

# Age of School Entry



Department  
of Education

## Background

“Age of school entry” is the minimum age a child must reach before being eligible to enter Grade 1. In recent years there has been much debate, both in Prince Edward Island and across North America, about what the optimal age of school entry is for both children and their families, as well as for the school system.

Prince Edward Island has the latest cut-off date for school eligibility in the country with the exception of several school districts in Alberta. In PEI, a child who reaches his or her sixth birthday on or before January 31 in a given school year is eligible to attend school in that school year. This means that some first graders can, in theory, be five years old for half of their Grade 1 year. It also means that, on average, close to half of the students entering Grade 1 will be five years old on their first day of school.

Across Canada the average cut-off date for entry into the school system is December 31, meaning that a child who will be six years old on or before December 31 of any given school year is eligible to enter school for that school year. In fact, six provinces, all three territories and 29 of Alberta’s 61 school districts use the December 31 cut-off date. Nova Scotia and Quebec set their cut-off dates at September 30 and September 1, respectively. In most states in the US, students must reach their sixth birthday before they are eligible to enter Grade 1.

This is not the first time PEI’s age of school entry policy has been reviewed. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s departmental papers debated the merits of changing the province’s age of school entry policy. The conclusions were less than conclusive. In some cases reports recommended changing the age of school entry to be more in-line with the other provinces (meaning a December 31 cut-off date), others suggested the province go a step further and adjust the cut-off rate to early fall (some suggested September 1, September 30, October 31, or even November 30), and finally, one report recommended not changing the age of school entry at all, leaving it at January 31.

## **Reasons for Change**

Recent research on how the brain works and develops, particularly with respect to early childhood development, has shed new light on age of school entry policies and school readiness in young children. Increasingly, educators and parents are voicing their opinions that jurisdictions should reevaluate their policies on age of school entry. Through increased research in the area of early childhood development, evidence is mounting that suggests younger children may not be as developmentally ready as their chronologically older peers to learn in an instructional environment. With the introduction of provincially-funded kindergarten and the release of the provincial Healthy Child Development Strategy, it is time to revisit this issue.

The research on early childhood development points to a link between the chronological age of a child and his/her readiness to meet the learning expectations of Grade 1. While certainly not the only, or even the best, predictor of success in learning, chronological age contributes to a child's likelihood of readiness for institution-based learning.

In comparison to most jurisdictions across Canada and the US, PEI has the youngest first graders (on average). This has several implications. cursory research on Island first graders suggests that a significant proportion of those students retained for a second year of Grade 1 are the youngest students in the class. For Island families that move off-Island, their children may be significantly younger than their peers in the same grade level. The current age of entry also means that Island students graduate from high school at an earlier age than their peers across North America.

Raising the age of school entry requirement will mean that, in general, more students will be ready to begin the formal educational process that the public school system provides. Research suggests that students are more likely to experience success if they are older upon entering school. Older students tend to be more socially, intellectually and developmentally advanced than their younger counterparts, and thus are often better equipped to handle the pressure and rigours of an academic setting.

## **Reasons for Maintaining Current Age of Entry**

As would be expected, the decision to change the age of school entry is not that simple. There are several arguments for maintaining the current age of school entry for PEI children. First, and foremost, is the unending dilemma that regardless of where the cut-off date is placed, there can be a one- year age span between the youngest and the oldest child in a given grade level. Therefore changing the age of school entry will not negate the fact that the youngest children in the one-year span may not be as ready to learn in an institutional environment as compared to their older counterparts.

Secondly, the arbitrariness and randomness of age of school entry policies based on the calendar year ignore the individuality of every student and the various paces at which they develop. There is no single cut-off date that is going to eliminate the age disparity among first graders and the challenges presented to parents, educators and policy-makers. Children will always enter the school system at various stages of readiness regardless of the age of school entry policy. Therefore, one may argue that it is pointless to change the cut-off date.

The final argument for maintaining the age of school entry for PEI is that it exacerbates the disadvantage that many at-risk children experience because it postpones their entry into a system that may provide them with much needed social and intellectual stimuli. It also places an added economic burden on parents who will have to make child care arrangements for a longer period of time. The introduction of provincially-funded kindergarten may help to ease this added burden, but it remains a concern for many parents and educators.

## **Conclusion**

While these arguments are compelling, the underlying argument remains that children, in general, are more ready to experience success in school if they are older. There is no one age of school entry that will meet the needs of every child. There will always be children who are ready to begin school at an earlier age and there will be students who are not ready even at a later date. In general however, more students will be ready to succeed in school if the age of entry is moved from January 31 to sometime in the fall.

The greatest challenge in deciding the best, and most appropriate date, is that there is not one correct answer. Unfortunately, other jurisdictions across North America use such diverse cut-off dates that they provide no insight into what works best for families. Researchers are no further ahead in pinpointing the precise moment when a child is ready to begin school; simply because every child is different.

The minimum age on September 1 to begin school during that academic year ranges from five years and five months to six years and six months old. While the vast majority of jurisdictions in North America use ages between five years and eight months old and six years and two months old, there isn't one overwhelming consensus that may suggest where PEI should consider placing its cut-off. In Canada, the vast majority of jurisdictions use five years and eight months old as their age requirement for entry into school although two jurisdiction use six years and five years and eleven months, respectively. However, many jurisdictions are considering reviews of their age of school entry policies in light of new evidence on early child development.

## **Recommendations**

The Department of Education is recommending one of two options as the new age of school entry for Grade 1 - August 31 or October 31. The department will also review any other date, including “no change”, that is submitted for its consideration. In implementing the proposed change to the age of school entry the department is recommending a phased in approach where the age of school entry will change incrementally, month by month, over a period of several years until it reaches the desired date. The attached tables illustrate possible phase in periods for both proposed dates. (See attached implementation schedules.)

The department is seeking comments and feedback on this proposed change from the general public as well as from early childhood and other educational stakeholders. A series of public consultations will be held across the Island during May. People are invited to submit comments in writing or to make comments at these meetings.

For more information contact:

Susan Graham or Ken Gunn

Department of Education

Tel: (902) 368 4690

Fax: (902) 368 4663

E-Mail: [scgraham@gov.pe.ca](mailto:scgraham@gov.pe.ca) or [ckgunn@gov.pe.ca](mailto:ckgunn@gov.pe.ca)

**The Implementation Options** (These are only two possible options)

<b>October 31</b>	<b>Kindergarten</b>	<b>Grade 1</b>
2002 - 2003	No Change	No Change
2003 - 2004	No Change	No Change
2004 - 2005	December 31	No Change
2005 - 2006	November 30	December 31
2006 - 2007	October 31	November 30
2007 - 2008	October 31	October 31
2008 - 2009	October 31	October 31

<b>August 31</b>	<b>Kindergarten</b>	<b>Grade 1</b>
2002 - 2003	No Change	No Change
2003 - 2004	December 31	No Change
2004 - 2005	November 30	December 31
2005 - 2006	October 31	November 30
2006 - 2007	September 30	October 31
2007 - 2008	August 31	September 30
2008 - 2009	August 31	August 31
2009 - 2010	August 31	August 31

April 22, 2002