

"Voices from the Field"

Wisconsin Early Childhood Education and Care Stakeholders Consider Delayed Entrance to Kindergarten

What is the issue?

Questions about delaying the entrance of age-eligible children into five-year-old kindergarten (5K) — or “red shirting,” as the practice has become known — are re-emerging with the increase of four-year-old kindergarten (4K) programs in Wisconsin.

Two situations are raised:

- School districts report that some parents of 5K-eligible children are concerned about the child's readiness for school and consider holding their child back. If the district has 4K, these parents may request enrolling their 5K-eligible child in 4K. This appears to be more common for children with late summer birthdays.
- Another concern on delayed entrance is raised when schools may misuse kindergarten screening and recommend that a child be held out of school for one more year. Occasionally, child care or Head Start providers will also advise parents to “hold the child out” one more year from 4- or 5-year-old kindergarten.

Pressure to “hold children back” started over 20 years ago. Noted child development expert David Elkind began raising concerns about the issue in 1985. With the recent No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal legislation, schools face the push to assure “academic success” for every student. Misuse of kindergarten screening may occur when screeners suggest that parents “hold their child back” because they are “not ready.”

What do Wisconsin Statutes say about eligibility for kindergarten?

S. 118.15, Wis. Stats., defines mandatory school age as 6 years-of-age. Therefore, kindergarten attendance at age 5 is not mandatory.

State statutes define age as the criteria for eligibility to kindergarten and first grade. S. 118.14, Wis. Stats., Age of pupils states:

- (a) No child may be admitted to a 4-year-old kindergarten unless he or she is 4 years old on or before September 1 in the year that he or she proposes to enter school.
- (b) No child may be admitted to a 5-year-old kindergarten unless he or she is 5 years old on or before September 1 in the year that he or she proposes to enter school.
- (c) No child may be admitted to 1st grade unless he or she is 6 years old on or before September 1 in the year that he or she proposes to enter school.

S. 120.12(25), Wis. Stats., allows each school district to decide if their policies will allow early entrance, but the statutes are silent on delaying entrance.

Beginning in 2011-12, Wis. Statute S 118.15(1)(am), prohibits a school board from enrolling a child in first grade unless the child has completed 5-year-old kindergarten or has received an exemption. It also requires school boards to adopt a written policy specifying the criteria it will use for promoting a student from 5-year-old kindergarten to first grade.

How do districts handle parental requests to delay entrance to kindergarten?

In 2006, a web survey on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) Forces for Four-Year-Olds listserv asked districts to comment on how they address delayed entrance to kindergarten. Responses to this question show a variation in how districts handle these requests, including the following.

- The district has no written policy and looks at each child and family on a case-by-case basis. For instance, if a child turns 4 on August 30, a parent can request late entrance.

- The district works with parent to help them understand implications. They strongly encourage parents to place children with their age-mates, but let parent decide.
- The district has a written policy that lets the parent decide.
- The district has a written policy that does not allow 5K-eligible children to enroll in 4K program.

What does the research say?

- “UW-Madison Education Professor Elizabeth Graue and Lehigh University’s James DiPerna examined the school records of more than 8,500 Wisconsin students in 47 districts in 1995. A summary of their findings is below, see their report [The Pros and Cons of “Holding Out”](#) for more information.
 - Approximately 7% of kindergartners were redshirted, and 3% retained K-3.
 - The majority of redshirts are boys with summer birthdays. Retainees (students who are asked to repeat a grade) follow this pattern; additionally, children of color and of poverty are overrepresented.
 - On the Wisconsin third grade reading test, all groups were statistically and practically even in their test results, with the exception of students who were retained during early elementary years. Redshirts achieve on par with their grade-level peers, including summer birthday children who entered on time (though they are not on top as some would suggest). All retainees performed at levels below their grade level peers.
 - Students do not seem to benefit socially from being redshirted. Their self-concept and acceptance by peers are about the same, as are teacher ratings of behavior for oldest (redshirted) and youngest (not redshirted) children.
 - Some first through third graders who were red-shirted required greater use of special education services which leads to speculation that they had special needs that were misdiagnosed as immaturity and should have been treated with direct intervention other than delayed entry.
 - These proportions and patterns hold true in nationally representative samples.
- Lorrie A. Shepard and Mary Lee Smith conducted research on kindergarten retention from 1984-88, [What Research Says about Retention](#) (1989). There were three major findings:
 - Kindergarten retention does nothing to boost subsequent academic achievement;
 - Regardless of what the extra year may be called, there is a social stigma for children who attend an extra year;
 - Retention actually fosters inappropriate academic demands in first grade.
- Two U.S. Department of Education reports, *Children Who Enter Kindergarten Late Or Repeat Kindergarten: Their Characteristics And Later School Performance* (NCES No. 2000-039) and *America’s Kindergarteners* (NCES No 2000-070) report:
 - Immediate effects include: academic achievement in math, reading, and general knowledge, as well as conduct, generally on par with or above grade-level peers.
 - In grades 1-3 they are: less likely than younger classmates “to draw negative feedback from teachers” about their academic performance or conduct in class.

