Testimony
presented to the
House Education Committee
Pedro Rivera, Secretary of Education
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Compulsory School Attendance Age

Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck, members of the Education Committee, thank you for hosting today's hearing and providing us the opportunity to engage in a critical conversation on my favorite topic – improving the future of our commonwealth's students. My name is Pedro Rivera and I serve as Secretary of Education for Pennsylvania. Over the past four years, we have worked collaboratively with our partners in the General Assembly to prioritize education; a collaboration for which I am truly grateful. We have set Pennsylvania on a positive trajectory with efforts to restore critical investments in PreK-12 education, establish new accountability measures with the Future Ready PA Index, and diversify the pathways that a student in our commonwealth can choose when charting their course through high school to demonstrate that they are college, career and community-ready to graduate.

In this year's budget address, Governor Wolf re-emphasized his commitment to both Pennsylvania's students and a skilled workforce with his Statewide Workforce, Education, and Accountability Program (SWEAP) initiative, which proposes several crucial steps in laying the foundation for every Pennsylvanian to have the opportunity to succeed in a rapidly changing economy. Amending the Public School Code's Compulsory School Attendance requirements to lower the compulsory school attendance age from eight to six and to raise the dropout age from 17 to 18 is a significant step forward in solidifying this foundation for success.

Raising the Upper Age of Compulsory School Attendance to 18

As the Secretary of Education, I speak to you as someone who has achieved something that, no doubt, most of you have also achieved. An achievement that cannot be taken away once earned, an achievement that has been a cornerstone of our careers and successes, but unfortunately an achievement that nearly 14,000 of Pennsylvania's children leave school every year without obtaining. A high school diploma – a proud achievement too often taken for granted – carries an invaluable benefit as it sets the foundation for any postsecondary pathway we choose. Raising the upper age for compulsory school attendance from 17 to 18, places increased emphasis on the importance of obtaining a high school diploma in the current economic climate.
The current law was established in 1949, at a time when a high school diploma provided an opportunity for a well-paying and promising career directly out of high school – an era when many of those jobs were available even to those who did not have that diploma. Today's economic climate is vastly different. Demand for high-skilled labor and an ever-expanding technology sector has redefined what our schools must deliver to students who are entering a workforce which demands much more from them than it did in 1949. Even traditional skilled trades are increasingly technologically sophisticated, requiring students to develop additional necessary skills that allow them to compete in the rapidly changing 21st century market. This paradigm shift requires a comprehensive approach.

Just over 40 percent of current Pennsylvania residents between the ages of 24 to 65 hold a postsecondary certificate or degree, signifying their completion of a training or higher education program that built upon their high school diploma. By 2025, estimates by Georgetown University predict the demand for the percentage of the workforce to hold postsecondary certificates and degrees will sharply increase. These programs hold the key to preparing students for future success in the workforce. Access to the vast majority of these programs is only possible by demonstrating proficiency in the skills K-12 education requires. We have declared a 60 percent statewide postsecondary certificate or degree attainment goal, but getting there will be difficult without addressing a 17-year old child's ability to remove themselves from school before graduating.

In the 2016-2017 school year, nearly 14,000 students in Pennsylvania left high school without obtaining a diploma. More than 10,000 of these students dropped out before the age of 18. Over half of which were students of color, and nearly two-thirds were from low income families. Many students from these groups feel the financial and moral pressure to be providers for their families, often leading to the decision to end their educational career early and enter the workforce, only to be able to find low-skilled work as a result.

While I sympathize with these students and their families, the long-term cost of this decision is devastating to the future of students and the commonwealth. Students who leave school without a high school diploma achieve a median annual salary of just over $26,000, which pales in comparison to a median salary of $45,000 achieved by their peers who hold a high school diploma. While the immediate, if temporary relief from harsh economic circumstances for many students may seem like the expedient route, by dropping out of school without a diploma, students fail to benefit from an estimated $690,000 of lost lifetime earnings. This extraordinary loss, based on a 17-year old’s shortsighted and consequential decision to dropout, creates a lifetime setback that perpetuates the cycle of poverty in communities across the commonwealth. Whereas the student loses lifetime earning potential, the loss does not end there. These individuals’ experience higher demands for healthcare and human services later in life. Those increased demands resulted in an estimated cost to Pennsylvania taxpayers of $13.2 billion in the 2016 - 2017 fiscal year alone, not to mention the lower income tax revenue to the commonwealth from lower earnings. This is further compounded by the thousands of dollars of per pupil funding the commonwealth and local school districts have invested in the student over the course of their K-12 educational career. Without achieving a high school diploma, that funding amounts to a lost opportunity.
The statistics regarding the costs of high school dropouts to both the individual and the commonwealth are alarming, but the compulsory school age initiative means more for children than just numbers. The benefits of a child staying in school a year later to develop social, emotional, character and other career-ready and employability skills have been shown to increase the likelihood that the child will succeed in the workforce, raise a stable family, be less inclined to crime, and have greater quality of life. Requiring student attendance until age 18 is another component that contributes to a student culture that emphasizes the importance of obtaining a high school diploma for success in the future. Encouraging a student culture inclined towards high school completion is invaluable.

