

Testimony

Macomb Intermediate School District

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We all know the many research studies that confirm that children who are reading fluently and comprehend well by the end of 3rd grade will be more successful in school. We know that children and youth who are successful in school are less likely to drop out. And, study after study reinforces that a majority of prisoners in the correction system in this nation are unable to read or write at the 3rd grade level, and that has contributed to their incarceration. Furthermore, reading failure has exacted a tremendous long-term consequence for children's motivation to learn and later school performance. Increasing student achievement is expected in every classroom across this state, as it should be. So, why would changing the start date for a child's first exposure to a positive learning environment with a highly qualified teacher even be debated. We would hope that instead of delaying the education process that members of this legislature would be discussing ways to provide universal pre-school for all children in this state. General research into the effects of preschool education has demonstrated lasting effects on achievement in school and throughout life. Michigan is clearly making a positive statement to all children and ultimately increased student achievement by keeping the start date of December 1. Here are some facts about children from a study by Hart and Risley. Dr. Todd Risley is the co-author of the landmark book "Meaningful Differences in the Everyday

Experiences of Young American Children." He has authored more than 100 professional articles and book chapters and five books and monographs which have been widely cited and reprinted.

In collaboration with Dr. Betty Hart, he led the most comprehensive research project ever conducted on the home language learning experiences of young children. Conclusions from that study include:

- The typical 4 year old has a vocabulary of more than 1,000 words.
- A child from a low-income family enters kindergarten with a listening vocabulary of 3,000 words, while a child of a middle income family enters school with a listening vocabulary of 20,000 words.
- The average middle income 5 year old recognizes 22 letters of the alphabet, while the average low income 5 year old recognizes only 9 letters of the alphabet.
- 61% of low income children have no age appropriate books in their homes. The consequences of a slow start in reading become monumental as they accumulate exponentially over time.
- Active participation and engagement in school can increase the likelihood that preschoolers would learn more vocabulary. Children have to catch up at above average rates when vocabulary limitations exist.
- It is well established that there are significant differences in vocabulary knowledge among children from different socioeconomic groups beginning in young toddlerhood through high school (Hart and Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003). Extrapolating to the first 4 years of life, Hart and Risley estimate

that the average child from a professional family would be exposed to an accumulated experience of about 42 million words compared to 13 million for the child from a poor family. Moats (1999) estimated the difference at school entry to be about 15,000 words, with linguistically disadvantaged children knowing about 5,000 words compared to the more advantaged children knowing 20,000 words.

We know that according to CEPI the percent of free and reduce lunch students in Michigan in 2010 was 46%. Given the facts just reviewed we can clearly understand the need to make sure children are given the opportunity to start formal schooling as soon as possible. Vocabulary development and appropriate leveled books for students is imperative in learning how to read. For low-income children, every month of additional schools closes one-tenth of the gap between them and more advantaged students. The change in the start date for Kindergarten would hurt children from low-income families the most. The impact on achievement is significant if the child, through no fault of their own have been born into a poverty situation. Compounding that disadvantage because of a birthdate could mean the difference in developing learning disabilities or being successful in school overall. Dr. Todd Elder, Associate Professor of Economics at MSU states in a research brief published in The Journal of Human Resources that age-related differences in early school performance are largely driven by the accumulation of skills prior to kindergarten and tend to fade away quickly as children progress through school. Rather than providing a boost to children's human capital development, delayed entry simply postpones learning and is

likely not worth the long-term costs, especially among children from poorer families and those who have few educational opportunities outside of the public school system. In that same research paper, Dr. Elder indicates there is no evidence to support the popular notion that older children learn at a faster rate, which corroborates other recent evidence that there are no long-term beneficial effects on earnings from entering kindergarten at an older age (Fredricksson and Ockert 2005; Dobkin and Ferreira, 2006).

Dr. Samuel Meisels, President of Chicago's Erikson Institute, a well known early childhood expert says, 'redshirting' (the practice of holding children out of kindergarten for a year so they can be older when they begin school) is educational quackery. Dr. Sam Wang and Dr. Sandra Aamodt two neuroscientists (Dr. Wang is an associate professor of neuroscience at Princeton) states, "parents who want to give their young children an academic advantage have a powerful tool: school itself." In a large scale study at 26 Canadian elementary schools, first graders who were young for their year made considerably more progress in reading and math than kindergarteners who were old for their year. In another large study the youngest fifth-graders scored a little lower than their classmates, but five points higher in verbal IQ on average, than fourth-graders of the same age. In other words, school makes children smarter. The first six years of life are a time of tremendous growth and change in the developing brain. Synapses, the connections between brain cells, are undergoing major reorganization. Indeed a 4 year-old's brain uses more energy than it ever will again. Brain development cannot be put on pause, so the critical

question is how to provide best possible context to support it. That context according to Dr. Wang is the classroom.

With more rigor in Michigan's curriculum with the adoption of the Common Core and higher cut scores based on ACT it is imperative that children be given the earliest opportunity to begin the learning process. This legislation is a step backward in our goal to assure that every student is academically successful in this state.

We have been told this change in the Kindergarten start date will save about 150 million dollars. Is the future of our youngest learners – where we know we can make a powerful and significant impact on student achievement over time worth 150 million dollars. We believe it is not only worth it, but the savings yielded in future special education costs, remedial expenses, will ultimately impact the Michigan economy.