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Summary:

As the legislature considers lowering Oregon's compulsory school age from seven down to five, Oregonians should ask hard questions about what our compulsory schooling system is really doing for, and to, the children it captures now.

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“...[W]e shouldn't make kids ready for Kindergarten; we should make Kindergarten ready for kids....

[C]reative kids aren't Kindergarten-ready because they don't conform.”

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Should Compulsory Schooling Start at Age Five?

By Steve Buckstein

Every state in the union has what are known as [compulsory school attendance laws](#). Oregon currently requires that virtually every child attend school from age seven to age 18. A bill before the State Senate, [SB 321](#), would decrease the compulsory school age from seven down to five.

Before deciding whether this is a good idea, it may be time to reconsider why we compel parents to send their children to school at all. We might ask ourselves some hard questions, including:

- How does compulsion further our interest in encouraging a passion for learning in our children?
- In a free society, shouldn't we be looking for ways to reduce compulsion, rather than to increase it?
- If compelling seven-to-18-year-olds to attend school [isn't working very well](#), why compel five- and six-year-olds to attend also?"

Some of the [written testimony](#) from professional educators in favor of SB 321 assumes that the bill would reduce the “compulsory education” age. But we can't really compel students to learn, so is the next best thing compelling them to sit in classroom seats?

Schooling may facilitate good education, but they are not always the same thing. As Harvard Professor Lant Pritchett [says](#), “Good governments do schooling, but nearly all bad governments do it, too.” He is talking here about different national governments since his field is global development, but the thought applies to our state and local governments as well.

Pritchett goes on to say, “We know that if you impose a top-down educational system, often it breaks down—you get a bureaucracy that doesn't work, and the outcomes get worse than if you allow local control.” If this is true in Oregon, then former Governor John Kitzhaber's [flawed Oregon Education Investment Board](#) approach may be doing more harm than good.

More and more Oregon parents and teachers are standing up to oppose top-down approaches such as new high-stakes tests designed to measure how well public schools are teaching the controversial [Common Core Standards](#).



The so-called [Smarter-Balanced tests](#) are on track to be given to students in grades three through eight and high school juniors to measure how well they've mastered reading, math, writing, listening, research, and thinking. [Official estimates](#) are that over 60 percent of students may fail the tests this spring.

[Dr. Yong Zhao](#), Director of Global and Online Education at University of Oregon, is a critic of both high-stakes testing and the Common Core Standards themselves. He gave an entertaining [51-minute presentation](#) to the Senate Education Committee on February 10.

While Dr. Zhao doesn't have a formal position on whether Oregon's compulsory school age should be lowered, he does make the points that we shouldn't make kids ready for Kindergarten; we should make Kindergarten ready for kids, and creative kids aren't Kindergarten-ready because they don't conform. Lowering the compulsory school age to five may put more kids in Kindergarten seats, but it will do nothing to make Kindergarten ready to meet their individual needs.

Dr. Zhao's presentation stood in stark contrast to that of Oregon "[education czar](#)" [Nancy Golden](#) who spoke before him at [the hearing](#), and that of Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction [Rob Saxton](#) who spoke after him. It should be noted that Golden and Saxton were handpicked by Governor Kitzhaber to help promote his top-down, birth-through-graduate school vision for education in Oregon.

Questioning the value of compulsory schooling is nothing new. Here is what a past president of the American Psychological Association, Knight Dunlap, said in his 1929 article, [Is Compulsory Education Justified?](#):

"...education is a good thing for us, and so we wish to bestow its blessings on others. If they will not take it gladly, we will make them take it: for their own good..."

So, before we agree to reduce Oregon's compulsory school age from seven down to five, let's ask the hard questions about what our compulsory schooling system is really doing for, and to, the children it captures now.

Steve Buckstein is Founder and Senior Policy Analyst at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research organization.

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