WHEREAS, Many students are dropping out of school at the age of 16; and

WHEREAS, The Delegate Assembly is the official policymaking body of the New Jersey School Boards Association; and

WHEREAS, Nearly one million students every year don't make it to graduation; and

WHEREAS, The dropout age, historically set at 16 in most of the nation, has been edging up (currently, 21 states and the District of Columbia have compulsory attendance until 18, and 11 others require attendance until age 17); and

WHEREAS, Several economists, over two decades, have found that higher dropout ages improve not only graduation rates but entrance to higher education and career outcomes (“The evidence is quite robust that raising the school-leaving age increases educational attainment,” said Philip Oreopoulos, an economics professor at the University of Toronto); and

WHEREAS, In a 2010 report on the dropout problem, Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at Johns Hopkins University, found that of the six states that increased the compulsory school age from 2002 to 2008, two — Illinois and South Dakota; and

WHEREAS, The education community understands that to prevent dropouts, schools need a broad range of supports for struggling students, as far back as middle schools, and understands that the issue of dropping out, or signing out at a certain age can be for varying issues, and schools need to intervene quickly if there are warning flags; and

WHEREAS, According to a study by Columbia University in 2005, if only one-third of high school dropouts were to earn a diploma, there would be federal savings in reduced costs for varying social programs; and

WHEREAS, When students aren't allowed to walk away from their education, more of them walk the stage to get their diploma; and
WHEREAS, Raising the dropout age is about keeping individual people with bright futures in jobs and off the streets (as reported by the Child Trends Databank, male employment rate for high school dropouts was about 52 percent, and female rates were as low as 38 percent compared to 65 percent employment for HS graduates and 84 percent employment for people with college degrees); and

WHEREAS, The dropout problem will not be solved just because of an age change, so that districts will need to be innovative with their practices and programs to keep students engaged, in order to fully support the spirit of this resolution; and

WHEREAS, The Neptune Board of Education asks that the Delegate Assembly agree to move the dropout age from 16 to 18 years old; and

WHEREAS, Education-related compulsory policies resulting from prior Delegate Assembly and Board of Directors actions are codified in the NJSBA's Manual of Positions and Policies on Education; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the Neptune Board of Education proposes the following policy language for adoption by the Delegate Assembly and inclusion in NJSBA's Manual of Positions and Policies on Education:

The NJSBA believes...

Education is the key to a productive life.

RESOLVED, That this resolution be placed on the agenda for consideration at the May 14, 2016 Delegate Assembly.

Adopted at a regular meeting
Of the Neptune Board of Education on February 24, 2016.

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PETER J. LEONARD
BOARD SECRETARY
RESOLUTION NO. 2

SYNOPSIS

Resolution No. 2 from the Neptune Board of Education in (Monmouth County) proposes new language to be added to NJSBA’s Manual of Positions and Policies on Education to support raising the dropout age from 16 to 18.

BACKGROUND

Neptune School District requested that the dropout age be raised from 16 to 18 in order to require students to remain in school until graduation. According to an article: “Staying in School: A Proposal for Raising High-School Graduation Rates,” which was prepared for the Hamilton Project of the Brookings Institution. High school drop outs fare substantially worse than peers on a wide variety of long-term outcomes. On average, a dropout student earns less money, is more likely to be incarcerated and has more physical and mental health issues than a high school graduate. Dropout rates in the United States have remained mostly unchanged, at roughly 30 percent, during the past three decades. This problem disproportionately affects low-income and minority students. Nearly half of these individuals do not graduate with their class.

Research suggests ways to improve high-school graduation rates and close the achievement gap. A key element is for all states to increase their minimum school-leaving age to 18. Studies have found that this intervention significantly improves several long term outcomes. More effort is also needed to keep students engaged in school, even at an early age. If states invest in effective support programs, they can further increase graduation rates and reduce future costs of enforcing compulsory-schooling policies. Interventions could be implemented with the goal of strengthening youth. However, could also be paid to associated costs of dealing with students with a variety of socio-economic problems. This cannot become another unfunded mandate.

High-school dropouts face daunting challenges. Skills and educational attainment are increasingly important in today’s economy, and individuals with the least education are faring particularly badly. Among recent dropouts, 16% are unemployed and 32% live below the poverty line. Dropouts with jobs earn an average of only $12.75 per hour. Dropouts aged 50 earn an average of $16.50 an hour.

