



Colchester School District

Administrative Offices, 59 Rathe Rd, PO Box 27, Colchester, Vermont 05446

Phone: (802) 264-5999 • www.csdvt.org • Fax: (802) 318-4669

S.34 Testimony provided by:

Amy Minor: Colchester School District Superintendent of Schools
Vermont Superintendents Association, President Elect

February 10, 2023

Good afternoon, for the record, I am Amy Minor, Superintendent for the Colchester School District and the president-elect for the Vermont Superintendents Association. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Before I comment on S.34, I wanted to share just a bit about my background, I have served as an educator in Vermont for over twenty years as both a teacher and an administrator and finally, I am the proud mom of two daughters (ages 10, and 13) and I remember registering my own girls for kindergarten.

With respect to S.34, I would like to convey, at the outset, that the elementary principals in Colchester and the Vermont Superintendents Association are not in support. In the Colchester School District, the current kindergarten eligibility date in Colchester requires the student to be five years old BEFORE September 1st. Regionally, school districts are not 100 percent in alignment with this date but we are close. Many districts around us are “on or before September 1st” in order to be eligible.

After consultation with my administrative team and the Vermont Superintendents Association, my recommendations to your committee are:

- That the General Assembly take **no action** to standardize the kindergarten entrance age.
- If the General Assembly determines that legislative action is needed, **September 1** is used as the kindergarten eligibility date for students turning age five.
- That the General Assembly take no action that would lower the kindergarten entrance age by selecting a date later than September 1. The General Assembly should take **no action** to create or require an early entrance waiver process.
- That the General Assembly does not provide families with the decision-making power and authority to determine kindergarten readiness and enrollment.

Amy Minor
Superintendent
of Schools

George Trieb
Business & Operations
Manager

Carrie Lutz
Director of Student
Support Services

Jean Shea
Director of Instructional
Support Services

Gwendolyn Carmolli
Director of Curriculum
& Instruction

Standardized Kindergarten Entrance Age is Statute:

Recommendation: **NO ACTION** should be taken to standardize the kindergarten entrance age.

Narrative: In its report titled Standardizing the Kindergarten Entrance Age, required by Act 166 of 2022 and filed with the General Assembly on December 16, 2022, the Vermont Agency of Education concluded that “no legislative action is needed, given the numerous challenges facing teachers, school systems, students and families.” The report outlines details around current practice under existing law and concludes that most, if not all, school districts use a September 1 cutoff date for kindergarten entry age. Schools across Vermont have clearly established a process that is working for their districts and the vast majority of families, we urge you to allow for local control around this issue and we believe our systems are working.

Kindergarten Eligibility Date

Recommendation: If the General Assembly determines that action is necessary at the legislative level, then Superintendents recommend that the General Assembly establish kindergarten eligibility as five years old **on or before September 1**.

Narrative: A firm entrance date is required in order to successfully predict student enrollment, and plan for the appropriate number of teachers and classrooms to ensure that Vermont School will be in alignment with the Vermont Education Quality Standards, specifically class size. Unpredictable swings in enrollment could have negative impacts on class size, funding predictability, and operations.

Lowering Kindergarten Entrance Age

Recommendation: The General Assembly take **no action** that would lower the kindergarten entrance age by selecting a date later than September 1. The General Assembly does not create a waiver process or requirement.

Narrative: Lowering the entrance age will require teachers to increase the amount of differentiation that they will need to plan for in their instruction, curriculum, and assessments in order to meet the vast range of developmental readiness in their classrooms. Not just instruction in academics, but also direct instruction in social and emotional learning. This is challenging knowing that access to qualified paraeducators to support our kindergarten teachers and students is dramatically diminished given the educator workforce shortage.

For example, kindergarten teachers already differentiate for a huge range of developmental needs and abilities. If early entrance is enacted, you could have children from 4 years old to 7 years old in kindergarten classrooms. Specifically, early entrance students ages 4/5, typical entrance age 5/6, VT statute (must be enrolled by 6) and the practice of "red-shirting" 6/7. We believe the 4-7 year old age span in a kindergarten classroom will negatively impact the quality of instruction for **ALL** students.

We have seen a number of families choose to hold their students back a year with the belief that they would be more academically successful and competitive in the older grades and college application process if they wait a year to enter kindergarten. On the flip side of “red-shirting” early entrance can make learning about a race to get ahead that is really only available for some students. Any system that we create needs to be accessible to all students.

As you hear testimony and review the systems that Vermont schools have in place for kindergarten eligibility please ensure that the system is equitable and available to all. In my experience, the vast majority of families that have made requests for early kindergarten entrance are those that have been historically advantaged (white, not experiencing poverty, no disabilities). Students who have skills based on access to high-quality preschool, to social peers, and to paid co-curricular opportunities (sports, music lessons, etc.). It has also been families who have had the means to pay for evaluations to demonstrate that their child should be allowed to enter kindergarten early. These assessments can be expensive and they are often biased toward those who are historically advantaged.

Universal preschool for all Vermont four-year-olds is an important concept for Vermont to consider. As it could increase the access and quality of education that four-year-olds experience. It may also reduce the number of families that are requesting early kindergarten enrollment because they have access to a high-quality program.

A concern is that not all families will have equitable access to a waiver process as they might not be able to demonstrate the necessary data required for early entrance into kindergarten. Those benchmarks would need to be clearly defined so that the waiver process was implemented with fidelity across the state. This process could also negatively impact families who do not have the means to pay for preschool, potentially reducing the chance that the student would meet the waiver criteria, and that they would never have the opportunity for early entrance into kindergarten.

Schools across the state already have strong, clearly articulated grade advancement and retention procedures for students who are achieving above or below grade level. This is an important point to consider, as ALL students who truly are accelerated already have access to a standardized process for grade advancement to be considered through their local school system.

Early enrollment could also result in students needing to be retained in either kindergarten or first grade as a result of not being kindergarten ready at the time of enrollment. Retention should be avoided if possible due to the long-term social and emotional impacts of being held back a grade. Early access to kindergarten could have detrimental effects if the students are not both academically and socially ready. Socially being the oldest or youngest student in a grade level has impacts, especially when these students enter middle grades, high school, and college.

Families Determining Kindergarten Readiness and Enrollment Date

Recommendation: The General Assembly does not provide families with the decision-making power and authority to determine kindergarten readiness and enrollment date.

Narrative: The VSA and my administrative team strongly oppose additional language prohibiting a school district from denying enrollment of a child, if the parent seeks to enroll the child regardless of the district's recommendation. We do not recommend allowing parental determination to establish when a child will start kindergarten, this should be a local decision. Should this happen, families would have the authority to enroll their student before they were academically or socially ready having negative repercussions on the student's school experience for years to come. Essentially, allowing the child's guardian to determine and accurately assess why the student should be eligible for enrollment without having expertise or knowledge of the benchmark skills necessary in order to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.