

# The Sacramento Bee

August 24, 2010

## Teachers, lawmakers rethink state's kindergarten age limit



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Christene Santos, center, and Gabriel Roblas, left, both 4, eat snacks Monday in Regency Park Elementary's kindergarten.

### SEPT. 1 WOULD BE NEW CUTOFF DATE UNDER PROPOSAL

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For decades, millions of Californians with children who have fall birthdays have struggled over whether to pack their 4-year-olds off to kindergarten – or hold them

back because they might be too young to start school.

This week, California state legislators may be the closest they've ever come to making that decision for parents, with room for some exceptions.

A bill by Sen. Joe Simitian, a Palo Alto Democrat, would roll back the date that entering kindergartners must turn 5 from the current Dec. 2 to Sept. 1.

In 2008, a Public Policy Institute of California review of 14 studies

found that students who start kindergarten at older ages perform better on math and reading tests into eighth grade.

Educators hope the change in the age limit will reduce the number of children in special education and those who are held back, as well as help close the achievement gap that divides affluent and lower-income kids.

The change also has long been discussed as a cost-saving measure at

**KINDERGARTEN** | Page A15

# Kindergarten: Change would be phased in over three years

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the Capitol. Former Gov. Pete Wilson drew the ire of the California Teachers Association in 1992 when he proposed delaying the start of kindergarten that year for more than 100,000 children.

The latest proposal, Senate Bill 1381, would take about \$700 million in savings - the result of having 100,000 fewer students each year - and use that money to fund mandatory new "transitional kindergartens."

The transitional classes would be for children whose birthdays fall between the day after the new cutoff date and Dec. 2.

The change would be phased in, rolling the cutoff date back a month each year, over a three-year period.

The California Parent Teacher Association, the Association of California School Administrators and business interests now are rallying around Simitian's bill, which could go to the Assembly for a vote this week.

The bill has already passed the Senate. But that version - which was presented as a budget-saving device as well as a good policy idea - was significantly different.

The original bill called for plowing half the savings into preschools and half back into the state's depleted general fund - a proposal strongly opposed by the state PTA and the CTA.

The proposal has since been amended to include transitional kindergartens - which keeps the savings within the K-12 system - and the bill now has no organized opposition, Simitian said.

To address concerns that \$700 million wouldn't be enough to cover costs, chil-

**"I think people are seeing this as a rare opportunity to do something good for kids at a time when there aren't many opportunities."**

SEN. JOE SIMITIAN, the Palo Alto Democrat who authored a bill to roll back the date that entering kindergartners must turn 5 from the current Dec. 2 to Sept. 1

dren couldn't repeat transitional kindergarten, and small districts that might only have a handful eligible for transitional classes could put them in a combination classroom.

The transitional kindergarten is a concept some school districts have already embraced - the classes are a precursor to kindergarten.

Educators believe that they would especially benefit kids whose families can't afford preschool and who tend to enter kindergarten behind their peers.

"I think people are seeing this as a rare opportunity to do something good for kids at a time when there aren't many opportunities," Simitian said.

Debbie Look, director of legislation for the state PTA, said the PTA threw its support to Simitian's bill once transitional kindergarten was included.

"Our feeling was these children would not necessarily benefit from a third of a year of preschool," she said.

DeAnn Strangeland, an East Sacramento parent, has two daughters with birthdays that fall just short of the current Dec. 2 cutoff date.



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**Four-year-old Abigail Castellanos naps** while her classmates eat snacks Monday in Laura Bingham's kindergarten class at Sacramento's Regency Park Elementary School. Senate Bill 1381 would gradually roll back the birthday cutoff for entering kindergarten from Dec. 2 to Sept. 1.

In 2008, Strangeland exercised an option to hold one daughter, now 6, back from starting kindergarten.

"It proved to be a good decision for us. Things came a lot easier for her," Strangeland said.

"She was getting the homework," she added. "You want them to feel successful. I think she was ready the year before, but I think we made the right decision."

Sacramento area kindergarten teacher Laura Bingham, who works at Regency Park Elementary School, called Simitian's bill "an excellent idea."

"We are required to have kindergartners reading at the end of kindergarten," Bingham said. "It's a huge developmental difference for them (4-year-olds) to come in with the skills some 5-year-olds already have."

Simitian's bill would make exceptions for 4-year-olds whose parents and schools believe they are ready to begin regular kindergarten.

The California Teachers Association, which has gone from opposition to a neutral

stance on the bill, would prefer that bill include the option to place 5-year-olds who seem developmentally young in transitional classes.