- Spitzer, S., Cupp, R., & Parke, R.D. (1995) in *School Entrance Age, Social Acceptance And Self-Perception In Kindergarten And 1st Grade*, Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 10(4), 433-450 et al., 1995 reports that “Red shirted” kindergartners exhibit more confidence in interactions with peers and tend to be well-liked more often than younger classmates.
- Byrd, R.S., Weitzman, M., & Auiger, P (1997) *Increased Behavior Problems Associated With Delayed School Entry And Delayed School Progress*. PEDIATRICS, 100(4), 654-661, found that adolescents whose school entry had been delayed exhibited more behavior problems than their classmates.

Resources that “take a stand” on delayed entrance

- The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education position statement, [STILL Unacceptable Trends in Kindergarten Entry and Placement](#), is “Children are enrolled in kindergarten based on their legal right to enter families are not counseled or pressured to delay entrance of their children for a year by keeping them at home or enrolling them in other programs. Rather, families are strongly encouraged to enroll age-eligible children.”
- Debra J. Ackerman and W. Steven Barnett tie the practice to the concept of “school readiness” in [Prepared for Kindergarten: What Does “Readiness” Mean?](#): “Readiness testing is common. Although these assessments may be used to determine instructional needs, schools may also use results to discourage parents from enrolling their age-eligible child in kindergarten. Research finds the predictive validity of these tests to be extremely limited. Thus, their use in making decisions about kindergarten enrollment is highly questionable.” Steven Barnett, also points out that red-shirting has serious economic effects. For the parents it involves an additional year of either lost wages or of child care. For the child it involves a delay in beginning a working career.
- [Marilou Hyson](#), an executive with the National Association for the Education of Young Children, feared that we were creating a vicious cycle. Kindergarten might continue getting more advanced, causing the average age of kindergarten students to go up in response, which in turn would allow the academic demands to be ratcheted up further. Eventually, after much turmoil, kindergarten might turn out to be simply first grade under a different name, with the same curriculum and the same age students as first grade traditionally had.

Suggestions for Parents:

In *Academic Redshirting and Young Children*, ERIC Digest, 2000. www.eric.ed.gov

The ERIC Digest offers a variety of suggestions for advising parents including:

- Be clear about the characteristics that cause concern about readiness for kindergarten. Don’t delay entrance just because the child is likely to be the youngest in class.
- Find out what the school expects and check the schools kindergarten screening procedures to help prepare your child before school entry.
- Find out about the nature of the kindergarten program. Lower class size and “learning center” organization can accommodate greater developmental ranges among children in the class.
- Consider what the child would be doing if they did not start kindergarten. Will they have available and affordable preschool opportunities?

An internet search will find a variety of other resources including:

- [Academic Redshirting](#), Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting (CEEP), March 2005.
- [“An Updated Look at Delaying Kindergarten Entry,”](#) Hermine H. Marshall. Young Children, Sept. 2003.

- *Getting Schools Ready for Children: The Other Side of the Readiness Goal- Exclusion and Retention: Failed Strategies*, <http://readyweb.crc.uiuc.edu/library/1994/sreb-gsr/excl-ret.html>.
- *The Early Reading and Mathematics Achievement of Children Who Repeated Kindergarten or Who Began School a Year Late*, From Statistics in Brief, May 2006.
- *Prepared for Kindergarten: What Does "Readiness" Mean?* The National Institute for Early Education Research, March 2005.
- *The Pros and Cons of "Holding Out,"* Wisconsin Center for Educational Research.
- *Ready Kids, Ready Schools, Ready Communities, Measuring School Readiness in Wisconsin*, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, Spring 2004.
- *School Readiness: Helping Communities Get Children Ready for School and Schools Ready for Children*, Trends Child Research Brief, 2001.
- Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). *Exclusion and Retention: Failed Strategies*, in *Getting Schools Ready for Children: The Other Side of the Readiness Goal*, 1995.
- *Wisconsin School Readiness Indicator Initiative: The Status of School Readiness Indicators in Wisconsin*, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, Sept. 2003.

Samples of School District Polices or Letters to Parents Requesting Delayed Entrance

- School District of Onalaska - [Delayed Placement For Five-Year Olds](#)