

Published Oct 24, 2009

Published Saturday October 24, 2009

Ending the 'redshirt' edge

By Paul Hammel

WORLD-HERALD BUREAU



WORLD-HERALD NEWS SERVICE

Legislators say changing kindergarten-eligibility rules would ensure that more children are ready for the more rigorous academic requirements of kindergarten and would narrow the gap in maturity levels.

LINCOLN — Hey, Mom and Dad: If little Mary and Johnny were born in August, September or early October, you might have to wait an extra year before sending them off to kindergarten.

Under current law, children can enroll in kindergarten if they turn 5 by Oct. 15 of the school year, and they must start school by the year in which they turn 6.

But the Legislature's Education Committee is proposing to roll back that kindergarten-eligibility date to July 31.

The bottom line on the proposed changes would be that kids who turn 5 after July 31 would have to wait a year before entering kindergarten in Nebraska.

That, legislators said, would ensure that more children are ready for the more rigorous academic requirements of kindergarten and would narrow the gap in maturity levels.

"It's about student achievement and narrowing that gap that exists when kids enter kindergarten," said State Sen. Greg Adams, chairman of the Education Committee and a former York High School teacher.

Right now, a child could be roughly as young as 4 years and 7 months old and as old as 6 years and 8 months old when he or she enters kindergarten classes in mid-August.

That's because school districts have the option of admitting younger students — those who turn 5 after Oct. 15 but before Feb. 1 — if an assessment shows they are mature enough.

That creates too wide a disparity among the ages of kindergartners, several elementary school principals and district superintendents told the committee Friday.

They testified that current law prompts many parents of children born in August, September and October to "redshirt" their kids for a year to let them mature or make them more attractive for sports teams later.

But educators said such redshirting is often discriminatory because poor families often cannot afford the cost of a year of preschool for

their children, so they enter kindergarten at a younger age.

Loup City Superintendent Caroline Winchester told lawmakers that 75 to 80 percent of the children held back an extra year in her district come from families with the financial means to do so.

A representative of an Omaha organization seeking to narrow the achievement gap between poor and affluent children in the state's largest city urged the committee to narrow the current 25-month age range between kindergarten students.

Sarah Ann Kotchian of Building Bright Futures said that now, a nearly 7-year-old with two years of preschool could be in kindergarten alongside an almost 5-year-old with no preschool training.

It creates a wide achievement gap on the first day of school, Kotchian said.

“This would level the playing field,” she said.

Under the committee's proposal, children who turn 5 after July 31 and through Oct. 31 could gain a waiver to enter kindergarten early, but only after an assessment showed they were ready.

Moving up the date of kindergarten eligibility — which would have to be approved by the Legislature and signed into law by the governor — would also solve another problem that jeopardizes more than \$50 million in federal funds.

Right now, school districts deny admission to publicly funded preschool programs for children who turn 5 by Oct. 15 and are eligible for kindergarten but are redshirted by their parents. Kindergarten-eligible students cannot, by federal rule, be in preschool programs, officials said.

Adams said moving the date to July 31 would reduce the number of kindergarten-eligible students who present that problem.

Moving up the date for kindergarten admission, officials said, might mean that some children would start kindergarten a year later, but also that those children would start preschool programs a year later.

Preschool programs begin a year or two before a child starts kindergarten.

Legislators discussed Friday whether to propose making the change in kindergarten eligibility effective next year or phase it in gradually but came to no agreement.

Contact the writer:

402-473-9584, paul.hammel@owh.com

Copyright ©2009 Omaha World-Herald®. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, displayed or redistributed for any purpose without permission from the Omaha World-Herald.