

New Hampshire Ups the Drop-Out Age to 18

Judy Fournier

"I think education is important, I just didn't like the school," Maiya told me recently. But she wasn't just expressing a minor preference. She experienced so much bullying in school and got so little support that she dropped out – despite her belief that education is important.

Maiya is not alone. There are thousands of young people in New Hampshire for whom regular high school is not a good match. They complain that schools are full of rules and regulations that seem trivial and unrealistic. They say that there are too many students in classes – forcing everyone to learn at the same pace or be left behind. Some students need to (or want to) work to support their families. They may come from families who are not able to support them to stay in school.

At what age should young people be allowed to drop out? Is the state responsible for meeting the needs of young people who do not want to

stay in high school?

In 2009, New Hampshire legislators put into effect a law (SB 18) that increased the legal dropout age from 16 to 18. Now, according to this new law, teenagers who want to leave school must enroll

in an alternative learning program. They can get their GED (general educational development) certificate, earn high school credits through the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, or earn a high school credential through an adult diploma program.

One of the programs they can enroll in is the

one I work at—Project LIFT. We offer GED preparation for adults and high school students. Funding for our high school age students comes from the school districts that would have been funding their education had they stayed in school. Once these students pass their GED, they are considered "completers." Having these alternative options available to high school students has helped reduce the dropout rate in New Hampshire.

Most students who attend Project LIFT, who are under 18 years of age, are grateful for the chance to learn in an environment that is very different from their former high school.

One student, Adena, who felt alienated and bored in high school said about Project LIFT: "Here I am learning and remembering things." Another remembered being bullied in high school, but at Project LIFT, she says, "People don't pick on me here."

Many adult education programs in the state do not favor SB 18. Serving these younger students can be overwhelming. The classroom dynamics changes drastically when adding teens to the mix with adult learners. Program coordinators have to cope with more administrative details to track the young people who fall under SB 18.

We feel the multi-generational classroom has far more benefits than negative aspects. Having adults in the same classroom adds a higher level of expected appropriate behavior than a room full of teens only. Adults act as role models for the younger students when struggling with a tough subject. A young person hears about how hard it is to learn new things once a student is an adult and has been out of school for many years; how they cannot find work because they didn't finish school. Adults offer advice to younger students

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Judy Fournier (standing in the middle) with some of the students from Project LIFT.

and listen to their challenges and offer encouragement. Younger students are often found helping adults with instruction in math or computer skills. In our classrooms, we are not judgmental; we expect tolerance and patience from everyone involved.

Knowing that each student is unique and often comes to us because regular schooling has failed them, we take time to assess everyone who applies for our program. We check skill levels, determine what learning challenges they may have, and how they came to become disengaged from the public school system. We ask about hobbies, past educational experiences, living arrangements, family dynamics, and future dreams of each student. We then devise a plan that takes into account the student's goals, work schedule, and transportation issues.

Those attending Project LIFT proceed at their own pace and are encouraged to discover their own learning style. We offer academics in a flexible environment, but we also teach respect,

self-control, goal-setting, and acceptance of all types of learners. Having a counselor in the program is important when working with such a diverse crowd. If someone is having a tough day for whatever reason, the counselor can recognize this and intervene.

Laughter, studying, sharing personal issues, and field trips are all part of the program. The environment is relaxed; we hold classes in an apartment building. We use the kitchen to share meals; we share chores such as dishes and shoveling snow. We encourage students to take breaks every 45 minutes and take walks. Because these students aren't staying for long periods of time, we expect them to complete their homework and classroom work. We always celebrate student successes – whether they are large or small.

Some people in New Hampshire opposed raising the compulsory education age to 18, saying that 16 is old enough to decide whether to stay in school or not. But the law didn't just force people to stay in the same school environment that wasn't working for them. It created alternatives. Maiya, the student I mentioned earlier who didn't like school, acknowledged, "If it weren't for this law making us stay in school, I'd be out." But she's not out. She's found a program that works for her and she's on the road to getting the education she wants and needs.

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Sources: This article was compiled with information from: Danforth, Scott and Terry J. Smith. *Engaging Troubling Students, A Constructivist Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005. and Seltzer, Judith. "Intergenerational relationships: New questions call for new data." National Council on Family Relations FF50 (2011): F2-F7.NH Drop out numbers: <www.education.nh.gov/data/dropouts.htm>; Drop out rate has been reduced: <newhampshire.watchdog.org/7971/nh-drop-out-rate-not-dropping-as-quickly-as-government-claims/>