

WEST VIRGINIA CODE: §18-8-6

§18-8-6. The High School Graduation Improvement Act.

(a) This section is known and may be cited as "The High School Graduation Improvement Act."

(b) The Legislature makes the following findings:

(1) West Virginia has a dire need to implement a comprehensive approach to addressing the high school drop-out crisis, and to develop policies and strategies that successfully assist at-risk students to stay in school, earn a high school diploma, and ultimately become productively contributing members of society;

(2) The current demands for a highly skilled workforce require a high school diploma at the very minimum;

(3) The state has several dynamic programs that are capable of actively engaging students in learning, providing students with a sense of relevancy in academics, and motivating students to succeed in school and ultimately earn a high school diploma;

(4) Raising the compulsory school attendance age alone will neither increase the graduation rate nor decrease the drop-out rate. It is imperative that the state shift the focus from merely compelling students to attend school to instead providing vibrant and engaging programs that allow students to recognize the value of a high school diploma or workforce credential and inspire students to graduate from high school, especially those students who are at risk of dropping out of school;

(5) Investing financially in this focus shift will result in the need for fewer resources to be committed to enforcing compulsory attendance laws and fewer incidents of disruptive student behavior;

(6) Absenteeism is proven to be the highest predictor of course failure. Truant students face low self-confidence in their ability to succeed in school because their absences cause them to fall behind their classmates, and the students find dropping out easier than catching up;

(7) There is a strong relationship between truancy and dropping out of high school. Frequent absences are one of the most common indicators that a student is disengaging from the learning process and likely to drop out of school early. Intervention after fewer absences is likely to have a positive impact on a student's persistence to graduation;

(8) Students cite many reasons for dropping out of school, some of which include engaging in drug culture, lack of positive influence, role model or parental involvement, absence of boundaries and direction, lack of a positive home environment, peer pressure, and poor community expectations;

(9) Dropping out of school has a profound negative impact on an individual's future, resulting in limited job choices, substantially lower wages and less earned over a life-time than high school graduates, and a greater likelihood of depending on public assistance and engaging in criminal activity;

(10) Career-technical education is a dynamic system in West Virginia which offers numerous concentrations that provide students with industry-recognized credentials, while also preparing them for post-secondary education;

(11) All career-technical education students in the state have an opportunity to earn free college credit through the Earn a Degree-Graduate Early (EDGE) program;

(12) The current high school graduation rate for secondary career-technical education completers is significantly higher than the state graduation rate;

(13) Students involved in career-technical education learn a marketable skill, are likely to find jobs, and become prepared for post-secondary education;

(14) A significant number of students who could benefit from participating in a career-technical program are denied access due to a number of factors, such as dropping out of high school prior to enrolling in career-technical education, requirements that students repeat academic courses that they have failed, and scheduling conflicts with the high schools;

(15) There has been a dramatic change over the years from vocational education, which was very basic and lacked high level skills, to the career-technical programs of today which are computer based, require national tests and certification, and often result in jobs with high salaries;

(16) West Virginia's employers and technical education job placement rates show that the state needs graduates with technical skills to compete in the current and future job markets;

(17) The job placement rate for students graduating from career-technical programs statewide is greater than ninety-five percent;

(18) Among the reasons students cite for dropping out of school are feelings of hopelessness when they have failed classes and can not recover credits in order to graduate;

(19) The state offers full-day programs consisting of credit recovery, hands on experiences in career-technical programs and basic education, which are valuable resources for re-engaging students who have dropped out of school, or have a potential for or are at risk of dropping out;

(20) A student is significantly more likely to graduate from high school if he or she completes four units of training in technical education;

(21) Learning is increased and retained at a higher level if the content is taught through a relevant and applied experience, and students who are able to experience academics through real life projects have a higher probability of mastering the appropriate concepts;

(22) Programs such as "GED Option" and "Techademics" are valuable resources for providing relevant and applied experience for students;

(23) The Techademics programs administered by the department of education has embedded math competencies in career-technical program curricula whereby students simultaneously earn credit for mastery of math competencies and career-technical courses;

(24) Students would greatly benefit if West Virginia were designated as a "GED Option" state. Currently a student is ineligible to take the General Educational Development (GED) exam if he or she is enrolled in school, which requires the student to drop out of high school in order to participate in a GED preparation program or take the exam, even if the student desires to remain enrolled;

(25) A GED Option state designation by the American Council on Education would allow students in this state to remain enrolled in school and continue acquiring academic and career-technical credits while pursuing a GED diploma. The GED Option would be blended with the West Virginia virtual schools or a career-technical education pathway. Upon completion, rather than being a dropout, the student would have a GED diploma and a certification in the chosen career-technical or virtual school pathway;

(26) The Mountaineer Challenge Academy is a positive option for students at risk of dropping out of school, as it provides students with structure, stability, and a focus on positive change, all in an environment where negative influences and distractions can be left behind;

(27) Students attending the Mountaineer Challenge Academy would greatly benefit if the GED Option were implemented at the Academy;

(28) The Health Sciences and Technology Academy (HSTA) program prepares rural, minority and economically disadvantaged students for college and careers in the health sciences, and demonstrates tremendous success in its high percentage of students who graduate from high school and participate in post-secondary education.

