

Earlier kindergarten cutoff date sensible

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California has one of the latest cutoff dates for kindergartners in the United States, and the result is that California has about 100,000 4-year-olds in kindergarten.

This has two major effects — one academic, one budgetary.

Academically, schooling before age 5 may be too early for many children. Research indicates that children who are older when they enter kindergarten are more likely to succeed in school, and are less likely to be held back later in school.

California's late cutoff date — Dec. 1 — allows too many children to enter kindergarten before they are developmentally ready.

The benefits of delaying kindergarten are even greater for children from poor families. Requiring children to turn 5 before entering kindergarten could improve their long-term chances for academic and social success.

Requiring children to be 5 when they start kindergarten would save money in the state's education budget. If California schools served 100,000 fewer kindergartners, that would save about \$700 million, according to the Legislative Analyst's Office.

Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, has introduced Senate Bill 1381, seeking to phase in a new cutoff date over three years. By 2014, all children would have to be 5 on Sept. 1 before entering kindergarten.

The question then becomes, what happens to the kids who would no longer be in kindergarten and who have working parents? Simitian's bill has an answer. Half of the \$700 million in savings would go toward expanding preschool programs.

Instead of struggling to keep up in kindergarten (with cumulative effects down the line in school), these kids would be able to develop the building blocks they need for later development.

To ensure that this money actually gets used for preschool, and not simply to plug budget holes, Simitian will need to strengthen the language in SB 1381.

This bill provides an opportunity to increase the number of quality preschool slots for California's 4-year-olds — and to reduce some of the budget strain on public schools. In tough budget times, these kinds of creative solutions will help the state save money, while making investments in the future.

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