

Panel airs change in school start

By TIM RICHARD
Staff Writer

The House Education Committee is mired in the most elementary school questions: Should kids have to wait until their fifth birthdays to start kindergarten?

Many suburban teachers and principals are supporting a bill by Rep. Bob Brackenridge, R-St. Joseph, that would gradually move forward the birth date to start school: Nov. 1 to start kindergarten in 1998, Oct. 1 in 1999, Sept. 1 in 2000.

"This will allow our young people to be more successful," Brackenridge told the panel Oct. 22, citing high failure rates in kindergarten of kids who started too young.

The panel discussed the bill and took no vote. Rep. Penny Crissman, R-Rochester, was cool to the idea. "I look at my two grandchildren and I see the brightest in the class," she smiled.

Rep. Rose Bogardus, D-Davidson, led the idea, citing a tiny four-year-old who couldn't open the schoolhouse door.

"We are taking decision making away from the parent," said Rep. Bob Brown, D-Deerborn Heights.

"Some children are ready before the age of five," said Rep. Deborah Cherry, D-Burns.

The Department of Education had no position on the bill. Eugene Johnson, a consultant and former teacher in other states, said there is "no particular test we can give" to determine if a child is ready for kindergarten.

"There will always be the youngest," she said. The key isn't the starting age but the curriculum, Johnson added, and Michigan has no standard curriculum for kindergarten. That is up to the district.

Steve Manchester, of the Michigan Association for the Education of Younger Children, said the bill would solve nothing. Life experience is more important than calendar age, Manchester said. "Some children have been read to every day of their lives. Others have the vocabulary of one-third to one-half of those who have been read to."

Manchester agreed with the state that the kindergarten curriculum is more important than calendar age. The curriculum includes not only academics but social skills, self-reliance and problem solving.

Under Brackenridge's bill, a school board could grant children waivers to start school earlier than calendar age five. The idea was frowned on by Jim Runderberg, of DeWitt, representing the Michigan Elementary and Middle Schools Association.

Waivers, he said, "put us at odds with the parents from the very first meeting. . . All parents think their children are gifted."

Brackenridge produced excerpts from letters by parents and educators supporting the Sept. 1 birthdate for starting kindergarten. Among them:

Richard C. Davidson, Farmington Hills: "My daughters face this prospect of going to school with children up to 16 months older than them, literally a 25 percent difference in age."

Although my four-year-old may be able to keep up with children 16 months her senior academically. . . she also needs to be able to keep up with these children physically, socially and emotionally."

Susan Wurtz, Lathrup Village: "As a pre-school teacher for 15 years, I have talked to many parents who regretted starting their children who had a fall birthday in kindergarten when he/she was four years old."

Baiba Jensen, principal of Hawkins Elementary, Brighton: "As an elementary principal for 14 years, I have seen the expectations for children increase. Although there will always be a gap between the youngest and oldest child in the classroom, having the children more developmentally ready for school challenges should help us prepare our students for the 21st Century."

Refer to House Bills 4697 and 4698 when writing to your state representative, State Capitol, Lansing 48909. The House Education Committee meets at noon Wednesdays in 424 of the Capitol Building.

Discipline bills

The House Education Committee has formed two bipartisan subcommittees to deal with emerging school issues.

One will deal with safe classrooms, a topic the Senate has made a priority this month. The Senate is working on bills to allow school dress codes (see item below) and require the expulsion of kids who assault teachers or other pupils. Its

seven members include Penny Crissman, R-Rochester.

The other will hold hearings on the MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) tests of fourth through eighth graders. Its seven members will include Bob Brown, D-Deerborn Heights, and Tom Middleton, R-Ortonville.

Dress code

The state Senate Oct. 21 approved 26-6 a bill encouraging school districts to adopt dress codes.

All area senators voted yes except Alma Wheeler Smith, D-Salem, who voted no; and Mike Bouchard, R-Birmingham, and John Cherry, D-Clio, who had excused absences.

"A tinkling symbol," said Smith. "We didn't mandate school uniforms because if we had, we would have had to pay."

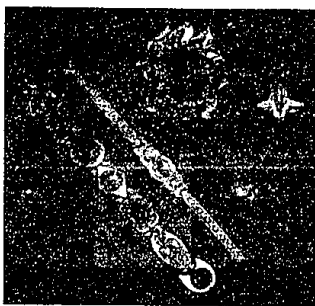
That's an extreme cost for school districts.

The bill was sent to the House. Refer to SB 190 when writing to your state representative.

No federal tests

National testing won't help schools improve, says the Michigan Association of School Boards. A poll of school officials found 62.5 percent opposed a plan by President Clinton to test fourth and eighth graders in reading and math in 1999.

MASB also found school people oppose bills mandating expulsion of students who misbehave (most want more options) and oppose a mandated post-Labor Day starting of classes.



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