

THE RED SHIRTING DEBATE

By Kristin Bustamante • December 10, 2010

Last year, more than 33,000 kindergarteners were enrolled in the 170 schools that comprise the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the seventh largest public school district in the nation and the largest in Texas. If the HISD follows national trends, approximately 3,000 of these students were markedly older than their classmates, entering school as 6-year-olds rather than 5-year-olds. No, Houston isn't full of preschool flunkies! The reason is redshirting – the practice of intentionally delaying an eligible child's entry to kindergarten, usually for academic or physical reasons.

Redshirting is a term rooted in the practice of delaying or suspending a college athlete's participation in order to lengthen his or her period of eligibility. This period of eligibility is typically four seasons (due to the four years traditionally needed to gain a bachelor's degree). An athlete may be given the opportunity to redshirt their first year in order to allow them to spread their eligibility over five years of academic enrollment. During this time they attend classes, practice and dress for games but do not compete. This year on the bench often gives the athlete an athletic advantage as they step onto the field another year stronger and more experienced. When it comes to kindergarten, about 9 percent of school-age children are redshirted each year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Similar to college athletics, it is almost always a desire for an additional year of preparation that drives parents to consider redshirting kindergarten students, especially those with birthdays extremely near the cutoff for enrollment (children must be 5 years old by September 1 in the state of Texas), thus making them the youngest in their class. This extra year allows the child to develop additional physical, mental, emotional and intellectual prowess in order to ease the transition to kindergarten and reward them with somewhat advanced standing in the class. Proponents of the practice point out that there are no long-term effects on the redshirted student, while opponents feel it creates a disadvantage for children with late birthdays who do begin school as a young 5-year-old.

The Arguments

In support of redshirting, Kathy Bedard and Elizabeth Dhuey of UC Santa Barbara gathered achievement data in the U.S. and Europe that suggested that students who were older than their classmates performed better, citing the fact that monitored U.S. eighth graders who were older ranked 4 to 8 percent higher than the youngest students in their grade.

Recently, two studies are challenging this ruling. The National Bureau of Economic Research examined detailed data from the birth certificate of every child in the United States from 1989 to 2001 and found that affluent mothers tended to get pregnant over the Christmas holidays while poor women got pregnant in the late spring and summer. No clear assessment was made as to the cause of this discrepancy but it could be argued that well-educated mothers were consciously timing the birth of their children to place them at the head of the class. This theory suggests that those older eighth graders weren't performing better solely due to their age. Instead, it is likely they perform better because they tend to be born to mothers who are affluent and college-educated.

A recent study by Todd Elder and Darren H. Lubotsky has further challenged the advantages of redshirting kindergarteners by finding that the main reason older children perform better is not due to a better ability to

learn but rather depends on the amount of preparation a child receives for school. Obviously, children who delay kindergarten by a year and are enrolled in an academic preschool program are receiving an additional year of preparation their 5-year-old playground peers did not benefit from.

Rather than redshirting, the HISD is seeing a trend of Houston parents seeking out early childhood education programs. These programs prepare children for kindergarten, making the practice of redshirting based on academic readiness unnecessary. “You can tell kids who have been in pre-K programs because they come in ready versus kids who have never been in a structured environment at all,” says Rodney Watson, elementary school improvement officer for HISD. “In terms of redshirting, it doesn’t mean that they’re going to be ahead,” adds Kimberly Fonteno, also an elementary school improvement officer for HISD. “It’s not necessarily the age, it’s the preparation.”

It’s a Boy Thing

Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that redshirting happens more often with male kindergarten students, presumably because parents fear their boy being the runt of the litter and prefer to place him in a place of dominance. This “leader of the pack” mentality is based on the theory that boys mature a bit slower than girls and an extra year of life experience will produce a stronger, more dominant and ultimately more successful male student.

Is it Worth it?

Although there’s no required immunization for it, redshirting may be the newest ill effect on your kindergarten student. The practice of redshirting pushes the average kindergarten age closer to 6, flipping the suggested advantages into disadvantages for those students who were not redshirted and now trend younger and perhaps less socially, physically, emotionally and intellectually prepared for kindergarten. The skill set that may have passed muster just a few years ago could be called into question if older students begin to flood kindergarten classrooms with advanced abilities. Six-year-old students in a kindergarten classroom could conceivably be 12 to 18 months older than their 5-year-old peers – a significant developmental gap at these ages. While parents argue that this gap can make their 5-year-olds feel self-conscious and excluded, the same can be argued for the children on the higher end of the spectrum who are so distanced from their classmates by being older and smarter.

