

September 8, 2010

The Honorable Arnold Schwarzenegger
Governor of California
State Capitol, First Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Senate Bill 1381 – Kindergarten Entry Age

Dear Governor Schwarzenegger:

This letter is to respectfully request your signature on Senate Bill 1381 relative to kindergarten entry age.

In most states, children must turn five by September 1st in order to start kindergarten. California is one of only four states (along with Connecticut, Michigan, and Vermont) with a cut-off date later than December 1st; at the same time, California has some of the highest standards for what we expect children to learn in kindergarten classrooms.

Research indicates that beginning school at an older age improves children's social and academic development. A 2005 study by the Rand Corporation found a "significant boost" to test scores, especially for children from low-income families.

A 2008 analysis by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) of fourteen recent rigorous studies on how entrance age affects student outcomes in the short and long term found that "increasing California's entry age will likely have a number of benefits, including boosting student achievement test scores." Several studies in the PPIC review also suggest that changing the kindergarten cut-off date change would affect student outcomes including grade retention, special education enrollment, high school completion rates, and higher wages as adults.

Based on these benefits, the Legislative Analyst's Office, the California Performance Review, and the Governor's Committee on Education Excellence have each called for an earlier kindergarten cut-off date.

Senate Bill 1381 accomplishes this objective by changing the kindergarten entry-age from five years old by December 2nd to five years old by September 1st. To allow local districts time to prepare and give the state time to make any necessary adjustments, the new age requirement would be delayed for two years and then phased-in over three years beginning in the 2012-13 school year.

In order to provide flexibility for children with late birthdays that are ready for kindergarten, the bill protects an important provision in existing law which allows for a child born after September 1st to be admitted into kindergarten on a case-by-case basis, if the parent or guardian applies for early admission and the school district agrees that it would be in the best interest of the child.

For those "young fives" (children turning five from September 2 – December 2) whose kindergarten is delayed, the bill creates a transitional kindergarten program to build a bridge between early learning and kindergarten using a modified kindergarten curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate.

Some school districts in California (Torrance and Palo Alto) already provide their youngest learners with programs like transitional kindergarten, while others (Sacramento, Fresno, Los Angeles, and Long Beach) are launching this innovative reform now.

Senate Bill 1381 is cost-neutral. The \$700 million in annual cost savings resulting from having a smaller kindergarten cohort is used to fund the transitional kindergarten program, and remains within Proposition 98. These savings expire after fifteen years; giving the state ample time to evaluate the benefits of transitional kindergarten and decide whether or not to continue it in the future.

Based on the experience in other states, we also expect significant cost savings in excess of \$130 million annually, once the bill is fully implemented, due to fewer retentions and special education placements.

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Assembly Floor amendments address mandate cost concerns raised by the Department of Finance, as well as provide technical corrections to protect Proposition 98 funding by ensuring that children participating in the transitional kindergarten program generate ADA revenue limit funding for school districts.

The bill received bipartisan votes in both the Senate and Assembly and is supported by a broad coalition of teacher, education, civil rights, and business organizations, including California Kindergarten Association, California State PTA, Preschool California, FIGHT CRIME: Invest in Kids, FIRST 5 California, Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, Public Advocates, Silicon Valley Leadership Group, Bay Area Council, Orange County Business Council, and several area chambers of commerce in Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco and San Jose (a complete list is attached).

As amended in the Assembly, **there is no opposition to this bill.**

Senate Bill 1381 will ensure that we start children at the right age with the right experience (with no displaced students). The extra year of growth and development is especially important for low-income and English learner students who often come to school with less academic preparation. And, the transitional kindergarten program pays for itself for the first fifteen years. This is a win-win for kids, and it's good for California.

I respectfully request your signature on Senate Bill 1381.

Sincerely,

S. Joseph Simitian
State Senator, Eleventh District

cc: Paul Navarro, Deputy Legislative Secretary
Michael Prosio, Legislative Secretary and Deputy Chief of Staff
Bonnie Reiss, Secretary of Education