

Occasional Papers

Changing the Kindergarten Cutoff Date: Effects on California Students and Schools

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When is the best time for children to enter kindergarten? In California, children who reach their fifth birthday by the cutoff date of December 2 are allowed to enter in that school year. California's is one of the latest kindergarten entry cutoff dates in the nation, and it effectively allows California children as young as four years, nine months to enter kindergarten. The issue has been the subject of debate for many years. Several legislative proposals to move the state's cutoff date back – thus increasing the average age of entering kindergarteners – have been proposed, but have failed to make it into law. Most recently, the Governor's Committee on Education Excellence recommended a change in cutoff date to September 1 from December 2. Using current enrollment figures, such a change would delay about 100,000 children from entering kindergarten for a year.

Proponents of moving the date earlier argue that children who enter kindergarten before age five are not developmentally mature enough yet for an academic setting, and that entering at an older age should improve academic performance. Many states over the years have moved their cutoff dates, partially on the basis of this argument (see chart). For proponents, the central issue is one of school readiness – students should begin formal schooling only when they have accumulated the skills necessary to meet the academic rigors ahead of them.

In practice, readiness is difficult to measure and for school purposes is determined by a child's age in relation to a specified cutoff date. Current kindergarten cutoff dates are not based on any evidence that one calendar date is better than others.

Our review of 14 recent studies on the short- and long-term effects of entering kindergarten at an older age suggests that increasing California's entry age will likely have a number of benefits, including boosting student achievement test scores. But it may also have the potential to increase the achievement gap among certain student subgroups. In this paper, we summarize and synthesize the findings of these 14 studies to provide a baseline of knowledge for further debate in the legislative and educational communities. A more detailed examination of these studies' designs, methodologies, and conclusions is available at http://www.ppic.org/content/other/508JCOP_technical_appendix.pdf.

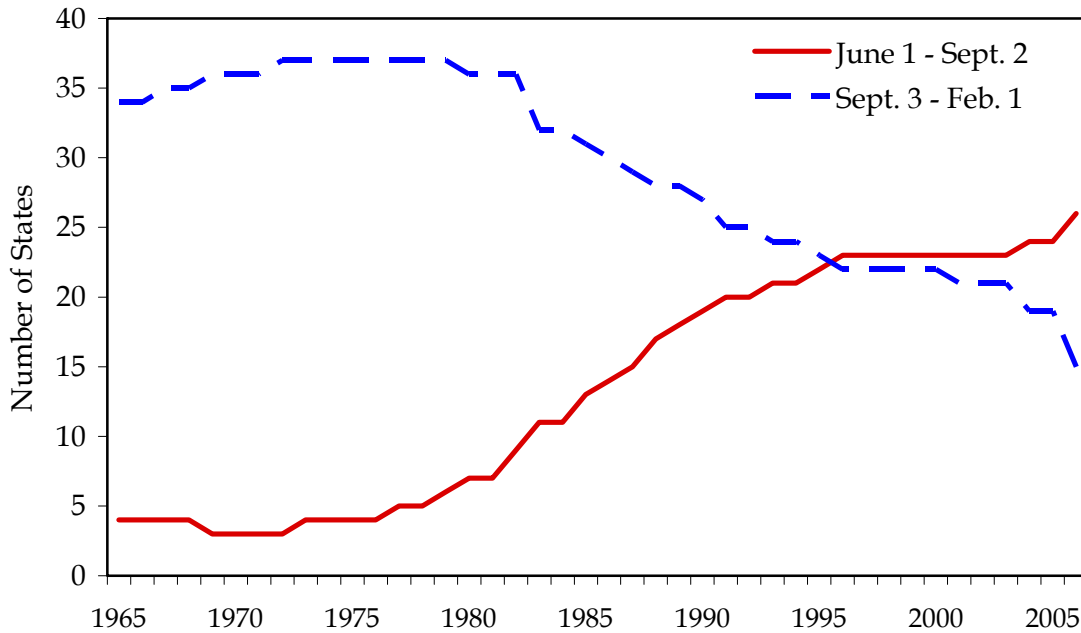
Positive Benefit on Test Scores

The primary benefit discussed in the research is the positive effect on elementary and middle school test scores. Students who are older when they enter kindergarten have better elementary math and reading scores, the subjects most often measured. These effects appear to persist into eighth grade, albeit with smaller magnitudes. This benefit would also accrue to schools, now adjusting to accountability measures, because school achievement growth would presumably rise along with their students'. It is unclear, however, how large the overall effect would be for a three-month change in the cutoff date.

But some subgroups of those students may not gain as much as others. One study suggests that more advantaged students may benefit more from being older at school entry than would disadvantaged children. This may be partly due to the former group's having better pre-kindergarten learning opportunities. The Governor's Committee also takes note of this likelihood and suggests that a change in entry age would be enhanced by an additional focus on pre-kindergarten educational opportunities, especially for low-income students. We concur:

Policymakers will want to pay close attention to the pre-kindergarten opportunities for disadvantaged children. Because an earlier entrance cutoff will almost certainly save the state money in the short term, one possibility is to use some or all of the savings for school readiness programs or other early interventions.

Trends in U.S. State Kindergarten Entry Cutoff Dates, 1965-2006



SOURCES: 1965-2005 data collected by Kelly Bedard (University of California, Santa Barbara) and Elizabeth Dhuey (University of Toronto); 2006 data from the Education Commission of the States, available at www.ecs.org, and personal communications with staff in state departments of education. NOTE: Several states do not have a uniform cutoff date for all school districts. Some state laws give local education agencies (LEAs) discretion over specifying the cutoff. Other states do not have kindergarten entrance age legislation.

