

Study suggests keeping students in high school longer, better 'at-risk' programs

February 4 2013, by Kim Wright

Raising the age at which students can legally drop out of school could determine their future earning power and quality of life, according to a new paper by U of T Mississauga economics professor Philip Oreopoulos.

An average dropout earns less money, is more likely to spend time in jail, and is less healthy, less happy and less likely to be married than a high school graduate, the paper reveals. "There appears to be a large expected return from being nudged to stay in school longer," Oreopoulos said, in an interview. "This raises the question of why we have to nudge in the first place, if the returns are so high?"

Prompted by U.S. president [Barack Obama](#)'s 2012 State of the Union call for every state to keep [students](#) in school until after they graduate or turn 18, Oreopoulos and co-author Derek Messacar, a PhD candidate at U of T, studied 15 years of literature in the areas of education and compulsory school-leaving age. Their paper, *Staying in School: A Proposal for Raising High-School Graduation Rates*, appears in the 2013 winter edition of [Issues in Science and Technology](#).

Consistently, studies find large socio-[economic gains](#) for students who stay in school longer; annual earnings are nearly 10 per cent higher, on average, for American students compelled to stay in school an additional year, with similar results observed in the U.K. and Canada.

However, the benefit of keeping reluctant students in the classroom

longer is not universally accepted. "Not everyone believes the return is there for people who really want to leave school," Oreopoulos said. "It's controversial because you place more students in the classroom who don't want to be there, and they may disrupt the people who do."

The key, according to the study, is a 'carrot-and-stick' approach that pairs an increase in the legal dropout age with improved programs to target at-risk students long before they decide to stop attending class. High schools that offer [vocational training](#), school-to-career programs, and career academies that combine standard classroom learning with on-the-job experience, may help to prepare students for a range of opportunities, including college and careers.

"Ideally, these laws don't mean a truant officer tracks students down and forces them into class," Oreopoulos said. "Today, students are still in school at the age of 16, not because they are forced to stay, but because it has become the social norm. Raising the leaving age to 18 may establish a new norm." In Ontario, the school-leaving age is 18 or graduation, whichever comes first.

Adults who drop out "almost universally express regret," the paper says. In one study, 74 per cent admitted they would have stayed in [school](#) if they could make the same decision again.

Provided by University of Toronto Mississauga

Citation: Study suggests keeping students in high school longer, better 'at-risk' programs (2013, February 4) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-02-students-high-school-longer-at-risk.html>

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