

“The Yankee Institute’s proposal to pay high school students to graduate in three years is a win-win for both taxpayers seeking to control public education spending and students needing financial help for college. Other states should follow the lead of Arizona and Utah in adopting this proposal.”

Newt Gingrich

### ***Pay High School Students to Graduate in Three Years***

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While there is no such thing as a “free lunch,” the simple reform of paying high school students to satisfy their state’s graduation requirements in three years would achieve the following:

1. Reduce the skyrocketing property, income, and sales taxes required to fund public education. This is accomplished by giving early graduation grants worth some fraction of the per pupil cost of the senior year of high school.
2. Make college education more affordable for all students, but especially for those from poor and middle class families. In almost every state the proposed grants would more than cover the full two-year tuition at community college.
3. Relieve growing towns and cities from the crushing burden of costly new school construction by reducing the school census.
4. Give secondary school educators a cost-free way to cope with taxpayer distress over the cost of public employee wages, pensions, and health care benefits. Because the proposed policy would have to be phased in over a number of years – students wanting to graduate early would have to start planning to satisfy graduation requirements as freshmen – the cost-saving staff reductions could be achieved through attrition. No teacher need lose his job.
5. Attenuate the senior year boredom that drives many restless adolescents, ready to leave high school, to engage in self-destructive behavior.
6. Bring the defenders of the current public education system and its critics together in the common cause of helping future generations.

### ***Background***

The idea of encouraging high school students to meet all their graduation requirements in three years, so they can go on early to college level work is not new. Leon Botstein, the distinguished president of Bard College, has long

argued that the current curriculum of American high schools is a hindrance to academic achievement with the worst damage wreaked on average and below-average pupils. Indeed, Bard has become an elite college in part by deliberately admitting many secondary students after their junior year of high school.

If the notion of condensing four years of high school into three is not new, neither does it turn out to be very difficult. This is because most school districts in North America define graduation requirements, not by years attended, but by the completion of certain required courses. Since high school students are permitted many electives over the course of four years, condensing the curriculum into three grades is largely a matter of students substituting required courses for some electives.

In 2003, the province of Ontario eliminated an entire grade with the only apparent problem being an unusually large number of applicants to Canadian colleges and universities in one year. Also in 2003, the governor of Florida instituted a voluntary three-grade curriculum for all state schools. Any Florida student who elects a “fast track” to high school graduation is encouraged to do, so as long as he or she takes all the state’s required courses. Indeed, in most states the requirements for high school graduation are so flexibly written that the majority of America’s local school boards already have the authority to confer diplomas on those who finish before the end of four academic years.

The proposed policy would increase the frequency of early graduation by employing a financial incentive that would greatly benefit both students and taxpayers. Specifically, it is recommended that every student who finishes his or her graduation requirements in three years be given a grant that is less than the per pupil cost of high school but at least enough to cover full tuition at a local community college.

States where progress has already been made include:

### ***Arizona***

The [Arizona early graduation program](#) has implemented the proposed policy by replacing the grant with a loan, forgivable upon completion of two years of post-secondary education.

### ***Connecticut***

The proposal to pay high school students to graduate early was first proposed in a 2004 Yankee Institute publication, [The Early Graduation Reward Plan](#). It was refined in 2007 in a second Yankee publication, [Free College for High School Students](#). The legislature has not yet enacted a statewide law, but the proposed policy is being advanced by individual towns.

### ***Texas***

The [Texas program](#) offers cash grants in differing amounts, depending on how early a student completes state requirements and how many college level courses were completed in high school.

### ***Utah***

[Utah also offers cash grants](#) in differing amounts, again related to how soon the student completes secondary school requirements.

### ***Dual Enrollment Programs***

Many states, including Minnesota, North Carolina, and Washington, have implemented something **deceptively similar** to the proposed policy by allowing high school students to spend the senior year by taking a full course load at local community colleges. The advantage to students is that they can earn both a high school and an associate's degree in five, versus the typical six, years.

Where such programs fall short of the proposed policy is that they leave students on the hook for the second year of community college. They also create a redundant payment system, paying both the high school and the community college to educate the same student at the same time. For taxpayers to really benefit, school budgets must reflect the fact that students have either graduated early or, if still technically enrolled in high school while taking a full college course load, are no longer educated by the district.