The school starting age: the case for greater flexibility in Northern Ireland

by Dr Liz Fawcett, NI Representative, ParentsOutloud, and Mark Langhammer, NI Director, Association of Teachers and Lecturers
Executive Summary

We are calling for the following measures:

• A firmer, time-bound commitment by the Department of Education in its Early Years Strategy to carry out a serious formal review of the current compulsory school starting age

• The introduction of a more flexible approach towards the school starting age as an interim measure to comprise, at a minimum:

  ◆ The right for parents of children in the following categories to be permitted a one year deferral of their child’s primary school place, where they judge that this is in the best interests of their child:
    – children born in May, June, or July 1st
    – children born prematurely
    – young-for-year children born as part of a multiple birth
    – children with non-statemented additional needs
    – adopted and looked after children

  ◆ Where deferral of a primary school place is granted in respect of a child who falls into any of the above categories, that child should have the right to a further one year’s state-funded pre-school place

• Ideally, as an interim measure, we would also like parents of all other children who would not have turned five when they are due to start school (i.e. with birthdays between October and April) to have the right to apply for a one year deferral of their child’s place, and to have the right to a state-funded pre-school place, where there are sufficient places
Our principal arguments are as follows:

- Northern Ireland has the lowest school starting age in Europe
- A significant proportion of children are leaving primary school without the requisite level of literacy or numeracy
- Children gain no academic advantage from starting school at four years
- Portuguese and US research indicates children may have better outcomes if they are not placed in formal academic environments before the age of six
- There is compelling evidence that children who are young within their academic year are at greater risk of suffering both educational and psychological disadvantage
  - In England and Northern Ireland, there is evidence of both academic and psychological disadvantage for ‘young for year’ children
  - In Northern Ireland, a relatively high proportion of children with May or June birthdays are referred to Educational Psychology Services
- The Chief Medical Officers of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland recommend a much higher level of physical activity for under-5s than is feasible in a primary school environment
- Currently, there is no provision for children in any of the following categories to have their school place deferred: children with premature births, multiple-birth children who are young for their year, children with non-statemented additional needs, adopted and looked after children
- In a survey of its members, the ATL found that 76% of those surveyed thought children should be at least five when they started school, while 37% thought the enrolment age should be greater than five
- Despite the introduction of the Revised Curriculum, a P1 environment does not provide children with the same degree of freedom and support that they have in a pre-school setting
- The Republic of Ireland experience suggests that it may be possible to raise the compulsory school starting age to six without wholesale reform of the current system – only a small minority of children enter school at six in the Republic
- In Scotland, where a flexible approach is taken towards the school starting age, only a relatively small proportion of children have their places ‘deferred’ beyond what is regarded as the normal enrolment age
- The wording of the legislation which is deemed to require children to start school at a certain age actually provides scope for flexibility on the starting age, as it states that children do not necessarily have to be educated at school
1. Introduction

1.1 This paper outlines our case for the introduction of a measure of greater flexibility in the age of primary school enrolment in Northern Ireland. It highlights some of the relevant evidence from Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Europe and the United States, and examines how systems which provide greater flexibility work in practice in the Republic of Ireland and in Scotland.

1.2 While we welcome the commitment in the Department of Education’s draft Early Years Strategy to potentially review the current school starting age, we are concerned that the commitment is worded in rather tentative terms. Moreover, given forthcoming cutbacks in government spending, we are concerned that it could be many years before any major change on policy on the school starting age could be implemented.

1.3 At the same time, we believe there is a pressing need to provide some measure of flexibility within the current system. There is particularly compelling evidence that some of those children who are the youngest within their year cohort when they enter primary school may not be achieving their full potential. For this reason, we would like the Department of Education to introduce a measure of flexibility.

1.4 At a minimum, our proposed measure of flexibility would enable parents of children in the following categories to have the right to defer their child’s school entry for a year: the very youngest children, children born prematurely, young-for-year multiple-birth children, adopted and looked after children, and/or those with non-statemented additional needs. Ideally, we would like parents of all other children who would be under five when they start school to be able to apply for deferral for a year if they feel it would be in the child’s best interests.