(29) The West Virginia GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) program is aimed at increasing the academic performance and rigorous preparation of students, increasing the number of high-poverty, at-risk students who are prepared to enter and succeed in post-secondary education, and increasing the high school graduation rate;

(30) The GEAR UP program successfully aids students in planning, applying and paying for education and training beyond high school;

- (31) Each dropout involved in drugs or crime or dependent on public assistance creates a huge fiscal burden on society;
- (32) The intense treatment and individual monitoring provided through the state's juvenile drug courts have proven to be highly effective in treating drug addictions, and rehabilitating drug-addicted youth and improving their educational outcomes;
- (33) Services provided by juvenile drug courts include substance abuse treatment, intervention, assessment, juvenile and family counseling, heavy supervision by probation officers including school-based probation officers who provide early intervention and diversion services, and addressing some of the underlying reasons why students are not successful in school;
- (34) School participation and attendance are required for students participating in juvenile drug courts, and along with academic progress are closely monitored by the courts;
- (35) Juvenile drug courts are an important strategy to improve substance abuse treatment outcomes, and serve to save the state significant cost on incarceration of the juveniles, along with the future costs to society of individuals who remain substance abusers;
- (36) Juvenile drug courts produce greater cost benefits than other strategies that address criminal activity related to substance abuse and addiction that bring individuals into the criminal justice system;
- (37) Funding for the increased number of students enrolled in school during the 2010-2011 school year due to the compulsory school attendance age increase established by this act will not be reflected in the state aid formula allocation until the 2011-2012 school year, which will require additional funds to be provided to county boards for the 2010-2011 school year to accommodate the increased enrollment;
- (38) The state will benefit both fiscally and through improved quality of life if scarce state resources are targeted toward programs that result in providing a competitive advantage as adults for those students who are at risk of dropping out of school;
- (39) Funds invested toward education and ensuring that students complete high school pay tremendous dividends through the moneys saved on incarceration, unemployment and underemployment as those students reach adulthood;
- (40) Increasing the compulsory school attendance age will have little effect in aiding students to complete high school if additional resources, both fiscal and programmatic, are not dedicated to supporting student achievement, providing real-life relevancy in curriculum, and engaging students in learning, particularly for those students who have become so disengaged from school and learning that they are at risk of dropping out of school; and
- (41) Schools cannot solve the dropout problem alone. Research shows when educators, parents, elected officials, business leaders, faith-based leaders, human service personnel,

judicial personnel and civic leaders collectively work together they are often able to find innovative solutions to address school and community problems. (c) The Legislature intends as follows:

- (1) The state will continue to explore diverse instructional delivery strategies to accommodate various learning styles and will focus on a state-wide dropout intervention and prevention program to provide support for students having academic difficulty;
 - (2) A general credit recovery program shall be implemented statewide, including delivery through West Virginia virtual schools;
 - (3) The state board will continue to improve the way career-technical education is offered, including expansion of the Techademics program;
 - (4) Up to five additional juvenile drug courts shall be established by January 1, 2012;
 - (5) The state will invest additional state funds and other resources in strategies and programs that engage disconnected and discouraged students in a positive learning environment as a critical first step to ensuring that students persist and graduate;
 - (6) County boards will develop plans to demonstrate how they will use available funds to implement the intent of this section; and
 - (7) The state board shall develop a statewide system in electronic format that will provide schools with easily identifiable early warning indicators of students at risk of not graduating from high school. The system shall be delivered through the uniform integrated regional computer information system (commonly known as the West Virginia Education Information System) and shall at a minimum incorporate data on the attendance, academic performance and disciplinary infractions of individual students. The state board shall require implementation of the system in Local Solution Dropout Prevention and Recovery Innovation Zones along with a plan of interventions to increase the number of students earning a high school diploma, and may utilize the zones as a pilot test of the system.
- (d) Each county board shall include in its alternative education program plan required by section six, article two, of this chapter a plan to improve student retention and increase the graduation rate in the county. The plan is subject to approval of the state board, and shall include strategies the county board will implement to achieve the following goals:

- (1) Increasing the graduation rate for the county;
- (2) Identifying at the earliest age possible those students who are at risk of dropping out of school prior to graduation; and
- (3) Providing additional options for delivering to at-risk students academic credentials and career-technical training if appropriate or desired by the student. The options may include such programs as Techademics, Earn a Degree-Graduate Early (EDGE), Health Sciences and

Technology Academy (HSTA), Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), truancy diversion, early intervention, dropout prevention, prevention resource officers, GED option, credit recovery, alternative learning environments, or any other program or strategy approved by the state board.

(e) As soon as is practicable the state superintendent or his or her designee shall pursue designation of West Virginia as a "GED Option" state by the American Council on Education. If so designated, the state board shall:

(1) Develop and implement a program whereby a student may pursue a GED diploma while remaining enrolled in high school; and

(2) Ensure that the GED Option is offered to students attending the Mountaineer Challenge Academy.

(f) The state board shall continue to expand:

(1) The Techademics program to include each major academic subject and increase the academic credit available through the program to students; and

(2) The Health Sciences and Technology Academy to ensure that the program is available for any school containing any of the grade levels of eligible students.

(g) The state board shall ensure that the dropout information required by section twenty-four, article one-b, chapter fifteen of this code is provided annually to the Mountaineer Challenge Academy.

(h) Some career and technical education programs only accept students in certain upper high school grade levels due to lack of capacity to accept the students in the lower high school grade levels. This can be detrimental to efforts to keep students identified as at risk of dropping out of school prior to graduation in school. Therefore, those career and technical education programs that limit enrollment to students in certain upper high school grade levels may make exceptions for those at risk students and enroll any of those at risk students who are in grades nine and above.