

Testimony Opposing S.B. 930, An Act Concerning the School Entrance Age

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Education Committee
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Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

We are testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, an independent, research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices for Children strongly opposes S.B. 930, which would move back the school entrance age without addressing disparities in access to high-quality preschool.

Moving back the kindergarten entrance age cutoff will worsen the achievement gap.

Research shows that low-income students start off behind their higher-income counterparts primarily because they have less preparation, not because they are younger.¹ Holding back students without providing universal access to high-quality preschool means the most vulnerable students will fall even further behind their classmates. Middle-class and affluent children will progress more during an additional year of “waiting” to start kindergarten than their low-income counterparts, due largely to the fact that they are more likely to receive high-quality preschool during that time period.² As the school entrance age effect is larger for children of higher socioeconomic status, moving up the entrance age is likely to have “the perverse effect of exacerbating socioeconomic differences in school performance.”³

There is even some evidence that suggests that, for those without access to high-quality preschool, moving back the entrance age could decrease academic performance in an absolute sense. One study of high school standardized test performance by minorities concluded that students who were expected to be the youngest in their cohort outperformed those who were expected to be the oldest in their cohort. This result suggested that the lost year of schooling lowers test scores by more than the gain due to additional maturation during that year.⁴

¹ Todd Elder and Darren H. Lubotsky. 2008. “Kindergarten Entrance Age and Children’s Achievement: Impacts of State Policies, Family Background, and Peers.” (available at [http://web4.uwindsor.ca/users/a/arbex/main.nsf/0/d71f84892f3e76368525754000535d61/\\$FILE/Elder08.pdf](http://web4.uwindsor.ca/users/a/arbex/main.nsf/0/d71f84892f3e76368525754000535d61/$FILE/Elder08.pdf) on p. 5)

² Ashlesha Datar. “The Impact of Changes in Kindergarten Entrance Age Policies on Children’s Academic Achievement and the Child Care Needs of Families.” *Rand Corporation* (2005) (available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/rgs_dissertations/2005/RGSD177.pdf on p. 49-50)

³ Elder at 21.

⁴ Elizabeth Cascio. “How and Why Does Age at Kindergarten Entry Matter?” *FRBSF Economic Letter* Number 2008-24, Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco (2008) p. 3, citing Cascio and Lewis 2006.

Low-income children are better off in school than out. There is evidence that parents of low-income children are less likely to read to their children,⁵ and less likely to be able to provide them with a high-quality preschool experience.⁶ Since the benefits of delayed enrollment result primarily from an additional year of human capital accumulation, changing the entrance age is least likely to improve the achievement of those most at-risk since they receive the least human capital investment prior to entering school.⁷ Additionally, studies show that children’s reading and math abilities increase much more quickly once they begin kindergarten than they would have increased during the same period if they delayed kindergarten entry.⁸ Therefore, increases in kindergarten entrance ages have the primary effect of delaying the rapid learning that children experience once they begin school, especially for students from low-income households.⁹

While it is true that age at kindergarten entrance has a small impact on academic performance, the effect becomes less significant as students age and is small compared to the impact of family socioeconomic status and preschool experiences. One study found that the proportion of risk to achievement attributed to race and socio-economic status is 13 times that contributed by age.¹⁰ Other studies that have found that age-of-entry effects are dwarfed by other aspects of family and child care experiences.¹¹ In most cases, controlling for demographic, socioeconomic, and developmental factors eliminates most differences between delayed-entry students and others.¹² In other words, younger kindergarteners tend to perform more poorly not because they are younger, but because their age is correlated with the things that really matter: preschool experience, maternal education, and socioeconomic status. Changing the date of kindergarten eligibility does not address the real challenges these children face.

Younger kindergarteners do not suffer from any more social or emotional problems in school than their elder classmates. There is a myth that children with fall birthdays are not socially or emotionally prepared to enter kindergarten, have more difficulty paying attention, cooperating, and making friends, and experience more behavior problems. But there is no evidence

⁵ Kathryn Taaffe Young et al., “Listening to Parents: A National Survey of Parents with Young Children,” *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 152 (1998) on p. 258. Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. “America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2009.” Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2009), p. 49.

⁶ Datar at 49, citing Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2001.

⁷ Elder at 33-34.

⁸ Elder at 7.

⁹ Elder at 7.

¹⁰ Deborah Stipek. “At What Age Should Children Enter Kindergarten: A Question for Policymakers and Parents.” *Social Policy Report* XVI:2 (2002) (available at http://www.srce.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=120), citing Molly M. Jones and Garrett K. Mandeville, “The Effect of Age at School Entry on Reading Achievement Scores Among South Carolina Students.” *Remedial and Special Education* March/April 1990 11: 56-62.

