

Testimony on Senate Bill 321 (related to compulsory school age)

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Honorable Madams, Sirs, and Fellow Citizens,

Thank you for allowing me to address you regarding SB 321.

My name is Brian Ray. I earned my Ph.D. in science education from Oregon State University, an M.S. in zoology from Ohio University, a B.S. in biology from the University of Puget Sound, and a teaching degree from Oregon State University. I am a former classroom teacher in public and private schools and professor of education at the undergraduate and graduate university levels. I have been doing original educational research and following the research of others for 32 years. I am regularly interviewed by state, national, and international media, testify in courts and legislatures on educational topics, and present research at professional meetings.

There are several key reasons why SB 321 is a bad idea and should be opposed.

Research, Hard Evidence

First, consider research and hard Evidence. Whether the research evidence is counter-intuitive to one or more of us, we must pay attention to it. We claim that we are logical and scientific in this day and age, so let us be that.

This bill implies that formal schooling for younger and younger ages will benefit children and society. But research shows no long-term benefits of younger and younger formal education. For example, this reminds me of a 2014 review of research on pre-Kindergarten schooling and education programs in which researcher Armor concluded the following:

It "... may help, but the research to date does not support expanding existing government programs. New preschool programs should not be introduced unless they have statistically significant, non-negligible benefits."¹ (p. 13)

In other words, there is no factual, empirical evidence to justify spending tax dollars on this, let alone forcing or compelling parents to put their children in it.

In a 2013 study of 88,000 4th- and 8th-grade students and the age at which they entered school, the researchers found:

Students who are **older** when they enter school perform slightly better than their older classmates in the lower grades of primary school, but these differences in achievement are very small and are probably no longer present by the end of primary schooling"² (emphasis added) (p. 651)

In a review of studies in various nations and the impact of school entry age on academic achievement, researcher Sharp concluded the following:

“The arguments in favour of children being taught academic skills earlier do not appear to be borne out by the evidence.”³ (p. 15)

In the concluding section, “The impact of school entry age on academic achievement,” the authors wrote the following:

- There is a lack of conclusive evidence concerning the benefits of starting school at different ages.
- The best available evidence suggests that teaching more formal skills early (in school) gives children an initial academic advantage, but that this advantage is not sustained in the longer term.
- There are some suggestions that an early introduction to a formal curriculum may increase anxiety and have a negative impact on children’s self esteem and motivation to learn.” (p. 18)

Based on a study of 4.8 million students, researchers Fredriksson and Öckert found the following:

“In this paper we have presented a collection of evidence suggesting that starting school at an **older** age is beneficial for scholastic achievement. Starting school one year later increases compulsory school performance by roughly 0.2 standard deviations (SD). Moreover, the effects persist into adulthood. Late school starters go on to have more schooling and they have a slight long-run earnings advantage in comparison to early starters” (p. 38). “Using a rich data set ..., we find that children who start school at an older age do better in school and go on to have more education than their younger peers. **Children from families with weaker educational tradition have more to win from starting school later**” (emphasis added) (p. iii).

There must be at least a correlation between X and Y to consider a cause-and-effect relationship. Research shows not even a correlation between earlier compulsory school age and better learning. SB 321 is illogical; it flies in the face of decades of education research findings.

You might think I am cherry picking research to support my statements. I am not. I challenge you to find a solid body of evidence that making compulsory school age younger will substantially increase children’s achievement or success into their adult lives. I think you will not find it.

Agency and Choice by Parents and Their Children

Second, SB 321 would remove agency and choice from parents and families. Lowering the compulsory age takes choices away from parents, who have the rightful place of responsibility and authority in a child’s educational life.

This point has two parts related to the Oregon government’s role regarding the education or schooling of children. First, the Oregon Constitution (Article VIII, Section 3) says the

government shall provide for the establishment of common schools. Our Oregon Constitution does not compel attendance in the common (public) schools or any schools. Second, our Constitution does not give control over schooling to the government, you legislators, when parents have not put their children in government-run and tax-funded public schools. That is to say, Article I, Section 3, shows that the fundamental right of parents to direct the education and upbringing of their children should not be denied or abrogated by Oregon's government.

This fundamentally contradicts the spirit of school choice, parental and family engagement and agency. Are you for command-and-control schooling or for school choice? You cannot have your cake and eat it, too. If you believe in choice and that the large majority of parents can make responsible decisions for their children, whether they are ready for or need schooling at age 4, 6, or 8, prove you do and let them do it. If you believe in choice, you should oppose this bill. Parents can already choose to send their child to school at age 5; why take this choice away from parents, the ones who know their children best?

