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Article published Oct 13, 2006

## Dropout prevention

Raising North Carolina's compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18 is just one strategy to discourage kids from dropping out of school, not a quick fix for a problem that threatens the state's future vitality and competitiveness.

A new legislative committee formed to study high school graduation and dropout rates will consider that approach and others with the goal of keeping more students in classrooms and out of the streets, House Speaker Jim Black said Monday. Comprehensive study of the issues, long overdue, could pave the way for a new attendance policy. Considering how schools can prepare for the costs of more students who stay the course must be part of the committee's process.

"Our schools are losing too many students due to discipline problems, gangs, long-term suspensions, or simply because they turn 16," Black said. "State and local leaders, educators and parents must find better ways to reduce dropout rates ... ."

Indications are that a higher school attendance age is an approach whose time has come in North Carolina, one of 28 states that still allow students to drop out at 16. The days of doing just that and earning a living without earning a high school diploma are long gone, a point often made by both lawmakers and education leaders.

Earlier this year, Board of Education Chairman Howard Lee renewed his call for change in the school attendance law. "We do students a disservice to send the message that it is acceptable to drop out of school when they are 16 years old," he said. "A high school diploma is a minimum requirement for future success, and we will continue to press for changing the compulsory school attendance age."

There also has been little progress in lowering dropout rates in Guilford County and statewide in recent years. While the state reported a 2004-05 high school dropout rate of 4.7 percent, graduation rates show only about 60 percent of ninth-grade students complete high school in four years.

That disparity between official dropout statistics and actual graduation rates isn't unique to North Carolina. Recent studies show the gap can be traced to flawed reporting of dropouts in states across the nation. A truer picture should emerge here in years to come, as the state now calculates graduation rates based on how many ninth-graders graduate with their senior class.

But ultimately, as Linda Harrill of Communities in Schools of North Carolina has said, even the

lower dropout numbers are too high. "Every year, we lose about 20,000 students," she told the News & Record last fall. "When you consider the economic implications, that's bigger than the size of some of our cities."

To make a real difference in the dropout rate, raising the compulsory attendance age must be combined with more alternatives for students, whether they've fallen behind or aren't challenged enough. But a clear message that kids over age 16 belong in school is the right place to start.

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