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Bill to Lower Kindergarten Age to Four Held After Lawmakers, Educators Warn of Developmental and Funding Risks

Sen. Alma Francis Heyliger's proposal to begin formal education at age 4 instead of 4 faced broad opposition from educators and agencies, who said the move could disrupt Head Start programs, strain teachers, & place unready children in classrooms too soon

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Despite not having expected amendments that would “drastically” overhaul proposed legislation to lower the mandatory entry age for kindergarten, Senator Alma Francis Heyliger kept the bill on Wednesday's agenda anyway, citing the “importance of having this frank discussion.”

Bill 36-0069 seeks to change the age a child begins kindergarten from five years of age to four. Senator Francis Heyliger told her colleagues on the Committee on Education and Workforce Development that she had been researching the educational structures and arrangements in other jurisdictions.

The proposed legislation came about following her conclusion that “we need to make adjustments as it relates to how we attempt to educate our students.” One of those necessary adjustments, argued Francis Heyliger, is mandating a “formal set of education from age four and not five.” She argued that enrolling them earlier could offer a “better chance, in my opinion, of potentially helping our students to get better scores.”

Invited testifiers, however, countered that the negative outcomes far outweigh any potential benefits.

Abigail Hendricks-Cagan is a member of the Board of Education. She reminded lawmakers that a pre-kindergarten framework is already regulated by law, and implementing Bill 36-0069 risks “destabilizing programs that are already carefully regulated by law.” Pre-K programs are intended for children aged 3-5 years. As Ms. Hendricks-Cagan noted, “the compulsory education law fixes age five as the standard because it balances developmental readiness with educational opportunity.”

Emotional and developmental readiness was a recurring theme in each testimony. So too was the potential human resource burden. Ms. Hendricks-Cagan testified that there is a territory-wide “shortage of qualified early childhood educators” and many educators are already eligible for retirement. Implementing Sen. Francis Heyliger’s proposed legislation would mean kindergarten classes would expand. “Our classrooms are not uniformly equipped for four-year-olds, and our curricula are not designed for this age group,” Ms. Hendricks-Cagan said.

The Department of Education does not support the original iteration of the bill either. “Younger children benefit from a later start to develop social and emotional maturity, which are crucial for academic success and overall well-being,” Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington said. She offered the results of several studies that allowed VIDE to conclude that students who enter kindergarten at a later age display stronger academic results in the long term.

She lamented that such a shift would place a “massive, massive strain on an already burdened infrastructure of the department’s aging elementary schools.” Like Ms. Hendricks-Cagan, VIDE’s commissioner bemoaned existing challenges in securing qualified personnel. Kindergarten teachers already require dual certification to provide early childhood instruction. “The lack of a proposed funding source is detrimental to the adoption of this bill,” she stated as well.

Commissioner Wells-Hedrington also reminded lawmakers that such a move would be “detrimental to federally funded Head Start programs operated by the Department of Human Services.” Ms. Hendricks-Cagan, too, noted that the bill could “jeopardize that federal investment, particularly in the current political climate where every dollar is contested.”

Carla Benjamin, the assistant commissioner at the Department of Human Services, espoused similar concerns as the speakers before her. That included the reality that “not all four-year-olds are developmentally prepared for the structure and expectations of a kindergarten classroom.”

Since federal funding for DHS’s Head Start Program is based on enrollment, Ms. Benjamin worried that shifting an entire year of students to the kindergarten level could be “detrimental.” Currently, the Head Start program is “operating at 91.9% of its funded enrollment of 637 children

with 586 currently enrolled,” per Ms. Benjamin. More than half of that figure are four-year-olds.

If passed, Bill 36-0069 “would directly eliminate a majority of our current student population and destabilize the funding and staffing that sustains it,” Ms. Benjamin stated.

There were also concerns from the Department of Health. Assistant Commissioner Nicole Craigwell-Syms reminded the bill’s sponsor that research shows “early access does not automatically mean better outcome.” Reports state that many four-year-olds “lack the attention span, emotional regulation, and stamina required to sustain a full day structured setting,” noted Syms. Studies also show that premature enrollment could “heighten anxiety, frustration and behavioral issues without yielding long-term academic gains.”

There were also concerns that such a move would result in children entering kindergarten as early as three years old if they were born later in the calendar year.

Lawmakers ultimately voted to hold the bill in committee pending the substantial amendments Senator Francis Heyliger said were forthcoming. Before doing so, they shared a host of concerns.

Senator Carla Joseph warned against “developmentally exposing the students, because now they're going into a major population that is not just composed of students their age.” Committee chair Senator Kurt Vialet was concerned about the potential loss of Head Start funding. “We're jeopardizing possibly 180 jobs that are partially federally funded, to include school lunch,” he stated. Senator Avery Lewis advocated for the primary sector who “employ as well, and who was having hardship as well.”

“Let's proceed with caution, with everything that we are deciding that we're going to do,” advised Senator Vialet.