

CPS flags parents with 'redshirt' rule

Age policy upsets families who want to hold back kids

By **Cynthia Dizikes**
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Jonathan Schroeder was a congenial and curious 4-year-old, but preschool proved challenging.

He rarely raised his hand to speak, stuck close by his teacher and set a year-end goal to spend less time hiding in the bathroom.

So when it came time to enroll him in kindergarten, his parents researched and debated before making a decision that has become increasingly popular during the past several decades: They gave Jonathan another year to grow older, bigger and maybe a bit more confident.

They also unwittingly broke the rules.

When the Schroeders entered Jonathan into this year's kindergarten lottery for a slot at one of the city's elite magnet schools, Chicago Public Schools officials notified them that he had exceeded the district's age limit because he will turn 6 in July. His only option was to apply directly to first grade.

"I started crying, I was so angry," Mary Stephenson Schroeder said at the Wicker Park home she shares with her husband and three children. "I feel like I made all these plans for what I thought would be best for him and they just threw it out the window."

The practice of kindergarten "redshirting" became more common in the 1990s as course work turned from coloring and singing

about the alphabet to reading, simple arithmetic and

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standardized testing. In 2009, 17 percent of kindergartners were 6 or older by October that school year, up from about 5 percent in 1970, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

But redshirting has not been without controversy. While some educators say delaying kindergarten can lead to better grades, athletic ability and self-esteem, others say any academic and social advantages are short-lived and may be eclipsed by greater challenges once children reach puberty in middle school.

At CPS, the intent of a hard-line approach was partly to ensure greater equity among Chicago children vying for a limited number of positions at the district's top schools, general counsel Patrick Rocks said in an interview this week.

Although the CPS age cap for preschool, kindergarten and first grade has been a longstanding policy, the district just began uniformly enforcing it this year at its competitive magnet schools.

"If an individual can gain maturity and can gain confidence in the testing process by virtue of a parent deciding to hold a child for a year ... (it) isn't fair because the same rules should apply to everyone," Rocks said.

In Chicago's suburbs, school principals insist

only that children turn 5 by the start of the September of their kindergarten year. Most districts set no caps on how old kindergartners can be when they enroll, with some early childhood teachers even advising parents of children born in the summer months to consider giving their kids "the gift of another year."

Similarly, New York City public schools and Los Angeles Unified School District will make exceptions

for older children. And Los Angeles is piloting a two-year transitional kindergarten initiative in order to handle the redshirting wave, said Whitcomb Hayslip, a consultant for the program.

"We are trying to fill that niche for kids who may not be ready, while creating more options for families who may not have money to hold their children out of public school for another year," Hayslip said.

Many parents worry about the social and emotional effects of starting their children too early, pointing to research indicating that boys may mature at a slower rate than girls when it comes to language and fine motor skills. On the other end, some parents also fret that their children may be the oldest in the class and will be bored and possibly unruly.

The age cutoff at CPS is Sept. 1, meaning that if a child turns 5 on or before that date his parents should enroll him in kindergarten. Similarly, if a child is 6, he must enter first grade.

Marjorie Rice's son, Isaac, was born on Sept. 1 and is now one of the youngest students in his first grade class. Although he has excelled, earning As and Bs, Rice said she still worries about the challenges he may face in the future.



"It's a question that is always on my mind," Rice said. "Should I have held him back? Should I hold him back this year? What is going to happen in high school?"

Risa McDonell said cutoff dates seem more arbitrary for children born closer to them. She wanted to enroll her son, who can already do basic math and read, in a magnet kindergarten this year but was told she couldn't because he turns 5 at the end of September.

"It really bothers me that I don't have that option," McDonell said. "They are really stopping parents who know their kids better than the bureaucrats."

In response to recent comments about the cap, CPS officials said they have begun a districtwide audit to check overall compliance and are now considering having a commission evaluate the possibility of adding flexibility.

"The policy question is, (should) the district allow for some period of time in which that parental judgment could be made?" Rocks said. "And then the follow question is, (what) is the right period of time — is it a month? Is it two months?"

Some experts object to districts allowing parents to hold children out an extra year, arguing that it favors the wealthy, won't necessarily lead to better

outcomes and might increase the chances that children will feel isolated.

"You have kids in a grade that could be up to two years older than their peers, which can have serious implications in high school in terms of behavior and conduct," said Samuel Meisels, president of Erikson Institute, a graduate school in child development.

"It is really short-sighted for people not to be looking down the road a little bit," said Meisels, who lauded the CPS age cap policy.

But Schroeder said she and her husband remain convinced they made the right decision.

After one more year in preschool, Jonathan has grown surer of himself, offering to help younger chil-

dren and even volunteering recently to lead his class in their ABCs. Although he was accepted into first grade at a magnet school, his parents still think he needs kindergarten.

"It is just so frustrating because this is his life we're talking about," Schroeder said. "If I can do something that I think will help him be more successful, why wouldn't I?"

Tribune reporter Tara Malone contributed.

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— Risa McDonell



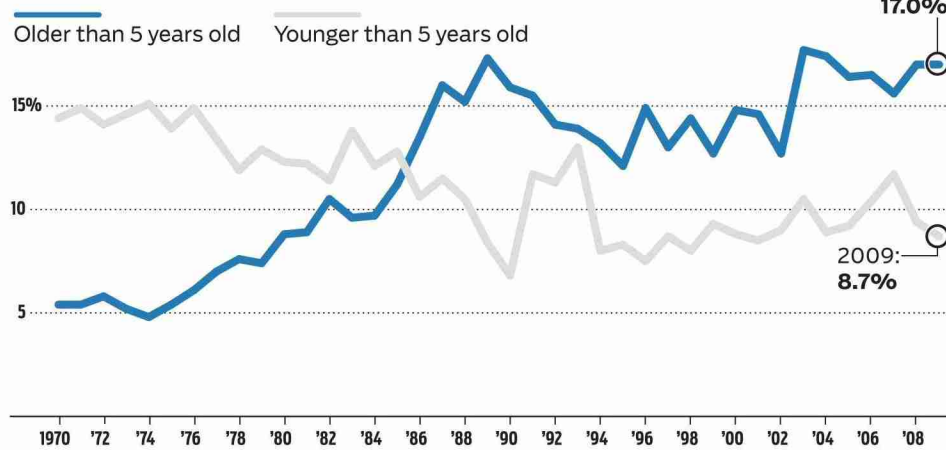
JOSÉ M. OSORIO/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Mary Stephenson Schroeder gave her son an extra year of preschool, but he must now go to first grade, CPS says.

Getting a later start

During the past 40 years, U.S. kindergarteners have gradually become older. Although a majority of kindergartners are still 5 years old, the percentage of kindergartners who are at least 6 years old has increased from about 5 percent in 1970 to 17 percent in 2009. The percentage of kindergartners younger than 5 has dropped.

PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Current Population Survey

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