The Governor’s Committee also notes the possibility that an older entry age policy would reduce the occurrence of purposefully delayed school entry by parents of younger children, a practice known as “redshirting.” If true, this would result in a more even distribution of students by age and so help to reduce achievement gaps. While we agree that redshirting may decline, we do not know by how much. It also remains to be seen whether students who would become the youngest students because of a date change – students with July and August birthdates – will enter on time or will themselves delay entry at higher rates than occurs now. In relation to the achievement gap, what ultimately matters is whether any reductions in redshirting would mitigate the additional differences between groups in pre-kindergarten learning opportunities.

Other Benefits and Issues

Several of the studies point out that a kindergarten entry date change might affect student outcomes in dimensions other than academic achievement. These include grade retention, special education enrollment, high school completion rates, and in the very long-term, students' wages as adults. Our reading of the evidence is that a kindergarten date change would not affect these other outcomes adversely: that is, there would be little if any increase in grade retention or special education enrollment, or decrease in high school completion rates.

On this latter point, it is important to note that a consequence of an earlier kindergarten entry cutoff date is that it makes some students eligible to drop out of school legally with less completed education. The state's compulsory schooling law requires students to stay enrolled in school until they reach age 18 (or graduate from high school); an earlier kindergarten cutoff date would mean more students starting their education at older ages, and they would have less time in school before their 18th birthdays. Thus, an earlier cutoff date may mean lower high school completion rates. The important question, however, is how large these adverse consequences might be. The research suggests that they are likely to be very small or even nonexistent. Moreover, California's current focus on dropout prevention may further mitigate this potential problem.

Another long-term effect of moving the entry cutoff relates to wages a kindergarten student might later earn as an adult in the labor market. A study still in progress, and the only one examining direct evidence of the effects of state policy changes, shows that when states moved their entry cutoffs earlier in the year, the students who began school in that year went on to earn slightly higher average wages as adults in the labor market.

Individual Effects and Issues

From a policy perspective, the focus of the entry age debate is on educational outcomes statewide. Locally, an additional concern is the effects of a date change on individual students. Even if the statewide effect of moving students' entry dates were neutral, cutoff dates themselves may affect individual students in important ways. An unavoidable consequence of moving the entry cutoff is changing which students will be the oldest and the youngest within each kindergarten class. Children whose kindergarten entry is delayed by a policy change not only begin school one year older but also become older relative to their classmates. Further, even children not directly affected by an entry date change are indirectly affected because they are made relatively younger than their classmates.

Several studies explore whether relatively older students outperform their younger peers. This research finds consistently that students who are expected to be the oldest in their class score higher on achievement tests, up through high school, than do students expected to be the youngest. Relatively older students also achieve in other important, non-academic ways such as being more likely to become the captain of their varsity sports team or a club president in high school. Relatively older students are also less likely to be retained a grade and less likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability. In fact, the research suggests that students forced to delay school entry by a year will become less likely to be retained or to be diagnosed with a learning disability, while students made relatively younger will become more likely. Thus, a

September 1 cutoff should not meaningfully affect retention or special education enrollment, on average.

Other findings suggest that relatively older students may be slightly less likely to complete high school, the issue noted above. However, assuming they do graduate, there is some evidence that they are more likely to enroll in college. Studies examining age effects in some European countries where compulsory schooling laws require school attendance for a minimum number of years, rather than up to a specific age, find that relatively older students attain more schooling, are more likely to be placed on an advanced academic track, and are more likely to enroll in college.

In sum, student relative age is an important predictor of educational success. Changing student relative age is also unavoidable when enacting an entrance cutoff change. For this reason we conclude that policymakers should base their decision to adopt a September 1 cutoff on the likely statewide effects, while keeping in mind that individually, relatively older students generally outperform their younger peers regardless of the cutoff date chosen.

Conclusions

Our reading of the evidence in the 14 studies we reviewed suggests that moving the entrance cutoff date from December 2 to September 1 would likely boost average scores on the California Standards Tests, and presumably, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress as well. This is principally because some students would be a year older when taking those tests. Increasing the minimum entry age by moving the cutoff date is not likely to affect overall grade retention or special education enrollment rates, and may even boost adult wages. The potential costs of this policy change include allowing some students to drop out of school at an earlier grade legally, but we conclude that this should not cause a large reduction in graduation rates. Overall, we feel the potential effects on disadvantaged children merit special attention in association with a policy change.

At the student level, it is important to keep in mind that an entrance policy change would have a differential effect on students, and almost certainly between socio-economically disadvantaged and advantaged students. We argue that the effect of an entrance policy change on the achievement gap depends on the extent to which it reduces academic redshirting and the extent to which it results in further disparities in skill acquisition prior to kindergarten entry. English learners are another important subgroup that could be affected, but at present no study has explicitly focused on this population. Finally, the research indicates that student relative age is an important predictor of educational success: Any entrance age policy change will benefit those made relatively oldest at the expense of those made relatively youngest. To the extent that an older minimum entry age reduces academic redshirting among socio-economically advantaged students, an earlier cutoff date should help mitigate relative age disparities.

The available evidence suggests academic merits to adopting the September 1 cutoff. If the earlier cutoff is adopted, policymakers should follow how entering students are affected, paying special attention to disadvantaged students and English learners. These students may need additional pre-kindergarten and kindergarten investments to reduce the achievement gap.

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