1.5 We would emphasise that we believe the Department of Education should carry out a review of the school starting age, and we would like to see a firmer commitment to this effect within the final version of the Early Years Strategy. However, our proposal would provide an interim measure which, we believe, would benefit many children, and would lead to improved educational and psychological outcomes.

2. Literacy and numeracy standards

2.1 At present, Northern Ireland has the lowest school starting age in Europe, being the only country which legally obliges children aged four years to attend primary school. In most European countries, compulsory formal schooling does not commence until the age of six. In six European countries, the compulsory enrolment age is seven years.

2.2 At the same time, one in five children is still leaving primary school in Northern Ireland with literacy and numeracy skills which are below the requisite levels. The previous Minister for Employment and Learning, Danny Kennedy, revealed that 60% of those who sign up for Essential Skills literacy and numeracy courses in Northern Ireland are aged between 16 and 19 years.

2.3 Mr Kennedy reportedly suggested that there should be greater flexibility in the age at which children transfer from primary to post-primary school, with children deferring entry to post-primary school until they have mastered the basics of literacy and numeracy. This obviously begs the question as to whether such flexibility should not also exist with regard to the transfer from pre-school settings to primary school.
3. Psychological and educational impact of starting school too young

3.1 There is convincing evidence to support the case for raising the compulsory school starting age. There is conclusive evidence that children gain no academic advantage through starting to learn to read and write at four years old. A comprehensive review of the evidence by the National Foundation for Educational Research found that “The arguments in favour of academic skills being taught earlier do not appear to be borne out by the evidence.”

3.2 Research carried out in Portugal and the United States indicates that children have better outcomes when they are not placed in formal academic environments before the age of six. A Portuguese study found that children who were placed in a pre-school environment which focused on child-led activities and play demonstrated higher self-esteem and lower anxiety than those who had been placed in a formal adult-led setting. A larger American study found that children who had experienced a child-centred, more informal pre-school setting achieved better social and psychological outcomes at age 23 than those who were placed in a more formal academic environment.

4. Research on ‘young for year’ children

4.1 However, there is particularly compelling evidence that children who are young within their academic year are at greater risk of suffering both educational and psychological disadvantage. In England, a major study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that younger children within a year group performed significantly worse than their peers, on average, in academic tests at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16. The same team also found that the youngest children (which, in England, are those born in August) were much more likely to be classified as having non-statemented (that is, less severe) special educational needs at age 11 than the oldest children, born in September. There was also a smaller likelihood of August-born children having a statemented special educational need.

4.2 In England, there is slightly more flexibility in the school starting age in that parents do have a legal right to defer a child’s entry until they turn five. However, any children whose entry is deferred are still expected to join the Reception Year (equivalent of P1) at that point and then move up to Year One (equivalent of P2) at the same time as the rest of their ‘year group’.

4.3 In Northern Ireland, the youngest children in any year group are those with May and June birthdays. Combined data provided by the five Education and Library Boards to the Northern Ireland Assembly’s Education Committee shows that, over the six years between 2006 and 2011, children with May or June birthdays were 14% more likely to be referred to the Educational Psychology Service than the average rate for children with any birth month.

4.4 In addition, a large study carried out recently in Northern Ireland found that children with May and June birthdays were at a double disadvantage in terms of the development of core literacy skills in the early primary school years as they suffered from the observed negative impact of being both summer born and relatively young for their year. Children with May and June birthdays also had lower levels of literacy attainment at age 14 and in GSCE English Language examinations.
5. Physical activity needs of under-5s

5.1 We would also question whether primary schools can provide adequately for the physical activity needs of the under-5 age group. The specific needs of this age group were highlighted by the four Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in updated guidance on recommended levels of physical activity which was published by them in July 2011. In the light of the evidence now available, the CMOs make the following recommendations:

Children of pre-school age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active daily for at least 180 minutes (3 hours), spread throughout the day.

All under 5s should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (being restrained or sitting) for extended periods (except time spent sleeping).

The CMOs go on to say:

...there is emerging evidence that sedentary behaviour in the early years is associated with overweight and obesity as well as lower cognitive development...

...The guidelines for those aged 5–18 years are not suitable for early years, as they specify a [lower] level of intensity that is not developmentally appropriate for most children under 5. Children of pre-school age who can stand and walk need opportunities to play that allow them to develop their fundamental movement skills and master their physical environment. One hour a day is not enough to achieve this.