Dropouts face worse social outcomes as well. For example, 33% of recent female dropouts have given birth as a teenager, 13% of male and female dropouts are separated or divorced, 32% report being unhealthy, and 22% report being unhappy, according to data from the 2005–2010 waves of the General Social Survey, which is considered a reliable indicator of societal trends.

Several studies also link a region’s proportion of dropouts to its overall prosperity. Individuals earn higher wages if they work in regions with fewer dropouts, irrespective of their own level of educational attainment. Crime rates are lower, and civic participation is higher. For these reasons, the high-school dropout rate is sometimes used as a quality measure of schools and an appraisal of the skill level of the future national workforce. This is the nation’s primary education system to promote college attendance and improve career-outcomes among youth.

Reasons for dropping out: Conflicts at home, urgent financial difficulties, and unexpected pregnancies are only a few examples. Some dropouts say they are too poorly prepared to
complete school. A majority of these individuals say they are unmotivated or uninspired to go to class. Disengaged students experience more academic troubles and record more failing grades throughout all levels of schooling than do their peers who graduate. Dropouts are more likely to be from households where parents are less active in promoting and helping with school. By the time students decide to leave, they often feel there is disconnect or lack of support between themselves, their parents and their teachers.

Many studies have found that youth are particularly predisposed to impulsive behavior, especially in situations involving immediate costs relative to long-term benefits. Similar forces seem to be at play for many students in their decisions to drop out of school. In hindsight, adults who dropped out almost universally express regret. In one study, 74% admitted that they would have stayed in school if they could make the same decision again. So although the reasons students disengage from school are important to understand and address, the basic fact remains that students miss out on long-term payoffs from doing so.

From a federal perspective, increasing the compulsory schooling age is socially desirable. President Barack Obama stated in his 2012 State of the Union address: “When students don’t walk away from their education, more of them walk the stage to get their diploma. When students are not allowed to drop out, they do better.”

While requiring states to establish compulsory-schooling laws set at age 18 is not a guarantee that this will improve the problem of dropouts, it could, however, form the cornerstone of a suite of policies to reengage the most at-risk young students; establish the right expectations for students, their families, and educators; and provide a focus for related policies to improve educational outcomes.

**RELEVANT POLICY**

File Code 1430: State Role in Education

A. The NJSBA believes the authority for management of public schools should rest with local boards of education and State authority over school districts should not exceed the scope necessary to fulfill the constitutional mandate for a thorough and efficient system of free public education. [Authority: DA 10/78-CR Graduation Requirements, DA 6/80-A, DA 6/93-SR, DA 6/95-SR]

File Code 3220 in part: State School Finance System

A. The NJSBA believes that New Jersey’s school finance system should provide state funding for the full cost of all state mandates.

File Code 6147: Statewide Graduation Standards

A. The NJSBA believes that local board policy should set local graduation requirements, and supports local control over graduation requirements. [Authority: DA 5/99-1a & b. DA 11/97 SR]

B. The NJSBA believes that all students who meet local and State requirements for graduation should be granted a state-endorsed diploma, including special education
students and students of limited English proficiency who meet the requirements of their individual IEP. [Authority: DA 10/78 CR (Graduation Requirements); DA 1/80 A; DA 12/83 4; DA 12/85-1; DA 12/89 CR (HSPT/Differentiated Diplomas), DA 11/97 SR, DA 5/00-1]

C. **The NJSBA believes** that students who fail the High School Proficiency Assessment (H.S.P.A.) twice should have the option of having an Individual Student Plan developed that will lead to marketable job skills and receive a state endorsed certificate that delineates the student’s training. [Authority: DA 6/85-CR (Proficiency Test), DA 12/89-CR (HSPT/Differentiated Diplomas), DA 5/00-1, DA 11/02-SR, DA 11/07-SR, DA 11/12-SR]

**File Code 6172: Dropouts**

A. **The NJSBA believes** in the importance of effective dropout prevention measures.

B. **The NJSBA believes** that it is essential to maintain accurate information on the student dropout problem in New Jersey and to determine methods of improving the collection and reporting of accurate data on dropouts. [Authority: DA 12/82-CR (Urban Education), DA 11/97-SR, DA 5/02-SR, DA 11/02-SR, 11/07-SR, DA 11/12-SR]

