



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding
Compulsory School Age**

**Presented to the
House Education Committee**

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By

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Good morning, Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck, and distinguished members of the House Education Committee. My name is Rich Askey. I am a music educator with over three decades of experience, most of which was spent teaching music to elementary students in the Harrisburg School District. Currently, I am the President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), the state's largest union of educators and education support professionals. On behalf of our 180,000 members, thank you for inviting PSEA to provide testimony regarding proposed changes to Pennsylvania's compulsory school age.

PSEA believes that Pennsylvania's current laws pertaining to mandatory student attendance are in need of review and possible revision. PSEA views the compulsory school age policy as the baseline standard from which a myriad of educational policies impacting students throughout their academic career are built. The law determining the minimum and maximum age for school attendance is not an isolated policy. Any changes to it, therefore, need to be considered within the context of what is best for student developmental learning and preparing them for lifelong success as well as the ability of students, educators, and schools to meet any new requirements.

MINIMUM AGE FOR SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Pennsylvania is one of only two states that does not require children to attend school earlier than the age of 8. PSEA supports Governor Wolf's proposal to reduce the minimum age from the current 8 years of age to 6 years, aligning the statute with what is already common practice for most students in Pennsylvania.

Updating the state's policy for the minimum starting age for school is a good start – but it is only words on paper if not coupled with significant and sustainable investments in high-quality early childhood education. Children who participate in high-quality pre-k programs perform better in school, are more likely to graduate, and earn more throughout their lives compared to peers without access to early learning programs.

PSEA supports the Governor's proposal to increase the state investment in Pre-K Counts by \$40M and to devote an additional \$10M for Head Start. More than 97,000 eligible 3- and 4-year old children don't have access to high-quality pre-K. The \$50M investment continues

Pennsylvania's bipartisan commitment to chip away at this gap, allowing approximately 5,500 children who currently don't have access to attend a high-quality pre-K program. We urge you and your colleagues to include this funding in the final FY19-20 budget.

Recently, our organization partnered with the Pre-K for PA Campaign to survey our members teaching kindergarten about their perception of the impact of high-quality, publicly funded pre-K in school readiness. Not surprisingly, the responses demonstrated resounding support for high-quality pre-K. Our members were clear – the children who come to their kindergarten classrooms *without* having attended are starting behind their peers who did attend a quality program in terms of academic, social, and emotional development.

Given the importance of high-quality early learning for providing children opportunities for improved physical, mental, and social well-being, PSEA supports not only expanded access to pre-K but also universal full-day kindergarten to ensure there is no gap in educational services for students. According to the Administration, there are approximately 49,000 5-year old children not enrolled in school in Pennsylvania. Therefore in addition to advocating for a change in the minimum starting age for school, the Administration has also proposed conducting a study to evaluate the long-term impacts of providing universal access to free, full-day kindergarten for all children in PA. PSEA supports this data-driven approach to evaluate the policy and identify potential challenges to be addressed prior to full implementation.

MAXIMUM AGE FOR SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Governor Wolf has also called for an increase in the maximum age for compulsory school attendance from the current 17 years old to 18 years. According to the Administration, more than 4,000 17-year old students left school before graduating in the 2016-2017 school year.

Raising the maximum compulsory age, *if combined with a system of supports*, could be valuable for reaffirming the state's expectation that its students will attain certain education levels. What's more, we can help thousands of young Pennsylvanians every year who fail to earn a diploma. Unfortunately, these students face a lifetime of lost earnings, are more likely to place downward

pressure on Pennsylvania’s human service support systems, and stifle the Commonwealth’s economic growth.

While PSEA does not have an official position on the Governor’s proposal for raising the maximum compulsory attendance age to 18 years of age, we recently adopted a position of support for House Bill 112 sponsored by Representative Miller. House Bill 112 would require parental consent for anyone 17 years of age seeking to drop out of school and, without consent, requires the student to remain in school until age 18.

The primary underlying issue, however, around discussions about the maximum compulsory age is more about what can be collectively done to reduce the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate in Pennsylvania. Decades of research demonstrate that the dropout rate is the result of student, family, and school factors that collectively disengage students from formal education. The most effective prevention programs address all three areas to re-engage students in learning. Dropping out of school is a long-term process of disengagement that can be observed as early as elementary school. It is essential, therefore, to provide comprehensive support systems for students across the K-12 continuum, as well as specific programmatic interventions for students at risk of dropping out.

High-quality early learning

When students enter school without the required knowledge and skills to succeed, they start the race a lap behind and may never catch up. High-quality early childhood programs – including pre-K, full-day K, and strong elementary programs particularly through the 3rd grade that support the emotional, cognitive, and social development of children - have demonstrated a clear and consistent ability to significantly reduce dropout rates in the later years.

Student Supports

Students who leave school early often do so because they feel alienated or disconnected from the school experience and are facing physical and mental challenges. Ensuring students have access to certified pupil services professionals including school nurses, school psychologists, school counselors, home and school visitors, and school social workers is critically important to help

reduce dropout rates in Pennsylvania. PSEA urges you and your colleagues to support changes to Pennsylvania law requiring the appropriate access for students to pupil services personnel based on national standards.

Career Education

Expanding student access to high quality career education and workforce readiness programs allows students to see the connection between school and careers after graduation. PSEA appreciates the bipartisan support for increasing access to and funding for Career and Technical Education in Pennsylvania. We encourage you to continue to invest in CTE in a manner that benefits and supports all students. The best use of additional state funds to be invested for expanded access to students for career and technical education would be allocations through the formula-driven CTE subsidy and the CTE equipment grant line.

Transition programs / middle grade interventions

Transitioning into and out of middle school can be difficult for many students, and as a result, many students are retained, particularly in the ninth grade. *Ninth-grade retention strongly correlates with dropping out of high school.* It is critical that the state support schools in their efforts to prioritize and provide student transition programs for the middle years. Factors such as unsatisfactory behavior, failing grades in math or English, and low attendance rates in sixth grade can present powerful indicators of whether a student will graduate on time or at all. Interventions should support improvements in these specific areas, ensuring students catch-up academically and have access to targeted early adolescent programs. Middle school programs should address causes of dropping out in these grades and ensure that students have access to algebra, science, and other courses that serve as the foundation for high school and postsecondary success.

PSEA appreciates the bipartisan efforts over the last several years to make progress toward more equitable state funding for public education. We are eager to continue to partner with you and the Administration to expand upon Pennsylvania's system of supports available for students most at-risk of dropping out and to help ensure our students have the tools they need to succeed.