



# Doc H's Blog

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## Recovery of dropouts should be seen as opportunity

Senate Bill 97, which the Kentucky General Assembly passed in 2013, raises the compulsory school attendance age from 16 to 18 for all Kentucky public school districts once 55 percent of districts voluntarily adopt such a policy. This took only two weeks in 2013. Because of the vision and leadership of these local boards of education, now all Kentucky school districts have adopted a policy to raise the dropout age to age 18, with the vast majority of districts implementing the policy in the upcoming 2015-16 school year.

As a result, local districts are contacting students between the ages of 16 and 18 who have dropped out of school so the students can re-enroll in school this fall.

The recovery of young adults who have made the unwise decision of dropping out of school is an economic, moral, and civil rights imperative for Kentucky. For too long, Kentucky has chosen to forget about these students and hoped that they were able to find their way in life. For too many of these students, the path forward has led to unemployment, dependency on social programs and for some, incarceration. More than 70 percent of the inmates in our nation's prisons are high school dropouts.

The recovery of these young adults presents a tremendous opportunity for our schools and communities. The Kentucky Department of Education provided planning grants of \$10,000 to assist school districts with this transition. Implementation grants also were provided to assist districts. And it should be pointed out that students who re-enroll are included in federal, state and local per pupil funding.

As with any new initiative there have been some missteps with implementation of the recovery system. Recent media articles have drawn attention to isolated cases of students caught in the middle of the transition to raising the dropout age.

One of the transition issues is related to the GED. For many years, high school dropouts looked to the GED as an alternative to a high school diploma. The GED was not intended for students between the ages of 16-18. The GED was intended for adults who were seeking to re-enter the education system to gain credentials that could help them gain better employment opportunities.

A leading economic researcher, Dr. James Heckman, has well documented evidence that 16-18 year old high school dropouts who seek a GED have no better economic future than high school dropouts. Today's economy does not support high school dropouts. There is substantial research to show the earnings difference between a high school dropout and students who move forward to a high school diploma and postsecondary credentials.

Also, the GED has made a major shift in the level of performance expected to pass. The GED transition was based on the academic and career skills that students need in order to be competitive in the current economy. Very few of the students who have dropped out would be able to pass the new GED without

significant support in literacy and numeracy skills. What better place to receive this support than in our public schools?

While Kentucky is shifting to a higher dropout age, there will be a number of students caught in the transition over the next two years. We must seize this opportunity to be creative and innovative. School districts must look at innovative ways to provide educational opportunities to these students. Educators must use common sense. It makes no sense to tell a 17-year-old who will turn 18 in December and has only a handful of high school credits that he/she must return to school and enter traditional credit coursework. Instead, educators should look for creative alternatives. Educators should utilize the plans created as the result of the planning and implementation grants provided by the Kentucky Department of Education. Educators should look for community-based solutions that would provide academic skills in a competency-based model and career and technical skills in work-based learning model that would provide the students caught in the transition with an improved hope of job readiness.

The alternative is doing nothing and continuing to ignore these students. This alternative would only serve to sentence these students to an outlook based on poverty, despair and hopelessness.

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