"But we recognize there are cost pressures," said CTA legislative advocate Jennifer Baker.

She said the CTA in general likes the idea of making Sept. 1 the cutoff date.

Call Susan Ferriss, Bee Capitol Bureau, (916) 321-1267.

## KINDERGARTEN: HOW OLD IS OLD ENOUGH?

■ **Current law:** Children can begin kindergarten if they turn 5 by Dec. 2. Parents can choose to hold kids back.

■ **Proposed law:** Children could begin kindergarten if they turn 5 by Sept. 1. The change would be phased in, starting with a new cutoff date of Nov. 1 in 2012-13; Oct. 1 in 2013-14; and Sept. 1 in 2014-15 and thereafter.

School districts would offer publicly funded "transitional kindergarten" classes for children whose birthdays fall between new cutoff dates and Dec. 2. Some exceptions could be made for 4-year-olds whose parents and schools believe they are ready to begin regular kindergarten.

■ **What's next:** Senate Bill 1381 is pending in the Assembly.

# Los Angeles Times

September 7, 2010

## Big changes for kindergarten?

Legislature passes a bill requiring that entering students reach age 5 by Sept. 1.

CARLA RIVERA

At Gulf Avenue Elementary in Wilmington, 4-year-olds in a transitional kindergarten class start the day singing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" before sitting down to trace the letter A and learn its sound. Nearby, students in the school's regular kindergarten class are also hard at work, reading and writing sentences.

The two sets of students are separated in age by only a few months, but the gulf in maturity and academic skills is wide.

Teacher Carmina Gonzalez, who helps some of the 4-



MARK BOSTER Los Angeles Times

**DISPARITIES:** Carmina Gonzalez reads with her kindergarten class. "The younger ones are all about exploration.... I couldn't get them to sit," she says.

year-olds with their letters while tending to a little girl who is crying distractedly, says she saw the contrasts every day in the kindergarten classes she taught.

"The younger ones are all about exploration: They want to walk around, I couldn't get them to sit," she said. "Sometimes they do well, but as the grades get

more difficult and the curriculum gets more difficult, that's when we see them fall behind."

Those disparities are one reason many educators are supporting legislation that, if signed by the governor, would require that California children entering kindergarten turn 5 by Sept. 1 rather than Dec. 2.

The bill, SB-1381, which was approved by the Legislature last week, would also provide a year of transitional kindergarten for children with fall birthdays, essentially creating another grade level for an estimated 120,000 4-year-olds.

California is one of only a few states with a kindergarten cutoff date later than Sept. 1, and many educators believe that puts younger children at a disadvantage when entering today's aca-

[See Schools, AA4]

# A new focus on early learning

[Schools, from AA1] demically demanding kindergarten classes.

Transitional kindergarten would provide two years of preparation for the first grade, which supporters say would boost test scores and reduce special education placements and the number of students held back a grade.

"Today's kindergarten is not what most of us think of when we remember our own experience decades ago," said state Sen. Joe Simitian (D-Palo Alto), who wrote the legislation. "It's a pretty rigorous place these days, and the youngest are struggling to keep up. One thing that caught my attention was a kindergarten report card that had a space for algebra skills, and I thought, 'OK, this is a lot more challenging.' Too many kids are just not ready."

In fact, in a practice some call kindergarten red-shirting, parents frequently hold their child back a year to al-

low them to mature and give them an academic advantage.

