

Options To Discourage Dropouts

Urged

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A review of California's compulsory school attendance law has concluded that students should be required to stay in school until age 18 — or 16, if they satisfy graduation requirements — but that "desirable options" should be made available to the disenfranchised.

Initiated in response to increasing concern about the high dropout rate among high school students, the study was completed by the state Educational Innovation and Planning Commission at the direction of the state Board of Education.

While supporting the compulsory attendance law, the commission warned that the schools are not providing adequate incentive to low-achieving potential dropouts or to high-achieving "gifted" students. Lowering the compulsory high school "exit age" has been suggested by some educators as one means of dealing with both groups, particularly those students who disrupt school for others who want to learn.

"Special concern has focused on students who, for different reasons, are unable to perform well in school," the commission concluded. "Seen alternatively as victims or victimizers, these students either drop out of school or stagnate until they can leave school legally. Some turn to disruptive anti-social acts.

"A further complication is the growing number of students classified as above average or gifted and talented, who are functioning successfully but who are increasingly disenfranchised with their classes and look for ways to leave school early."

The commission said lowering the age for compulsory attendance would "aggravate" the problems of low-achieving youngsters "by passing greater numbers of undereducated, undirected youth into a society already plagued by underemployment and crime."

And, the commission concluded, most students drop out of school because "the system does not work for them," although they have "a limited and unrealistic view of their future."

The commission said many students find school a largely useless, unstimulating experience. Some members said the compulsory attendance law discourages solutions because "it does not give educators the incentive to make schools more attractive to students."

Further, the commission said,

students are infrequently consulted about their educations. "Students operate in a system created and directed by adults," the commission said. "It is unfair to ask our youths to bear the consequences if the system is not functioning properly."

Among other criticisms, commission members said:

- An educational system designed for children is ineffective for teenagers who mature at an early age.

- Students who want an education are hampered by "disruptions caused by alienated, hostile, captive students" who don't want to be in school.

- "It is apparent to concerned and informed observers that many high school students — those who are gifted and creative as well as those who are dropouts or habitual truants — find little that is relevant in their present school environment."

- School counselors spend "too much time dealing with discipline cases rather than providing positive guidance and counseling."

The commission suggested several possible solutions to the dropout-disenfranchisement problem, including:

- "Emphasizing educational alternatives that excite, challenge and retain students," with high emphasis on science and technology.

- Allowing young people "to exercise some autonomy and control over their lives." According to studies cited by the commission, students who otherwise might have dropped out were staying in school by the use of flexible scheduling, home and community study.

- Expanding exceptions to attendance requirements, "including opportunities to participate in work, travel and independent study."

- Advising students in more detail about available options, such as night classes, state and community college courses, early graduation via "faster accumulation of required credits" and work-study programs.

- Revision of existing curricula and "rethinking" archaic graduation requirements to more accurately reflect modern technology.

The commission also criticized the current system of "Average Daily Attendance," which is used to determine state financial support for local schools. Under the attendance system, schools are reimbursed for absent students only if the absences are for illness — a system which the commission said is "narrow" and gives local districts little incentive to devise educational options for students who function best outside the traditional classroom.

The commission emphasized that little can be accomplished to remotivate disenfranchised students without money, and "steps should be taken to increase the awareness of the voters of the negative implications recent funding restrictions have had on the schools."

Of particular concern to the

commission is the loss of special programs such as summer schools, counseling and expanded curricula. "Such programs help to alleviate the problems faced by potential dropouts or disenfranchised gifted and talented youths who do well but prefer other teaching and learning styles than currently exist in most schools," the commission said.

Because of financial cutbacks largely caused by Proposition 13, the commission noted that California has dropped from fifth to 44th

among states in the nation "in per capita income support provided for the schools." The commission found that drop "alarming, especially in a state economically and educationally able to achieve the highest ranking."

And, the commission said, a clear definition of the role of schools in today's society — with its high divorce rate and increased numbers of working parents — "does not exist."