



**Pennsylvania House of Representatives Education Committee Public Hearing
Testimony on Changes to Compulsory Attendance in Pennsylvania
presented by
The Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators
June 4, 2019**

Good morning Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck, and distinguished members of the House Education Committee. My name is Dr. Richard Fry, Superintendent of the Big Spring School District and President of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA). I am here today representing PASA, whose members include school district superintendents, assistant superintendents and other public school system leaders from across Pennsylvania.

PASA supports the compulsory attendance law proposal that would lower Pennsylvania's school attendance requirement from age 8 to age 6. Pennsylvania is one of just two states in the nation (Washington State is the other) that allows families to wait until their children are age 8 to enroll them in school. The current compulsory age requirement was established in 1895 during a much different economic time in our nation's history. The law does not reflect the time needed to adequately educate children to be successful and meet the demands of today's world.

The current compulsory attendance law in Pennsylvania only requires students to attend school from age 8 to 17 before exiting the system. This is well below the minimum time needed for any student to acquire the competencies and skills necessary to be successful in life. Pennsylvania should join a growing number of states that have updated their compulsory attendance laws to ensure students receive a minimum of twelve years of education before having the ability to withdraw from their formal education.

Research suggests that an early start in formal schooling can help improve language and literacy skills, increase student achievement, enhance social and emotional learning, and decrease the need for remediation in later years. Lowering the starting age to 6 will help children build a solid educational foundation in school and prevent students from falling behind their peers who enter school at an earlier age.

Age 6 is typically the age of a first grade student. The vast majority of families in our commonwealth enroll their children in kindergarten by age 5. This is the accepted norm throughout the state and the country. In light of this, we do not anticipate the lowering of mandatory attendance to age 6 to be a burden or hardship for parents. In fact, most school districts encounter a much larger number of families wanting to start their children in kindergarten prior to age 5 as opposed to families not wanting to start their children in school until age 8.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Pennsylvania had a high school graduation rate of 87% in 2016-2017, which is the highest in the history of our state. Although our graduation rate has been rising steadily in recent years, state statistics show that approximately 13,800 students in Pennsylvania leave school without earning a high school diploma. Approximately 4,400 students dropped out of school at age 17 before graduation, which is the student's option under the current compulsory attendance law. Despite the best efforts of our high schools to encourage students to stay in school and earn a high school diploma, this trend of dropouts at age 17 continues far too often across the commonwealth. The under-education of these students leads to billions in lost earnings over their lifetime and often results in significant public expense for these individuals later in their life.

PASA believes that increasing the compulsory attendance law to age 18 will assist school districts in motivating and encouraging students to earn their high school diploma and set them on a path to a more productive future. When students realize that they must be in school until age 18, more will graduate from high school as the extra year will give school staff the time needed to assist struggling students with the requirements they need to meet to graduate. We anticipate continued growth in the state high school graduation rate if the compulsory attendance law is increased from age 17 to age 18 for high school students.

We understand that some concern has been expressed about students who do not wish to be in school until age 18. Issues of misbehavior, attendance, and discipline have been raised regarding some students with difficult histories. PASA understands the reality of these challenges, but we do not believe these concerns are a valid reason to let a 17-year-old student sign out of high school ill-prepared for life. We are committed to working with school leaders, the Department of Education, and the General Assembly to ensure all students graduate from high school.

PASA supports the proposed changes to the compulsory attendance law. I will be pleased to answer your questions.

Thank you.