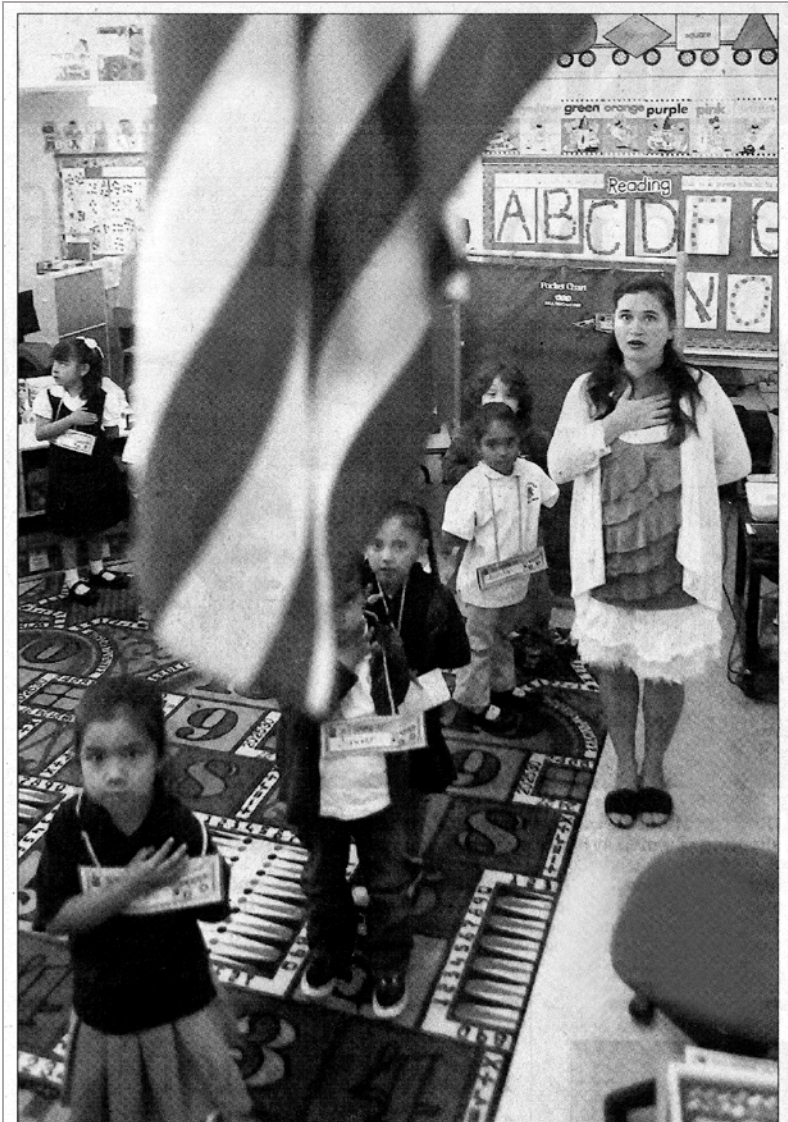
Typically, they are parents with the means to pay for an additional year of childcare or to send children to private preschool programs. Some critics question the long-term benefits of holding a child back, but the proposed changes in California would help level the playing field for low-income children and English learners, proponents say.

The California legislative analyst's office estimated that changing the cutoff date could save the state \$700 million annually by having 100,000 fewer kindergartners in school. The savings would be used by districts to establish transitional programs, so the legislation is considered cost neutral.

The age change would be phased in by moving the cutoff date a month earlier for three years beginning in 2012. Children born after Sept. 1 could still start kindergarten if their parents applied for early admission and the school district agreed it would be in the child's best interest.

Transitional kindergarten programs would be staffed by credentialed teachers and adhere to basic kindergarten standards, but with a curriculum that emphasizes fine motor skills, hands-on activities, learning to write names and basic counting.

The change would help young children who might



Photographs by MARK BOSTER Los Angeles Times

**YOUNG PUPILS:** Teacher Carmina Gonzalez leads the Pledge of Allegiance with her transitional kindergarten class at Gulf Avenue Elementary School.



**SQUIRMY:** Some of Gonzalez's students, mostly 4-year-olds, yawn and fidget at the start of class.

otherwise find themselves competing academically with classmates six months to a year older, said Debra Weller, president of the California Kindergarten Assn., which began calling for a later start to kindergarten more than two decades ago.

Over time, expectations for kindergartners have increased dramatically. They now are expected to be able to write three sentences with punctuation, read simple sentences and at least 50 words on sight, do simple addition and subtraction, and understand concepts of social studies and science.

But many 4-year-olds would still rather roll around on the rug and scribble, said Weller, a teacher at Bathgate Elementary in Mission Viejo.

"There's nothing wrong with their intelligence, they are perfect little 4-year-olds doing what 4-year-olds should do; but they start to realize they're not equal to their peers, so their self-esteem can start to be affected," said Weller, who has taught kindergarten for 18 years. "In many cases, they are the children who wind up in intervention classes and wind up being retained and costing a lot of extra time and resources."

Weller's observations are borne out by a 2008 report by the nonprofit Public Policy Institute of California, which reviewed 14 studies that examined the effects of entry age on student outcomes. Several of the studies suggested that older students are less likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability and more likely to attend college.

For Emma Payares, the transitional program at Gulf Avenue made sense for her 5-year-old son. The boy, whose birthday fell after last year's kindergarten deadline, can be shy in social situations and his attention sometimes wanders, she

said.

"Some children, especially boys, need that extra help so that they are not crammed with academics so quickly," said Payares, 53, a community instructor for the Los Angeles Unified School District. "They need time to develop socially, so it's definitely the ideal situation for him."