Research evidence shows that parental choice works. Oregon has a perfect example of this. Over 20 years of test scores from homeschool students in Oregon, whose parents exercised the ultimate in school choice who were not compelled to go to school at age 5, prove that the vast majority of parents can and do make good decisions for their children. These homeschool students score, on average, 20 percentile points or more above average.⁴ Further, these families making this choice save Oregon taxpayers many millions of dollars every year.

Spend Citizens' Money/Taxes Responsibly

Why spend money when there is no good prognosis for it benefitting children and Oregonians in general? Why force parents to put their children in school at an earlier age and force more Oregonians to pay more tax dollars for it when there is no solid evidence it will help children learn and advance Oregon's welfare in the long run? We should not do this.

Harm to Children

SB 321 would actually harm children who are not ready to attend school or be subjected to formalized instruction at age 5. All humans are individuals and each develops at his or her own rate and pace. SB 321 would harm boys, males, at a disproportionate rate. SB 321 treats all children as the same and forces a one-size-fits-all approach to education. (See research noted above.)

Mandating that all children attend at age 5 forces unprepared or unruly children into the system that are not ready. This would harm children who are ready. It would cause problems for classroom teachers and school administrators. It will waste local districts' time and waste taxpayers' money pursuing those children who miss school.

Moral Authority

The government of Oregon has no moral authority to usurp parents' responsibility and authority to decide when and how their children are educated. The Oregon Constitution gives the government the mandate to offer tax-funded schools to Oregon families, not to force children to attend public schools or any school.

More importantly, however, every one of us in this room has a worldview. Each of us must ask, "On what basis do I think the State of Oregon has (or does not have) the ethical and moral authority to force, with the power of the sword (i.e., fines, misdemeanors, removing children from parents' custody), children to attend school at age 5 (or 6, or 7)?" If you are a secularist, you have one faith-based answer. If you are a metaphysical naturalist, you have another faith-based answer. If you are an atheist, you have another faith-based answer. From a Christian biblical worldview, parents are given the responsibility and authority to decide when and how their children are to be educated; the State does not have this authority. That is, God gave this authority and responsibility to parents, not to the State. If you disagree with this, you must come to grips with the basis of your faith-based answer and explain your moral authority to take the choice from parents and give it, by force, to the State of Oregon.

Some argue, for example, that compulsory age must be lowered to train parents and families to force the child to attend school every day when he is 6 or 7. In other words, to reduce truancy someday. Oregon offering schools to its citizens is supposed to be for offering them an opportunity to learn and be productive householders and citizens. Offering schools is not for forcing parents to be responsible, to mold citizen's behaviors, to train them to fit someone's vision of "The Good American." This should not be the legacy that this committee or Oregon wants for why we have public schools. Read the history of how schooling is used by States (governments) and you will be appalled at how bills like SB 321 fit into history.⁵ Bills like SB 321 are a condescending, nanny-state, elitist, and social-engineering, and economic-statist approach to controlling parents, families, and citizens. I think you should want to be no part of it.

What Might be a Better Law, If Any?

Imagine: You could entertain a law to force parents to read aloud to their children, beginning at age 5, one-half hour per day from real books, not textbooks. Biographies. Historical accounts. Science information. Books for children. And do simple math games with them for 20 minutes per day. And allow no television until age 7. If the parent signs an affidavit testifying he or she did so, and files two 5-minute videos in December and May showing they did so, give them a \$5,000 tax credit or a \$2,000 earned income credit. I all but guarantee you would then see notable and lasting improvement in Oregon public school students' test scores and love of learning into adulthood. Actually, I do not believe in the government forcing parents to apply certain practices to their children, but this would be a far superior law than SB 321.

I welcome you to communicate with me about any my testimony. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

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References

¹ Armor, David J. (2014, October 15). The evidence on universal preschool: Are benefits worth the cost? *Policy Analysis*, no. 760. Washington, DC: Cato Institute.

² Marija Sakic, Marija; Burusic, Josip; & Babarovic, Toni. (2013). The relation between school entrance age and school achievement during primary schooling: Evidence from Croatian primary schools. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 83, 651–663.

³ Sharp, Caroline. (2002). *School starting age: European policy and recent research*. Paper presented at the LGA Seminar ‘When Should Our Children Start School?’, LGA Conference Centre, Smith Square, London, 1 November 2002. Retrieved March 5, 2015
<https://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/44410/44410.pdf>.

⁴ Oregon Department of Education. (2014). Home schooling–data. Retrieved March 28, 2014 from <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=2081>.

⁵ Glenn, Charles L. (1988). *The myth of the common school*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts. Gatto, John Taylor. (2001). *The underground history of American education: A schoolteacher’s intimate investigation into the problem of modern schooling*. Oxford, NY: The Oxford Village Press.