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Obama Wades into Issue of Raising Dropout Age

By TAMAR LEWIN

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President Obama's State of the Union call for every state to require students to stay in school until they turn 18 is Washington's first direct involvement in an issue that many governors and state legislators have found tough to address.

While state legislative efforts to raise the dropout age to 18 have spread in recent years, many have had trouble winning passage. Last year, for example, such legislation was considered in Alaska, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland and Rhode Island — but only Rhode Island actually changed its law.

“Efforts to raise the age usually come up against the argument that requiring students to stay in school when they no longer want to be there is disruptive to other students and not fair to the teacher,” said Sunny Deye, a senior policy analyst at the National Conference of State Legislatures. “Home-school groups often oppose raising the compulsory attendance age, and especially now, in this budget crunch, there are major concerns about the fiscal impact.”

In Kentucky, where the dropout age of 16 was set in 1934, legislation to move the age to 18 has failed twice. Gov. Steven L. Beshear's State of the State message this month made another push.

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.

Given that Washington provides only about 10 percent of education financing, the federal government's effort to dictate policy in an area that has always been left to the states may raise hackles.

“I will concede that having the federal government decree this, that's going to stick hard with some people,” said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, which supports the proposal. “But with almost a third of our students dropping out of high school, we have an economic crisis and we need to be sending a stronger message about the importance of education.”

And, he said, it would not be hard for the federal government to incentivize the higher age requirement by making it a condition of states' getting Race to the Top grants or other federal education money.

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, whose study found, however, that exceptions to the law, lenience in enforcement and weak consequences for truancy could all interfere with an increase. "Ideally, you use both a carrot and stick approach, so that if students have to stay in school longer you're also providing wider curriculum options that might interest them."

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 — experienced increases in their graduation rates, and one, Nevada, had a decline.

"It's symbolically and strategically important to raise the age to 18, but it's not the magical thing that in itself will keep kids in school," Dr. Balfanz said.

Most policy experts warn that to prevent dropouts, schools need a broad range of supports for struggling students, as far back as the middle grades.

"There's a whole array of reasons students drop out: teen pregnancy, financial obligations, detachment from the school environment, boredom, feeling the curriculum has no relevance in the real world," said Jennifer Dounay Zinth, a senior policy analyst at the Education Commission of the States. "Schools need to intervene quickly if there are warning flags."