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## Raising the Kindergarten Entry Age

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## **RAISING THE KINDERGARTEN ENTRY AGE**

### **SUMMARY POINTS**

- Recent Arkansas legislation requires children to reach age 5 before Aug. 1 to be enrolled in kindergarten.
- Proponents of the new law feel children are better prepared for school at a later age, relieving the burden on kindergarten teachers.
- Evidence suggests raising the age requirement has more potential academic and economic costs to students and their families than benefits.



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*In recent years, the standards in Arkansas for entry into kindergarten underwent changes that can be difficult to understand. Across the nation, states have increased the minimum age of entry into public schools, and Arkansas is no exception. Recently, a policymaker in our state asked the OEP to look into the research surrounding the question of raising the kindergarten entry age. This policy brief discusses the new requirements as well as the impact of these requirements on families and children in the short and long term by looking at recent changes in Arkansas law and studies concerning the effect of entry age on student achievement.*

### **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE LAW**

In 2007, Arkansas passed Act 462, which changed the minimum age of enrollment for prospective kindergarten students. A. C. A. § 6-18-07, a section of Act 462, states that "for the 2011-2012 school year and afterwards, students may enter kindergarten in the public schools of this state if they will be (5) years old on or before August 1 of the year in which they are seeking initial enrollment." The bill also includes a provision allowing students enrolled in another state's approved kindergarten program for at least 60 days to enroll in Arkansas' kindergarten program as long as they will turn five during the year of enrollment and meet basic residency requirements.<sup>1</sup>

### **EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF RAISING THE AGE REQUIREMENT**

The prevailing theory behind the recent national trend of raising the age of entry into public school is that older children are more prepared, more mature, and more likely to perform well on early standardized test scores. Many parents acting on this theory elect to wait until their child is 6 to enroll him or her in kindergarten, and states are increasingly institutionalizing this practice, known as "redshirting." The evidence shows that such parents' concerns are not unfounded, at least initially.

Students who start school younger are more likely to repeat a grade in K-8 (with higher grade retention rates among boys than girls) and struggle more academically in elementary school.

<sup>1</sup> <http://arkedu.state.ar.us/commemos/attachments/act462.pdf>

However, this gap closes by the later elementary years, often by third grade.<sup>2</sup>

Arkansas Act 825 of 2003 defines "kindergarten readiness" by enumerating a list of 38 characteristics each child should possess before entering kindergarten.<sup>3</sup> Items fall into one of 5 categories: social/emotional development, creative/aesthetic learning, cognitive/intellectual learning, physical development, and language.<sup>4</sup> Act 825 specifies the list ought to be prepared in such a manner that it will aid parents in preparing their children for school. Copies are to be provided to the childcare facilities licensed by the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education, who then give copies to the parents of three, four, and five-year-olds in their facilities.<sup>5</sup> The law, however, does not require that any of these conditions be met before a child can legally be enrolled in kindergarten. Currently, the only restrictions to entry are the age restrictions previously discussed.

Opponents to redshirting acknowledge that although there are some disadvantages for younger students early on, the evidence shows there are long-term advantages to entering school at an earlier age. Early benefits include increased cognitive skills from the classroom experience, nutritional food, counseling offered through the school, and help with any learning disabilities. Perhaps surprisingly, students who enter kindergarten earlier also have higher standardized test scores in high school, are more likely to attend college, earn a bachelors degree, have higher wages, and have more time to develop human capital. In their article "Does the Age that Children Start Kindergarten Matter? Evidence of Long-Term Educational

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~gpainter/Season%20of%20Birth%2009\\_04.pdf](http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~gpainter/Season%20of%20Birth%2009_04.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dcece/Pages/KindergartenReadiness.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Brown, D & Wright, B. (2002). A Framework for Quality Care and Education for Children from Three to Five," Arkansas Department of Health & Human Services.

<sup>5</sup> <http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dcece/Pages/KindergartenReadiness.aspx>

and Social Outcomes," Jane Lincove and Gary Painter suggest that "the most important effect of age at school entry may be that older students lose a year of participation in the workforce rather than that younger students are disadvantaged in early elementary years."<sup>6</sup> Although Act 462 will likely benefit overtaxed kindergarten teachers, there is some evidence to suggest it may harm students' long-term academic and professional achievement.

## **ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF RAISING THE AGE REQUIREMENT**

Aside from academic implications, there are also considerable economic implications of redshirting. Ashlesha Datar, a researcher with the RAND Corporation, estimated the nationwide costs of three hypothetical age entry policies by constructing an economic model of families' decisions about entry age. Currently, there are eight states that still have age 5 cutoff dates as late as December or January, which means some 4-year-olds can enter kindergarten. In her first scenario, Datar estimates the increased cost of childcare to parents if those eight states followed the current trend by moving their cutoff dates up to September 1. She found an increase of \$115 million in childcare costs. Similarly, if all states set their age requirement for entry at 5 years, there would be an estimated increase in childcare costs of \$184 million nationwide.<sup>7</sup>

Datar then estimated the effect of each state reducing their age requirement to 4 years, 6 months old. She found estimated savings of \$804 million if the current trend were reversed and such policies enacted.<sup>8</sup> Based on her findings, it seems clear that there are serious costs (related to child care expenses) placed on families by laws raising the age requirement

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~gpainter/Season%20of%20Birth%2009\\_04.pdf](http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~gpainter/Season%20of%20Birth%2009_04.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9082/index1.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9082/index1.html)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9082/index1.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9082/index1.html)

that must be considered in evaluating the wisdom of those laws. Although the findings on academic achievement of age entry laws are somewhat varied, the economic implications are clear. On the flip-side, for those who enter early and are held back, there are additional costs incurred by the state of educating a child for an additional year.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Is the recent shift--seen both in Arkansas and nationwide-- of raising the age of kindergarten entry positive for students and their families? Unfortunately, the answer is somewhat unclear. The evidence indicates early enrollment in kindergarten has negative effects on early academic performance and increases the likelihood of grade retention. However, these drawbacks may seem small when compared with the benefits of early entry which include earlier access to services

provided by schools and long-term benefits such as better performance in high school, greater likelihood to attend college, and greater earnings. Additionally, there are clear financial costs on families associated with keeping a child in childcare for an additional year.

Although some research suggests that raising the age requirement for entry into public schools has more negative consequences than positive for both students and their families, this is not the case universally. Parents should carefully consider the pros and cons of redshirting before making a final decision for their child. In any event, given the national trend, it is unlikely these laws will change any time soon. In fact, it is likely only a matter of time before all states require children entering kindergarten to reach the age of 5 before enrollment.

## **TO REDSHIRT OR NOT TO REDSHIRT?**

### **Advantages of Redshirting**

- Higher test scores and performance in kindergarten and early elementary years
- Less likelihood of grade retention (repeating a grade)
- Potential savings of additional cost associated with retention (applicable only to some students)

### **Advantages of Earlier Enrollment**

- Earlier access to school facilities and services
- Higher high school test scores and overall performance
- Greater likelihood of being accepted to college and earning a degree
- More lifetime earnings
- Less financial burden without the extra year of childcare necessitated by redshirting