¹¹ NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. Age of Entry to Kindergarten and Children’s Academic Achievement and Socioemotional Development. *Early Education & Development*, 18 (2007) 337-368. (available at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2140009/pdf/nihms-32744.pdf> on p.1, 13-14)

¹² National Center for Education Statistics. “Children Who Enter Kindergarten Late or Repeat Kindergarten: Their Characteristics and Later School Performance.” *Stats in Brief*. NCES 2000-039. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (2000) (available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000039.pdf> on p. 3)

to support this. To the contrary, studies suggest that age at kindergarten entrance is unrelated to any aspect of social functioning.¹³ One longitudinal study, examining children from kindergarten through third grade, found no connection, in any grade, between age of kindergarten entry and a variety of social skills (including self-control, relationships with peers, and understanding of social boundaries) and behaviors (including aggression and anxiety).¹⁴ Other studies have similarly found no age effects on attention, anxiety, or classroom behavior for children from kindergarten through third and fourth grade.¹⁵

Changing the age of kindergarten eligibility imposes a tremendous cost on working families. This proposal is tantamount to a new tax on Connecticut's working families, forcing them to pay for an additional, unplanned year of child care.¹⁶ In 2009, 77% of Connecticut children lived in families where all parents were working or looking for work.¹⁷ Child care in Connecticut is prohibitively expensive, consuming up to 27% of a basic family budget in a two parent, two child family.¹⁸ For families unable to afford the high cost of an additional year of childcare, the proposed legislation would serve as a barrier to productive employment.¹⁹

The State Department of Education estimates that moving back the kindergarten entrance age cutoff would keep up to 10,000 children out of kindergarten for an extra year.²⁰ Lower-income families would be disproportionately affected, as students from higher-income districts are currently overrepresented among held kindergarteners.²¹ The average yearly cost for full-time care for a preschooler in a licensed child care center is \$10,383.²² Therefore, the total cost to families of this

¹³ NIHCD at 14, 16. Stipek 10.

¹⁴ NIHCD at 10-11.

¹⁵ Stipek at 10 (citing Stipek & Byler 2001; Kinard & Reinherz 1986).

¹⁶ Datar at 50.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. 2009 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Table B23007: Presence of Own Children Under 18 Years by Family Type by Employment Status – Universe: Families.

¹⁸ Annemarie Hillman and Cyd Oppenheimer. "Connecticut Early Care & Education Progress Report, 2010." *Connecticut Voices for Children* (2011) (available at http://www.ctkidslink.org/pub_detail_530.html on p. 6), citing estimated costs in a basic family budget from the Economic Policy Institute, Basic Family Budget Calculator for the Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford region.

¹⁹ Public school enrollment has been shown to significantly increase the labor market participation of mothers. See Jonah B. Gelbach. "Public Schooling for Young Children and Maternal Labor Supply." *The American Economic Review*. Mar., 2002, p. 307-322.

²⁰ This is the number relied upon by the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) in putting together its proposal and is the number of students affected by a cutoff date of August 31, based upon the number of students born between September 1 and December 31, 2004 enrolled in kindergarten in School Year 2009-2010. Data provided by Michelle Levy, SDE, received via email 2/7/11. Because month-to-month breakdowns of student dates-of-birth days were not available to us, we are unable to calculate the exact number of students affected by an October 1 cutoff.

²¹ Connecticut Voices for Children analysis of Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) data on held kindergarteners by District Regional Group (DRG). Data provided by Michelle Levy, SDE, received via email 2/7/11. About 17% of kindergartners in Connecticut's wealthiest communities (DRG A) do not enter school in their first year of eligibility, while in Connecticut's poorest communities (DRG I), only about 3% of kindergartners do not enter school in their first year of eligibility.

²² 211 Child Care. "Fee Analysis of Child Care Facilities in Connecticut: January 5, 2011." (available at <http://www.211childcare.org/professionals/FeeCT.asp>)

proposal is in the millions of dollars— a cost borne entirely by Connecticut’s working parents, not by the state.

Furthermore, implementing the new cutoff beginning in School Year 2012-2013 does not provide sufficient notice to parents of current preschoolers. Such a move would place an unexpected burden on the parents of current 3-year-olds, many of whom were expecting to pay for 2 years of preschool and now would be forced to pay for 3 years. At a minimum, implementation should be delayed until School Year 2015-2016, allowing parents to plan and budget accordingly.

Moving back the kindergarten age without providing universal access to high quality preschool would punish students--particularly low-income students--and their families. Not only would this proposal worsen the achievement gap, it would also come at great cost to working parents. Consequently, we respectfully ask that you oppose S.B. 930.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.