Real Moms Make the Decision

Houston mom Abigail Warner is familiar with the redshirting decision; she chose to redshirt both her daughter and son, but for very different reasons. Despite having been in a Montessori preschool program that academically prepared her for school, Warner’s daughter had an August 23 birthday that would have made her one of the youngest in the class. “She was pretty introverted and preferred to just sit back and watch,” says Warner of her daughter’s personality. “She was super friendly, but she wasn’t one to stick her neck out. She didn’t like calling attention to herself. I felt that academically she was more than ready to go into the first grade, but socially she would have been the absolute youngest and I knew in my gut that she would do much better if she was the oldest.” Warner felt her daughter’s increased social confidence would cause her to be more apt to raise her hand and participate in class.

On the other hand, Houston mom Coree Silvana was aware of the redshirting practice but didn’t consider it for her son with a May 13 birthday, thinking it was a practice mainly used for later birthdays. She later came to regret the decision after realizing how immature her child was compared to their classmates.

Physical considerations also give Houston parents pause. Warner’s son has a May 15 birthday, so while he wasn’t on the cusp of meeting the age requirements for enrollment, he was a bit smaller than his peers. Warner worried

his smaller physical stature would put him at a disadvantage around larger male classmates. “He is outgoing and funny, but he’s not a gruff, aggressive boy,” she says. “I wasn’t sure how tall he was going to be and I think with boys it’s definitely a positive when they are bigger and stronger and feel secure that way.” Warner shares that she worried it might be detrimental to her son if he was both one of the youngest and one of the smallest in the class.

Assessing Readiness

Asli Remlinger, owner of the Goddard School in Katy, explains a few indicators of emotional readiness to begin kindergarten. The preschool takes a center-based approach to learning and Remlinger uses this as one measure of a child’s readiness. “They have to be able to share and verbalize their needs and wants with each other,” she says, adding that children with these skills are able to go through the centers in an easy manner.

What happens if a child begins kindergarten before they’re emotionally ready? “It can create a discipline problem for the classroom,” responds Remlinger, adding that student/teacher ratios on the classroom tend to be 22:1.

Judy Feinstein, owner of Towne Creek School in Missouri City, agrees that there are certain emotional indicators of readiness that parents should look out for. “Parents think their children should know the letters and the sounds they make, be able to cut, have a good concept of counting and basic preschool skills,” says Feinstein. While she agrees with these assessments, she also feels that children should be ready to sit for 15 to 20 minutes, pay attention and know how to listen when someone else is talking. “Kindergarten teachers love it when kids come in reading; this is a great skill set,” she says. “But they just want a child who is ready to learn. That’s why some of the younger children just aren’t ready.”

Physical skills are also important when assessing a child’s readiness for kindergarten. “My nephew went when he was not ready and it was struggle for him because he didn’t have the fine motor skills,” shares Remlinger. “He ended up repeating kindergarten one more time.” She adds that in the HISD, children are generally expected to know their letters and be on the brink of reading before starting kindergarten, even though there is no formal assessment. “Children may end up being behind cognitively because teachers zip through these skills fairly quickly,” she says.

Leave it to the Parents

Clearly, there are many opposing factors that impact the decision to redshirt kindergarten and it’s ultimately the parents who know their children best. After assessing a child’s readiness, parents should choose the route they think best fits their child’s emotional, physical and cognitive readiness to associate with their classmates.

“Parents should look within themselves to find what’s best for their child,” advises Watson. He encourages parents to visit the school their child will attend, look at the curriculum and understand their expectations. If it seems like a good fit, parents shouldn’t automatically redshirt a child with a late birthday.

“Some children are held back even though they’re actually ready,” says Remlinger. “These children can become very, very bored and it’s a challenge to motivate them to go to school. Others are held back and it’s the perfect age for them. In a perfect scenario, a child begins kindergarten at an age that’s best for their self confidence.”

In 1980, approximately 10 percent of kindergarteners were redshirted. In 2009, that number had doubled. But what is driving this trend and is it right for every late bloomer and birthday? Is it correct assessment of a child’s abilities and the desire to better prepare them, or is it driven by parent’s desires to have the brightest, strongest and best in the class? Again, it’s ultimately the parent’s call.