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Raising the dropout age won't solve the problem

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The governor's proposal to raise to 18 the age at which a student is allowed to drop out of school is a mistake. It is based on a common misperception that education takes place as a result of intellectual osmosis by propinquity. This assumption is obviously silly. Does the governor believe that forcing someone to sit in a stadium or a gym will make him a better athlete? Does he believe that forcing someone to sit in a doctor's office will make him more healthy? Having spent 35 years attempting to teach high school students, I would beg to differ with the governor.

Education is not imposed on an individual by a **teacher** or a school system. Instead each person educates himself. Without a commitment on the part of the student, no education takes place. Granted, once a commitment has been made by the student, a **teacher** certainly can help him learn, but forcing a recalcitrant, often hostile, individual to be in school a few days a week does nothing for that student and ruins the education of those who want to be there.

A simple analogy can be made with the medical profession. If an individual with a heart condition refuses to lose weight, exercise, take prescribed medications, avoid excessive alcohol or to quit smoking, there is little that can be done by the medical profession to help him, even if he were forced to spend time sitting in a doctor's office.

Yet when it comes to education, somehow people believe that those who have no desire to learn can be forced to learn simply by keeping them registered in school and attending class one or two days a week. This assumption is not only foolish, but also expensive to the taxpayers. By holding reluctant individuals hostage to our middle-class assumptions, we create nothing but hostile individuals who rebel against the education system, the **teachers** and other

students.

What we should do is demand that anyone over the age of 14 demonstrate that he is making an effort to learn if he wishes to stay in school. If he does not, he should be invited to leave. Why should **teachers** waste their time on people who refuse to make any effort to improve their own education? If these people were merely quiet ciphers sitting in the class that would be one thing, but more often than not they are causing trouble, disrupting classes, harassing students who wish to learn, and causing general chaos. Why should those who desire to learn be denied their opportunity by individuals who have neither desire nor respect for education?

The two things a student needs to succeed in education are basic ability and a willingness to work. Even those with limited intellectual ability will succeed if they have a desire to work hard, but those who refuse to take part in their own education are wasting their time, the time of their **teachers** and classmates, and the taxpayers' money by remaining in school.

Would a coach of an athletic team insist that people who have no desire to play be on his team? Why should he waste his time on someone who refuses to come to practice or, when he does come, refuses to participate in any meaningful way? In this country we have a fantasy about education. We think it is appropriate for everyone and that everyone will appreciate it and benefit from it. This is nonsense.

Education is an active, not a passive, experience. Each of us

educates himself. Without a commitment on the part of the student, no education takes place. We should not waste time nor money on anyone who does not wish to be in school. On this issue the governor is totally wrong.

However, trying to be positive, I would make this suggestion. Students who wish to engage in what are basically apprenticeship programs in areas such as carpentry, plumbing, electricity, etc., should be allowed to do so without having to take mandatory academic classes. During the years that I taught, I saw many students who were doing quite well in vocational programs yet dropped out of school because they failed some mandatory liberal arts classes in which they had no interest. I thought at the time, and still think, that imposing our middle-class values on these students, forcing them to jump through liberal-arts hoops, was the reason that they were never able to finish the programs that they really enjoyed and would have benefitted from.

These students should be encouraged to take academic programs but, if they choose not to, should not be denied the opportunity to succeed in hands-on vocational programs. We must recognize that different

people have different interests, and people should not be forced to achieve success in what are relatively arbitrary liberal-arts requirements in order to get a decent vocational training.

I will admit that if I had never taught, I would probably think as the governor does. However, having spent 35 years in public education, my experience tells me that the governor is wrong. His intentions, I am sure, are the best. But if he had the practical experience that I and many of my colleagues have had, I think his perception would be different.

Education policy is always set by those who have benefited from - and probably enjoyed - school. They were never in classes with those who had little or no interest in school and were frustrated by academics. Those people will become taxpayers too, and someone should speak for them.

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