

## Obama's dropout proposal gets mixed reception

President Barack Obama's proposal to require students stay in school until they graduate or turn 18 is a boon to Kentucky lawmakers trying to raise the minimum dropout age.

In Kentucky, students can drop out at age 16. Ohio and Indiana already have minimum dropout ages of 18, although the laws do allow several exceptions.

### • **Should students stay in school until they're 18?**

The White House says studies show students are more likely to graduate if they are required to stay in school until age 18. But that doesn't appear to have helped Ohio. The dropout rate in the Buckeye State (4.3 percent) is actually higher than Kentucky's (2.8 percent) and the national average (4.1 percent), according to a 2011 report by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Obama made the proposal during his State of the Union Address Wednesday night. It was among several reforms he said are needed to better prepare kids for college and careers and was meant as "encouragement" -- not a mandate -- for the 30 states that don't already mandate it, according to the U. S. Department of Education.

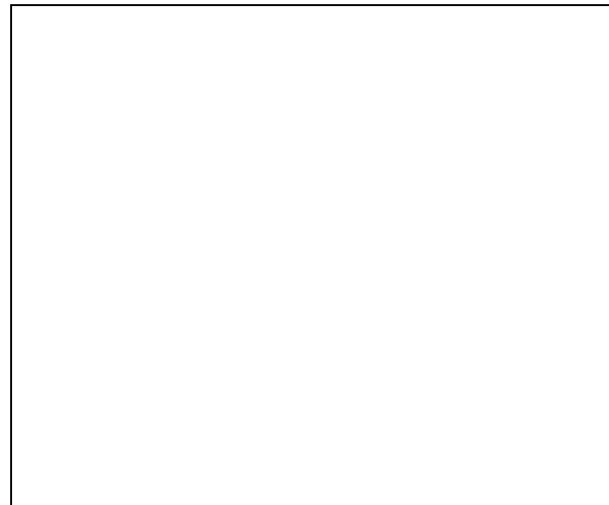
"We ... know that when students don't walk away from their education, more of them walk the stage to get their diploma," he said. "When students are not allowed to drop out, they do better."

Although the president's comments were met by applause, some education officials and lawmakers have concerns. Most say it's a good idea in theory but are worried about the logistics, financial costs, and impact on the student.

"I'm afraid his solution is at best a half-solution," said Jack Jennings, president of the Washington D.C.-based Center for Education Policy. "You can require kids to stay in school but that doesn't mean they would care about being there."

He said to truly curb the dropout rates, schools have to do a better job helping kids through transitions -- especially the move from middle school to high school. They have to offer engaging curriculum that keeps kids excited about learning. Schools and communities also need to address

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social problems (gang involvement, economic trouble, etc.) that make students drop out. Some are pressured by parents to stay home and work.

All of these things, Jennings said, cost money. And right now, no one is willing or able to pay for it, putting the president in a tough position with this proposal, he said.

In Kentucky, where the dropout rate is 2.8 percent, a House committee approved a bill Jan 17 that would raise the dropout age to 18 beginning in 2017. The full house may vote as early as next week. Proponents of the bill say the current law is outdated. They say most jobs require a diploma.

They also think the proposal would help the state attract businesses because companies look at graduation rates when relocating.

Bill sponsor Jeff Greer, D-Brandenburg, said the economic and social costs of dropping out are high.

“At age 16 they are not mature enough to make that decision,” he said. “Over 75 percent of our prison population does not have a high school diploma. When they can’t get a basic fast food job now, without having a high school diploma, they look to other things. (The bill) also creates a better-trained workforce that makes our state more marketable when it comes to landing manufacturing jobs here.”

Some legislators, however, have expressed concern about the financial cost of keeping

students in school when they don’t want to be there.

The bill still must pass the Kentucky Senate. A similar measure died there last year.

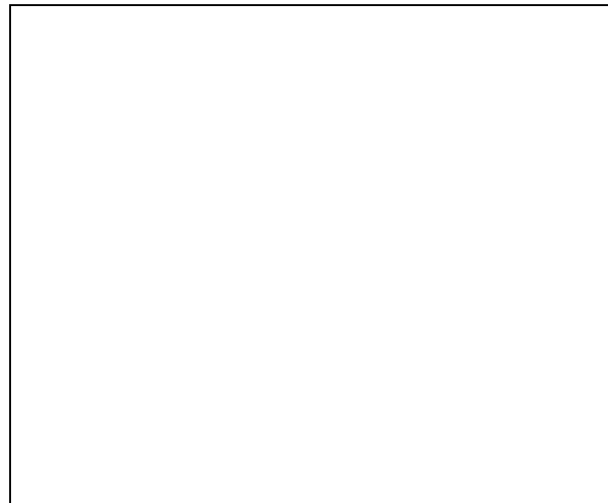
Nationwide, 20 states and the District of Columbia have mandated minimum dropout ages of 18. Nineteen states allow kids to drop out at age 16 and 11 states have a minimum dropout age of 17.

The Obama administration has no plans to pull funding for states that don’t comply, said John White, a spokesman for U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan’s office. But at a time when states are collectively signing onto national efforts to get students ready for college and careers, this issue shouldn’t be left unaddressed, he said.

“The president just wants to raise the bar,” White said.

In Ohio, the dropout age has been 18 since at least 1953. Despite the higher age,

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Ohio's still struggles with a dropout rate of 4.3 percent.

Ohio students can get permission to drop out before 18 for these reasons:

- Mental or physical conditions.
- They are being instructed at home.
- To work full time.

If a student stops attending, the parents can be charged with a misdemeanor. Repeated violations can result in jail time.

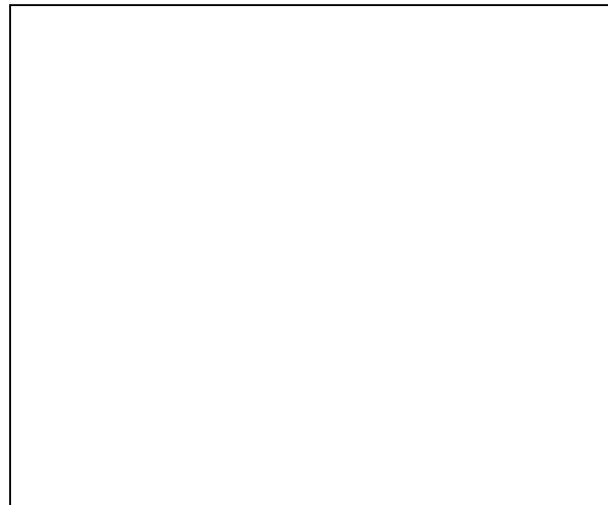
Ohio Department of Education spokesman Patrick Gallaway applauds the proposal but stresses that safety net programs be in place to help keep kids stay in school, regardless of their age.

Adele Craft, who offers GED classes through her East End Adult Education Center, said many of the kids who come to her dropped out because of a learning disability, bullying or trouble at home.

"Almost everyone who does drop out has a reason, not just because they feel like staying in bed."

Kaitlyn Ernst contributed

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