The evidence suggests that physical activity, especially in the form of play, is a basic and essential behaviour that must be fostered and encouraged during the first five years of life. Conversely, opportunities for young children to be sedentary should be limited and replaced with more physically active options.

The CMOs then observe that it is not practicable for schools to follow different guidelines for those children who have and who have not reached the age of five. However, their recommendations and overall observations about the need for intensive physical activity among the under-5 age group raise clear questions about the appropriateness of a primary school environment for under 5s, particularly for those children who have only recently turned four when they enter school.

6. Other children who deserve special consideration

6.1 One issue which must be borne in mind is that children with premature births, young-for-year multiple-birth children, adopted and looked after children, and children with non-statemented additional needs are currently being forced to attend school at four years in Northern Ireland, even when their parents or carers would prefer otherwise. There is no provision for children in any of these categories to have their places deferred. This includes children with premature births who would have gone to school a year later if born on their expected birth date. While we are informed by Martin Clarke that there is provision for children with a formal/statutory Statement of Special Needs to have their places deferred by a year, only a very small number of children have such a statement at the pre-school stage.

6.2 With regard to adopted and looked after children, in Northern Ireland, the average age at which a child is adopted is now almost five years. Such children will almost invariably have spent years in care. It is known that the attachment difficulties which adopted and looked after children often experience can
affect physical and psychological functioning, and can be associated with other assessed needs, such as ADHD and dyspraxia.

6.3 Children who are looked after, or who are emerging from care as a result of the abuse and neglect they have faced, are often developmentally delayed, both physically and mentally, so that their developmental age lags behind their chronological age. They may be over-anxious to please or desperate to do anything to avoid rejection. Some may act out their chaotic feelings in chaotic behaviour. Others may withdraw into themselves and/or may not be able to relate to other children or the adults that are around them. It is clear that a more flexible approach on the school starting age is a minimum requirement for these children combined with the introduction of a right on request for a part-time start to schooling for children with particular issues.

7. ATL survey

7.1 There is evidence of widespread concern among teachers in the UK about the current school starting age. In 2009, as part of a UK-wide survey of its members, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers asked its members what they felt was the optimum age at which children should be expected to commence statutory education. The survey included members in Northern Ireland. 76% of respondents said the school starting age should be at least five years, with 37% opting for an enrolment age of more than five years.

7.2 Many respondents commented on why they thought children should not start school as early as four years. A few of these comments are below:

Less able children starting school at four quickly learn failure. I spend my working hours picking up the pieces.

Children need time to be children. Once they start school the pressure is on to perform, sometimes just for the school’s ‘value added’. Boys, in particular, are often not ready to learn to read and write. They would be better prepared and motivated at a later stage.

Many parents are forced to accept places for their child when they are clearly not ready for mainstream schooling. Summer-born children, especially those born in August, often lack the maturity to cope with school. They would be better off staying at pre-school for longer, but there is also a lot of parental pressure for the children to start school so they can go to work.

In Gloucestershire some children start aged just 4. These are then often the children I work with later on in the school who struggle with reading and writing. They were probably too young to start school and it all went over their heads.

Having taught reception for several years, I feel that starting school at 4 is too young for a lot of children, especially summer-born boys. Although children need not start school until the term after their 5th birthday, the majority of parents choose for their child to start at the same time as their peers as they feel pressurised by other parents to do so.

8. The revised curriculum

8.1 It could be argued that the introduction of the Revised Curriculum in Northern Ireland should have dealt adequately with the issue of children who are not ready to commence formal learning when they start school. The Revised Curriculum is intended to put a greater emphasis on play and there is meant to be flexibility with regard to when formal reading and writing is introduced for each child.

8.2 However, the official guidance on the Northern Ireland Curriculum at Foundation Stage makes it quite clear that teachers are expected to engage children in reading and writing within the first two years of primary school. The guidance on writing specifically
states that children must have "...frequent opportunities to write independently from the beginning of the Foundation Stage."\textsuperscript{16}

8.3 Circumstantial evidence suggests that most schools introduce reading and writing by the second term of P1 at the latest. Moreover, even though many schools have adopted a more play-based approach at the Foundation Stage, much of the activity will be teacher-led and far more structured than a typical pre-school environment.