The legislation is supported by business, education, civic and child advocacy organizations.

The California Teachers Assn. has adopted a neutral position, after opposing a previous version of the bill that did not provide for transitional programs. A spokesman said the group would have liked more flexibility for local school districts and parents to determine what's best for individual children.

L.A. Unified launched a voluntary pilot transitional program this fall that will enroll about 900 students at 38 schools, including Gulf Avenue, said Whitcomb Hayslip, assistant superintendent for early childhood education.

The added year will be a special help to the school district's many dual language learners, he said. "These children come to school with many challenges but also a great opportunity, and that foundation year can give them the boost that they need," Hayslip said.

At Gulf Avenue, about 20 students attend the transitional class and most parents were enthusiastic, said Principal Nora Armenta.

"In affluent areas, the 'preppy K' programs have been around for a while because parents saw the need for their children, but not so much in working-class areas," Armenta said. "It's great that more children are going to have the same opportunity."

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# San Francisco Chronicle

September 13, 2010

EDITORIAL *On Changing the Age for Kindergarten*

## A better start in school

**F**ourteen studies reviewed by the Public Policy Institute of California in 2008 led it to conclude that the state need to shift its age of entry for kindergarten. Too many 4½-year-olds were struggling in class — and the effects of starting too early reverberated throughout their schooling.

State Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, had seen the studies. Even more compelling was a petition he received from 289 teachers that was brought to him by two in his district, reading specialist Natalie Bivas and kindergarten teacher Diana Argenti.

“This is an issue that has been bouncing around the Capitol for 25 years,” Simitian said.

A legislator who is known for turning constituent ideas into state laws decided to give the idea yet another try. His SB1381 would re-

quire that entering kindergartners must turn 5 by Sept. 1 — instead of the current Dec. 1.

Here is how it would work:

» The transition to the Sept. 1 cutoff would be phased in over three years, starting in fall 2012.

» The law would allow for exceptions to the Sept. 1 cutoff if requested by a parent or guardian — and the school district agrees that early admission is in the best interest of the child.

» The \$700 million annual savings

from the change — which would reduce the number of kindergartners about 100,000 statewide — would be put into a new “transitional kindergarten” program for 4-year-olds with fall birthdays who just missed the cutoff date for admission.

Common sense, and an abundance of research, suggests that sending children to school before they are ready is not in anyone’s interests: theirs, their classmates, teachers or taxpayers. By providing preschool options with the transitional kindergarten program, Simitian’s bill is likely to reap additional savings by reducing the number of students who end up in special education or forced to repeat an early grade.

California is one of just four states — Connecticut, Michigan and Vermont being the others — that set a Dec. 1 cutoff date for admission to kindergarten. All others are earlier, and Sept. 1 is the standard. A 2005 Rand Corp. study identified a significant correlation between the age a child entered kindergarten and his or her test scores.

SB1381 went through the state Senate and Assembly by wide margins, and with bipartisan support. It is backed by a broad array of policy experts and education advocates. It is a rare opportunity to improve our schools while saving money at the same time.

The fate of SB1381 now rests with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. He should sign it into law.

# San Francisco Chronicle

September 7, 2012

EDITORIAL *On Transitional Kindergarten*

## A better start for ‘young 5s’

California’s new “transitional kindergarten” program, which is proving highly popular with parents and educators, almost did not happen. Gov. Jerry Brown’s 2012-13 budget would have diverted the \$223 million to other programs. Fortunately, legislators stood their ground, and the state is moving forward with plans to gradually shift the cutoff date for kindergarten from December to Sept. 1.

Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, authored this 2010 measure in response to concerns from teachers that too many “young 5s” were not ready for school.

Under his bill, 4-year-olds who were shut out of kindergarten by the new date (they must be 5 by Nov. 1 this fall, the first year of the phase-in) could enroll in a “transitional kindergarten” program in public school. Best of all, Simitian’s bill gave districts great flexibility to design the programs to fit local needs and circumstances.

It’s important to note that the program does not add to the financial burden of districts because

these are students who otherwise could have entered kindergarten. But the transitional kindergarten does produce indirect savings by reducing the chances that students who are ill-prepared for kindergarten later get held back a grade or end up in special education programs.

The new cutoff dates are hardly revolutionary. Most states have a Sept. 1 cutoff for kindergarten.

The reaction to the program — from districts, teachers, parents — has been positive. California should stay the course, and must continue to resist any shortsighted attempts to undercut this long-overdue change.