

Waiver Process for a Child to Enroll in Kindergarten Before Turning 5

By: John D. Moran, Principal Analyst
October 31, 2023 | 2023-R-0269

Issue

This report describes the process by which parents or guardians can seek to have a child enrolled in kindergarten before turning age 5.

Change in the Kindergarten Enrollment Age and the Process to Enroll in Kindergarten Before Reaching Enrollment Age

[PA 23-159](#), § 3, raised the age children can start public school kindergarten from age 5 by January of the school year to age 5 by September of the school year (effective July 1, 2024). The act left unchanged the process for a child who is not yet 5 to be admitted into kindergarten: through a vote of the relevant board of education at a duly called meeting.

Then the legislature enacted [PA 23-208](#), § 1, which made additional changes to the same law. It allows a child under 5 years old as of September 1 to be admitted to kindergarten if the parent or guardian makes a written request to the school principal, and the principal and an appropriate staff person conduct an assessment that shows the child is developmentally ready for kindergarten. PA 23-208 eliminated the option that allowed such a child admission to kindergarten through a vote of the board of education at a duly called meeting.

“SDE recognizes that assessing a child for the purposes of determining the developmental appropriateness of early admission to kindergarten constitutes a challenge for children, families, and schools. This document alerts schools to some of those challenges, while also providing general guidance.

*–State Department of Education
kindergarten enrollment guidance*

SDE Guidance Documents

Since those acts passed, the State Department of Education (SDE) has issued two related guidance documents. [One](#) describes the new law and includes information on parental options such as preschool and daycare options and how to seek a waiver. In the other [document](#), SDE provides information for school districts on how to implement the waiver and addresses related considerations.

Implementation Document

On October 23, 2023, SDE released general guidance to school districts on how to implement the waiver. The guidance provides three overarching points for school districts:

1. PA 23-208 requires districts to conduct an assessment for early entry into kindergarten for any child not yet 5 whose parents or guardians submit a written request for the child's enrollment; conducting the assessment is not discretionary once the request is made.
2. SDE does not require that districts use a specific assessment tool or process. It instead provides considerations to guide districts in implementing the waiver process.
3. The chosen assessment should be administered universally across all schools in a district.

Assessment

Once a child's parents or guardian has made a written request for a child under age 5 to be enrolled, the district must conduct an assessment to determine whether enrolling the child is developmentally appropriate.

SDE points out that the Office of Early Childhood's [CT Early Learning and Developmental Standards](#) (ELDS) can assist a school principal or other certified staff to identify what children from birth to age 5 should know and be able to do. It may also assist a school in determining if its kindergarten program fits a child's developmental level.

Type of Assessment

SDE does not mandate that districts use a specific assessment for kindergarten readiness. The guidance notes, "[s]chools have discretion in determining whether 'an assessment' will be a stand-alone tool, or a holistic measure of a child's developmental level. The SDE will not identify an assessment tool for use to determine if admitting a child to kindergarten is developmentally appropriate."

But the guidance states that (1) any assessment tool use must produce results that are valid and reliable considering the intended uses and (2) any holistic assessment approach should assess a number of areas (e.g., cognitive, social-emotional, physical development, and health). Additionally, any assessment or method should be culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Teacher and Parent Input

The guidance also notes that obtaining and including information from the child's parent or guardian and preschool teacher or early care provider can provide a school with a deeper understanding of the child and help the district in making the assessment.

Consistent Assessments Across a School District

The guidance states the assessment process should be administered universally across all schools in a district. Also, that an established assessment calendar that includes specific, yet multiple times for receiving written parent requests for enrollment, would ensure that staff have the most current assessments at hand for a child. It warns that “[a]ssessments administered at inconsistent times across children may provide an unfair amount of maturation time to children who are assessed closer to the start of school.”

Children With Disabilities

The guidance notes that parents and guardians of children with disabilities may request early entry into kindergarten and that children with disabilities are entitled access to the same process for early kindergarten entry as any other child. For children recognized as needing (1) special education services who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), the assessment process must be individualized to align with any IEP accommodations or (2) a section 504 accommodation plan, the process must individualized and align with their plan.

Family Engagement

The guidance suggests considerations intended to help school districts work with families in the decision-making process over early enrollment to kindergarten. Districts should:

1. provide information about a school's kindergarten program in multiple languages,
2. communicate in a variety of formats and in a family's dominant language to foster a better understanding of the process, and
3. provide information about community partners who can offer alternatives to kindergarten for the children who do not meet the age requirement.

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