**DISCUSSION**

For decades, laws compelling school attendance have been implemented with the goals of raising educational attainment, reducing the number of dropouts, and addressing the problems myopic youth and disinterested parents have in choosing whether the student stays in school. The compulsory-schooling age sets the minimum length of time that students must spend in school before they have the legal option to leave. States generally set the laws covering compulsory attendance. The laws have been around for many decades. In New Jersey, S-658 (Pou/Ruiz) / S-2798 (Cruz-Perez) which seeks to raise the age requirement of compulsory school attendance from 16 to 18 years old, passed through the Senate Education Committee in 2014. It was then referred to Senate Budget and Appropriations. It has not been reintroduced in the state Legislature.

New Jersey’s dropout rate stands at approximately one half of one percent of the total number of school age children. While this is not a significant number of students statewide, we must do better in our efforts to reach out and assist New Jersey’s disengaged students. Why students choose to drop out of school is critical to fundamentally addressing the problem. Reasons can range from family crisis to a student who is simply not thriving in a traditional school environment. The act of dropping out must be understood not as a single event but an outcome that begins with school disengagement, often long before the student finally decided to stop coming to class.

First, the federal government should educate states on the benefits of high-school graduation and encourage legislative action to increase the minimum age at which students are legally allowed to drop out of high school to 18 years. Compulsory schooling and education in general are usually legislated at the state level. The federal government, as it has recently done, can encourage states to consider more-restrictive laws and grade states based on the extent to which
they follow federal recommendations. The federal government has a larger role in disseminating best practices and motivating policies from a cost/benefit perspective.*

Second, states should be encouraged to develop new programs to reengage at-risk youth. Compulsory-schooling laws help establish social norms and expectations for minimum school attainment. But compulsion should be a last resort alongside other policies to promote engagement and foster an environment in which struggling students are encouraged and assisted to complete high school. States should be challenged to come up with innovative plans, relevant to their communities, to keep young students engaged and learning before they approach high-school ages where they actually drop out.*

Third, state and local governments should improve the enforcement of new and existing laws. Although a strictly enforced minimum school-leaving age should, in theory, cause every student to either remain in school until the requisite age or face a penalty, compulsory-schooling laws tend not to be strictly enforced, often for reasons of cost. More resources clearly should be devoted to hiring more truant officers and attendance counselors.*

Fourth, compulsory-schooling laws should be designed to promote college attendance and improve the career outcomes of students. The motivation for a renewed focus on compulsory-schooling laws is the increasingly poor labor-market outcomes of high-school dropouts. In the past several decades, an increasingly competitive global economy and technological advancements have reduced the job opportunities available to less-educated, less-skilled workers and increased them for higher-skilled workers. This increased demand for skilled labor is reflected in the rise in earnings premiums of high-school and college graduates as compared with those of high-school dropouts. Even high-school graduates have seen large declines in their average earnings levels and employment rates relative to college graduates during the past several decades. This suggests additional opportunities for improved social and economic success through college. Increasing high-school attainment should be regarded as part of a more general goal to make youth more competitive in the labor market.*

While statistics and case studies demonstrate the potential benefits of remaining in school longer, NJSBA policy supports local control of decision making regarding management of school districts. This would include the determination of the appropriate dropout age as enacted by legislation.

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*Derek Messacar (derek.messacar@utoronto.ca) is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Economics, and Philip Oreopoulos (oreo@chass.utoronto.ca) is professor of economics and public policy at the University of Toronto. This article is based on the paper “Staying in School: A Proposal for Raising High-School Graduation Rates,” which was prepared for the Hamilton Project of the Brookings Institution (winter 2013 edition).
STATEMENT OF REASONS

1. NJSBA does not have policy specifically addressing the age of compulsory education.

2. Current state statute sets the compulsory education age at 16.

3. NJSBA policy supports local control of educational decisions and policy, which would include adopting policy to require students to remain beyond the minimum compulsory age, subject to statutory authorization.

RECOMMENDATION

The Resolution Subcommittee recommends approval of this resolution with the following substitute policy language, which would create new policy to be included in NJSBA’s Manual of Positions and Policies on Education, File Code 6147: Statewide Graduation Standards:

The NJSBA believes that local school boards should be permitted by statutory authority to mandate a graduation age beyond the mandatory compulsory age of 16.