

### Connection to the mFNC Strategic Plan: Postsecondary Access

- Action 2.2: Support impactful cross-sector legislative priorities;
- Action 4.1: Facilitate adoption of evidence-based policies and practices to drive attainment efforts; focus on gaps in access, quality, and outcomes.

**Policy:** Raise the Dropout Age from 16 to 18

#### The Issue

To reach 2 million by 2030 will require the state to achieve a high school graduation rate of 95% or an additional ~9,800 9<sup>th</sup> graders to complete high school in four years or less each year. North Carolina’s graduation rate is 87% and state data show a flatline trend on this key performance indicator, so additional focus will be required to meet this goal by 2030. While North Carolina has made significant progress on high school graduation rate, moving from 68% in 2002 to 87% in 2017, the education leaky pipeline still shows 13% of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students (15,600 students) won’t graduate high school on time. This includes **9,147 dropouts** as reported in the **2020-21 DPI data reflecting ~5,000 Black and Hispanic combined**. Based on the last five-year average, it is anticipated that ~100,000 students will dropout between 2020-2030.

Under current state law ([GS 115C.378](#)), students between the ages of 7 and 16 are required to be enrolled in school—the shortest required attendance span in the nation. High school dropouts are [more likely](#) to be unemployed and earn significantly less over their lifetime than their peers with a high school diploma or postsecondary degree. Lower educational attainment has also been linked to lower physical, mental, and cognitive health outcomes. To reduce the rate of high school dropouts, [24 states and DC](#), including a few contiguous to North Carolina, have implemented policies increasing the dropout age to 18 years old.

Demographic	Total	Female	Male	Asian	Black	Hispanic	American Indian	Two or More Races	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	White
State Totals	9147	3355	5792	82	2243	2613	81	516	15	3597

#### Affected Population(s)

Students age 16 and older.

#### Pros and Cons of Raising the Dropout Age

##### Pros:

- May positively influence educator behavior by reducing instances of educators “giving up on” or “pushing out” certain older students
- Corrects outdated attendance requirements grounded in an agrarian past in which graduation from high school was less important for financial success<sup>1</sup>
- Completers earn more and have a higher employment rate than do dropouts<sup>2</sup>
- Historically, compulsory attendance laws appear to have decreased dropout rates by 1 or 2 percentage points, while also increasing the proportion of young adults with at least some college<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rennie Center (2009)

<sup>2</sup> US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019 & (2022)

<sup>3</sup> *Stay in School: New Lessons on the Benefits of Raising the Legal School-Leaving Age* (2005)

## Cons:

- An isolated age-raising policy is unlikely to produce desired outcomes on its own; a policy change needs to be introduced in conjunction with other supports that directly address reasons for dropout<sup>4</sup>
- It may be more effective to increase supports for students with extenuating circumstances (e.g., students who must work full-time to support their families, students who take care of sick family members, etc.)
- The policy requires retention of students who may cause disruptions and impact the learning of other students because they do not want to be in school.
- Some reported gains in other states appear to be at least partially attributable to technicalities such as changes in the definition of a dropout<sup>5</sup>

## Policies in Other States

NC is one of only sixteen states with a legal dropout age of 16, and one of only six states (alongside Alaska, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, and Wyoming) with a compulsory attendance span of only 9 years.<sup>6</sup>

[Free and Compulsory School Age Requirements - Education Commission of the States \(ecs.org\)](#)

## Recent NC Legislative History (Since 2015-16)

- [H621](#) (2021) proposes raising the dropout age to 18 over a five-year period (*passed House and made cross-over / now in Senate rules*)
- [H516](#) (2021) proposes raising the dropout age to 18 (*remains in House chamber*)
- [SL2016-94](#) (Section 8.21) established a pilot program in Western school districts that raised the dropout age to 18 (early results described below)
- [H838](#) (2015) proposed raising the dropout age to 18

## Additional Context

### Dropout Trends in NC

The state dropout rate declined steadily for much of the last decade (from 3.01 per 100 9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> graders in 2010-11 to 1.53 per 100 in 2019-20) until the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, at which point the rate increase slightly (1.94 per 100). The most common reason cited for dropout (46% in 2020-21) is “attendance,” but that reason code typically is used whenever a more concrete reason is not known. Even with a declining rate, according to the [DPI data](#) North Carolina’s five-year dropout average is 9,742 students per year.

### Results of NC’s Experiment with Raising the Age

Per SL2016-94, Hickory City and Newton-Conover City Schools piloted a legal dropout age of 18 in 2015, followed by Rutherford (2017) and McDowell County (2018). Results have been mixed; one district has seen slight improvements, but there is no difference in two others (the fourth district has not implemented long enough yet for meaningful results). One district noted that the age change has given them more time to work with potential dropouts and that this extended opportunity can be a difference-maker. One district noted that results have been mixed among the districts based on the varying level of local commitment to the pilots, along with innovative alternative options being made available to students.

### Related mFNC Work Already in Progress

mFNC has submitted a proposal to the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation for support to study and build awareness of these issues, and the Foundation will decide about funding in the June 2022 timeframe.

---

<sup>4</sup> Rennie Center; [Does raising the state compulsory school attendance age achieve the intended outcomes?](#) (2013)

<sup>5</sup> For instance, a one-year increase in Illinois’s dropout age appeared to reduce dropout by 16%, but students who leave Illinois schools at age 16 are now listed as “chronic truants” and no longer as “dropouts” ([Illinois Task Force on Re-enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School: Interim Report](#), 2007)

<sup>6</sup> [Education Commission of the States](#) (2020)