

Indiana Should Lower the Compulsory Schooling Age

By Shawnta S. Barnes – November 30, 2017



The compulsory school age dictates when children must attend school according to each state's law. In Indiana, the compulsory school start age is seven. Dr. Jennifer McCormick, Indiana State Superintendent of Public

Instruction, released her areas of focus for the next legislative session and lowering the compulsory age from seven to five is one of her priorities. I agree the age should be lowered, but I think we should aim for six instead five.

According to data pulled by Education Commission of the States and released in their November 2017 report, the most common school start age is six.

<i>Compulsory School Entry Age - 50 States & the District of Columbia</i>			
Five	Six	Seven	Eight
Arkansas	Alabama	Alaska	Pennsylvania
Connecticut	Arizona	Idaho	Washington
Delaware	California	Indiana	
District of Columbia	Colorado	Kansas	
Hawaii	Florida	Louisiana	
Maryland	Georgia	Maine	
New Mexico	Illinois	Minnesota	
Oklahoma	Iowa	Missouri	
Rhode Island	Kentucky	Montana	
South Carolina	Massachusetts	Nevada	
Virginia	Michigan	North Carolina	
Wyoming	Mississippi	North Dakota	
	Nebraska		
	New Hampshire		
	New Jersey		
	New York		
	Ohio		
	Oregon		
	South Dakota		
	Tennessee		
	Texas		
	Utah		
	Vermont		
	West Virginia		
	Wisconsin		

Lowering the compulsory age is not a new issue for Indiana. According to Indiana Economic Digest, “In 2015 and 2017, State Sen. Greg Taylor, D-Indianapolis, introduced bills to lower the school age. Both bills were assigned to the Senate education committee but never heard.” The opposition to lowering the age mostly centers around the belief that parents should be the ones to determine when their children are ready to begin school. The other reason some lawmakers haven’t supported this legislation in the past is because the majority of Indiana families are not waiting until seven to send their children to school. The majority of Indiana students attend kindergarten (even though it is not mandatory in our state) at age five or six.

I assert we should be concerned about the families who wait to send their children to school. Many times these students are not prepared when their families eventually decide to send them to school. According to the Indiana Department of Education’s Kindergarten Entrance Law Memo:

Students residing in Indiana be at least five (5) years of age on or before August 1 in order to enroll in public school kindergarten...The law does not require a child to be six years of age on or before August 1 to be eligible for First grade...School corporations have the authority and responsibility to enroll a student in the appropriate grade based on educational factors.

This means a school district has to choose whether or not to put a seven year old in kindergarten or first grade. I have personally observed those students being placed in first grade because of social concerns, not academic, which is an unfair burden to the teacher. In particular, I knew one of these first graders who couldn’t even write her name. When a child starts so far behind his or her peers, it is difficult for that child to ever get caught up.

Since age seven is our mandatory school entry age, Indiana cannot mandate kindergarten which leads to poor attendance for some students. Although IDOE includes the following in their Kindergarten Entrance Law Memo, “Even though it is not mandatory that parents enroll their children into kindergarten, once a child is enrolled in kindergarten, the child is required to adhere to all state statutes, including attendance

guidelines,” there are some parents who could care less about their child attending every day. I knew a parent who pulled her child out of kindergarten for a month because she did not feel like leaving her house during the winter. Although this is an extreme, but true example, many kindergarten educators try to ensure their students leave them prepared for first grade, but some parents don’t take kindergarten seriously. They just see it as a free babysitter because it is not mandatory.

Lowering the age will get students into kindergarten earlier. I think we should aim for six because it is a modest move and Indiana is a conservative state. I don’t think aiming for five will pass. Honestly, there are some five years old who are too immature and not ready for kindergarten. Lowering Indiana’s school start age to six will allow parents to decide if their child needs another year to mature before entering school, but it won’t be so late that the child could be two years older than their peers when they enter kindergarten.

If once again, this potential legislation stalls and we don’t lower the compulsory start age, at least Indiana can say our start age isn’t eight like Pennsylvania and Washington.