8.4 In addition, children are expected to be able to go to the toilet by themselves, and to eat with a knife and fork. There is also likely to be no opportunity for a nap or 'quiet time', and less opportunity for outdoor play and physical activity. In short, the typical school environment is very different from a typical pre-school environment and may well be very daunting for a child who is particularly young for their year and/or who has made less progress developmentally.

8.5 Moreover, the figures for referral to the EPS in Northern Ireland, cited above, cover the five years to 2011. For most of that period, the Revised Curriculum has been in operation. Yet, the pattern of a particularly high number of referrals for children with May and June birthdays persists.

Table 1: age of children in Junior Infant classes in the Republic of Ireland in January 2010 (as % of total in each column)\textsuperscript{17}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-7 years</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9.3 The figures for January 2010, broken down by gender, are provided in Table 1. Taking into account that this table shows the age of children about one third of the way through the school year, the figures suggest that there is probably a fairly even split in the Republic between children who start school at four years and those who commence school at five. It is evident that only a very small proportion enrol at six years. However, a slightly higher proportion of boys than girls are aged five by January 2010, suggesting boys are probably somewhat more likely than girls to start school at five rather than four.

9.1 In the Republic of Ireland, the statutory school starting age is six years. However, children can commence school as young as four if their parents wish. Ireland therefore provides a useful example of what might happen in practice if the compulsory school starting age was moved to six, but the lower voluntary starting age remained the same.

9.2 In fact, in the Republic, the vast majority of children do commence school at four or five years. The Irish government does not keep statistics which show the actual age of entry. However, it does carry out a census-style exercise in January of each year. The figures for the last three years suggest that the proportions of four, five and six year olds in the first year of primary school (Junior Infants) do not vary greatly over time.

9. The Republic of Ireland

10. Scotland

10.1 In Scotland, children normally start school between the ages of four-and-a-half and five-and-a-half years. Legally, children do not have to start school until the beginning of the school year after they turn five. However, local education authorities are not obliged to provide pre-school education for them.

10.2 In practice, most local education authorities seem to provide parents of children who would be among the youngest in their year cohort - that is, those with January and February birthdays - with an automatic right to 'defer' their child's place for a year if they wish. Those children are also automatically
entitled to a state-sponsored place in a pre-
school nursery or playgroup for a further year.

10.3 In addition, parents of other children who
would not have turned five by the time they
start school in August (those with birthdays
between September and December inclusive)
are told they can apply to their local
education authority for the 'deferral' of their
child's place. If that application is granted,
there is no statutory guarantee of a state-
sponsored pre-school place for their child.
However, the general practice among local
education authorities appears to be to
provide a pre-school place for a further year
where the authority in question is convinced
that there such a 'deferral' would be in the
child's best interests.

10.4 It should be noted that the Scottish
Government's Schools Directorate says that,
strictly speaking, education authorities should
not be using the term 'deferral' in these
instances because all the children concerned
would be starting school by the school year in
which they would turn five. The system
appears to have been developed by local
education authorities to try to ensure that they
can manage demand for pre-school places.

10.5 There is some variation among local education
authorities in the extent to which primary
school places are 'deferred' under this system.
However, as Table 2 shows, the proportion of
children in P1 with 'deferred' places is
relatively small, ranging from 7% to 12.5%
in four Scottish local education authorities.

Table 2: proportion of children in P1 with
'deferred' places

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Council</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aberdeen City Council</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dundee City Council</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edinburgh City Council</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Borders Council</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Borders Council (January and February birthdays only)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10.6 In addition, the Scottish Borders Council was
able to provide a more detailed breakdown of
its figures. This showed that, in 2010/11, most
of those children whose places were 'deferred'
(72%) had January or February birthdays. If
the 'deferral' policy had been confined to
those with the youngest birth months of
January and February, approximately 5%
of children would have had their places
defered in each of the last three years.

10.7 The Scottish Borders Council was also able to
provide a breakdown of their 'deferrals' by
gender. This shows that, over the last four
years, just over two-thirds (68%) of all
'deferrals' have been granted to boys. Boys
make up an even higher proportion of those
whose deferral is discretionary (i.e. September
to December births), accounting for 76% of all
deferrals.

