needs to be looked at from the big picture. Senator Tippins described a recent effort by Marietta High School, where 600-700 students were interviewed individually and asked what reasons would make them consider dropping out of high school, and the responses varied widely. Senator Tippins reiterated the need to dive deeper into finding out *why* students are dropping out. He went on to explain the widespread discomfort among students struggling with the culture of high

school, and stated that keeping students in a building will not necessarily extend their education, because education and engagement are choices – so in reality, not every child will receive a high school diploma because they will choose not to.

Additionally, Senator Tippins suggested that intervention with students should begin far earlier than high school or middle school – perhaps when each student enters the public education system, schools should assess whether students have learning disabilities or struggle with particular subjects more than others.

Senator Tippins also expressed concerns regarding enforcement and the cost(s) of implementing an enforcement program. He stated that any legislation related to this issue needs to clearly outline what must be done differently, which may include a variety of efforts, and what the cost(s) would be. Senator Tippins stated in conclusion that academic achievement should be the focus of this conversation, rather than attendance, which only equates to seat time.

Senator Davenport brought up her district's concern with the school to prison pipeline and read a letter from Reverend Donald K. Reed which offered support for increasing the compulsory attendance age and described the issues related to systemic racism and the development of the school to prison pipeline.

Senator Payne offered final remarks and emphasized that not a single student in the state of Georgia should be considered expendable or a “lost cause.”

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In recent years, Georgia has established various needs-based pathways for K-12 students. While test scores and graduation rates have improved tremendously, the competitive nature of the world today requires that we always seek to improve beyond yesterday's measure.

Georgia has always been recognized as an agricultural leader in the nation, and at one time, students often withdrew from school to farm full-time at age 16. While agriculture remains a leading industry in our state, farming now requires a well-educated workforce to keep up with new developments in technology and improved methods for achieving greater product yields – all while protecting the environment for future generations.

Such advancements in science and technology require a higher standard of elementary and secondary education to meet the needs of Georgia's future workforce across *all* industries.

While the Senate Age of Mandatory Education Study Committee does not propose specific legislation based on its findings, it recognizes that the issues and ideas below merit further attention. Accordingly, the Study Committee urges the legislature to consider, either in whole or in part, the following findings and recommendations:

General Findings

- The Study Committee, after hearing much testimony and reviewing compelling educational research on raising the mandatory attendance age, finds:
 - A wide array of factors lead students to the decision to drop out of high school.
 - Many factors are evidenced as early as elementary school by available indicators, such as specific learning deficiencies of either an academic or sociological nature.
 - The testimony received was consistent with the viewpoint that the pathway to dropping out of high school is clearly established by the start of a student's ninth grade year of study.
 - Early intervention to these early warning indicators is critical to transform a struggling student from failure to one who can enjoy a successful academic experience which enables them to lead an adult life that benefits them and society.
 - The solution for addressing the academic needs of individual students is clearly not to be found in a "one size fits all" approach.

General Recommendations

- *Raise the Age*: Georgia should raise the age of mandatory education, but only in conjunction with increased requirements for early intervention and wraparound services.
- *Thoughtful Planning*: Any legislation related to increasing the mandatory education age should outline a clear and reasonable plan for implementing and enforcing such a change, which may include a variety of efforts. Legislation should address any associated cost(s) and designate which party or parties should bear each administrative or financial burden.

Academic Intervention and Achievement

- *Prioritize Achievement:* Efforts to increase the mandatory education age should be tailored to improving academic achievement rather than focusing merely on attendance, which only equates to seat time.
- *Take Advantage of Existing Data:* Every child in K-12 education in Georgia is currently tracked by Georgia Milestones data. There should be a specific measure developed using this data to identify students who are at risk of dropping out of high school.
- *Earlier Intervention:* Student intervention processes should begin earlier than high school or middle school. For example, third grade math and reading comprehension scores should be used to assess whether students have learning disabilities or struggle with particular subjects, and any need for intervention should be identified and implemented at the start of fourth grade.

Wraparound Services

- *Underlying Causes:* There is a need to dive deeper in order to determine *why* students are dropping out and identify trends among root causes (i.e., boredom, family obligations, learning disabilities, general discomfort with high school culture).
- *“Georgia’s Promise”:* Georgia must commit to implementing measured improvements to services for youths who struggle at an early age of life and in their education. Once those children are identified at an early age, there should be increased wraparound services in place to foster their success by the time they reach high school. To accomplish this, Georgia should develop a tiered approach to serving these children based on psychological, social and educational needs. The higher the level of need, the higher the level of service required. The child’s parents or guardians must also be involved, especially for those with higher levels of need. Testimony from the Georgia Department of Corrections made it very clear: the majority of inmates in our adult penitentiaries arrive with no high school diploma or equivalent. Thus, we can invest during the early years of a child’s development, or we’ll be forced to invest when many of those children become adults, and at an even greater expense.

Respectfully Submitted,

**FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE AGE OF
MANDATORY EDUCATION STUDY COMMITTEE**

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chuck Payne 54th". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

**Senator Chuck Payne - Committee Chairman
District 54**