Students now stand to benefit from first of their kind initiatives such as PAsmart that emphasizes career and technical programs, STEM and computer science education, corporate partnerships, and apprenticeships. Adopted as part of Pennsylvania’s Consolidated State Plan under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), we continue to focus on and support robust college and career explorations during middle and high school years that will ensure a student’s coursework is better aligned with their future career goals.

Lowering the Compulsory Attendance Age to Six

Currently, the School Code requires students to enroll in Kindergarten by age eight, a requirement set in 1895. Given the importance of high-quality early childhood education, an age requirement established nearly 125 years ago is just as outdated as it sounds. Research overwhelmingly suggests an early start to formal schooling can improve language and literacy skills, increase student achievement, enhance social and emotional skill development, and reduce the need for remediation in later years. To prevent students from falling behind, the administration is proposing to lower the age when students must start attending school from 8 to 6. In a separate resolution (HR 237), we also recommend studying the benefits of providing free full day kindergarten to all children starting at age 5. Raising the upper age of compulsory attendance is a significant back end measure to increase the likelihood of postsecondary attainment; however, engaging children in the crucial fundamentals of education early in life provides the basis for students to be prepared for opportunities available to them throughout their educational careers.

This antiquated requirement no longer reflects the needs of the commonwealth’s families. Pennsylvania and Washington are the only two states to allow students to wait to begin school until the age of eight. School districts may set local standards through policy that encourages younger enrollment. The School District of Philadelphia has already established the age of six for compulsory school attendance. However, as a state, Pennsylvania is lagging behind its peers. New York, New Jersey, Ohio, and West Virginia all require children to begin school by six years old, while Maryland, Delaware, Connecticut, Washington, D.C., and Virginia have set their compulsory school ages at five. By requiring students to start at age six, Pennsylvania will experience an enrollment increase of approximately 3,300 students statewide. This means 3,300 more students with regular access to libraries, computers, and stable, nourishing meals – and it means greater support for more Pennsylvania families.
Lowering the compulsory attendance age for our younger learners is not just an acknowledgement of the research that clearly demonstrates the benefits of high-quality early educational programs to childhood development. It is also a recognition of the need to support Pennsylvania families whose challenges are diverse; whether single-parent households working multiple jobs, two-earner households struggling to make ends meet, or even grandparents stepping into the role of primary caregiver in families that have been fractured by the opioid epidemic. Working class families are placed under stress by the many economic challenges associated with healthcare, housing and other expenses associated with raising children. Coupled with the increased investments in our state-supported early childhood education programs, Pennsylvania has expanded access for thousands of students to make possible a continuum of education. Unfortunately, despite these advances, many families still do not have access or the means to place their children in high-quality early childhood education programs during crucial developmental years.

Students from lower income, higher need families enter school at an even greater disadvantage; many lack a formal preschool education or even the basic enrichment activities at home. This leads to significant achievement gaps – sustained performance discrepancies – that, if left unaddressed, can persist throughout a child’s educational and professional career. The Northwest Comprehensive Center of Education research shows that early school intervention is correlated with improved language and literacy skills, higher student achievement, enhanced social skills, and decreased need for remediation in later years. However, to be effective, schools must have the students in the classroom as early as possible.

Lowering the compulsory age to six puts Pennsylvania on competitive footing with its peers and – coupled with our increased investments in early childhood education programs, like Pre-K Counts and Early Intervention – sends a strong message to families in the commonwealth that we are committed to preparing their children to become successful students, ready to receive a world class education during the most formative years of their lives.

Pennsylvania is emerging as one of the nation’s leaders in STEM and computer science education. Our schools continue to refine their approaches, they are innovating and establishing new benchmarks to prepare our commonwealth to face head on the challenges our rapidly changing world presents. However, in order for our children to emerge as leaders in this highly technical economic climate tomorrow, they must be in school today. Aligning our compulsory school age requirement with the expectations of families, employers, and workforce needs is one of the critical building blocks in the comprehensive framework we have constructed to continue the excellent strides forward Pennsylvania has made to be best positioned for future educational and economic prosperity.

Thank you for engaging in a serious discussion on this important topic. I hope the comments offered here today will prove helpful to the committee as it considers the merits of Representative Dan Miller’s House Bill 593, which has the administration’s full support and for which we would ask for your favorable consideration. I am happy to field any questions you may have.