10.8 We would not advocate a system where
misleading terminology is used by education
authorities, as we believe parents should be
made aware of their rights. However, we
would be very supportive of the principle of
flexibility which is built into the Scottish
system. The system provides a degree of
choice for parents and is predicated on a
decision being made which is in the best
interests of each individual child, rather than
conforming to any arbitrary deadline.

11. Conclusion

11.1 We believe that there is a strong case for a
serious formal review of Northern Ireland's
school starting age in the light of the following
factors: (i) that Northern Ireland has the lowest
compulsory school starting age in Europe (ii)
that there is no conclusive evidence of any
academic advantage of such an early start (iii)
that there is evidence of potential negative
psychological and social impacts of
commencing formal education at four years.

11.2 We are very disappointed that the draft
Early Years Strategy offers only the
tentative possibility of a review of the
school starting age. We would like the
Strategy to contain a firm commitment for such a review with a timeline attached.

11.3 The experience in the Republic of Ireland suggests that, contrary to fears which have been expressed in Northern Ireland, it may well be possible to introduce a compulsory school starting age of six without wholesale upheaval of the current system, as it seems unlikely that many parents would opt for their children to start at six if the option is also provided of commencing primary education at age four or five. We do recognise, nevertheless, that even this option would obviously mean a considerable expansion in the number of pre-school places to cope with the additional demand.

11.4 However, we also believe that any such review should examine best practice elsewhere and should take into account the impact of having primary school classes with, potentially, a wide range of ages. It may be that, in the longer term, it would be desirable to provide the Foundation Stage in a pre-school setting.

11.5 In the short to medium-term, however, we recognise the resource constraints which government spending cutbacks are imposing on all departments, including the Department of Education. At the same time, we believe it is possible to introduce some flexibility into the current system which would give parents greater choice and which may well help to significantly improve outcomes for some children, particularly those who would be among the youngest in their year.

11.6 For this reason, we would urge the Department of Education to introduce guidance to schools and education boards as follows:

- The right for parents of children in the following categories to be permitted a one year deferral of their child’s primary school place, where they judge that this is in the best interests of their child:
  - children born in May, June, or July 1st
  - children born prematurely
  - young-for-year multiple-birth children

- children with non-statemented additional needs
- adopted and looked after children

11.7 Ideally, as an interim measure, we would also like parents of all other children who would not have turned five when they are due to start school (i.e. with birthdays between October and April) to have the right to apply for a one year deferral of their child’s place, and to have the right to a state-funded pre-school place, where there are sufficient places.

11.8 While we understand that the Department of Education believes that the law would need to be changed to bring into effect the above measure of flexibility, we believe the current legislation does provide scope for this flexibility as children are permitted to be educated outside school after the compulsory school starting age.

11.9 The Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, article 45 (1), states:

The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

11.10 The use of the word ‘otherwise’ is designed to cover children who are home-educated. However, we have sought legal opinion and have been advised that this wording does not preclude school-age children from being educated in a pre-school setting. We therefore believe that a more flexible system could be operated by using this provision.

May 2012
Endnotes

1 This paper is also endorsed by Early Years, Adoption UK, BAAF, The Fostering Network, the multiple-birth organisation TAMBA, and TinyLife.

2 See data on compulsory school starting ages by country, last updated in October 2010, from the National Foundation for Educational Research at: http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/index.cfm?981C0068-C29E-AD4D-0AEC-8BF443F54428


6 Sylva, Kathy and Nabuco, Maria Emilia ‘Research on Quality in the Curriculum’ in International Journal of Early Childhood, October 1996. Available at: http://www.springerlink.com/content/38q4881w807k33tl/fulltext.pdf


10 This analysis was based on the 37, 137 referrals to the five Northern Ireland Education and Library Boards between 2006 and April 2011. The information was submitted to the Northern Ireland Assembly’s Education Committee in May 2011. Belfast Education and Library Board data shows that the number of schoolchildren born in May and June is similar to the number born, on average, in any month, so the pattern in referrals is not explained by any difference in birthrate.

11 McPhillips, Martin and Jordan-Black, Julie-Ann ‘The effect of month of birth on the attainment of primary and secondary school pupils’ in British Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 79, pp. 419 – 438, 2009. See also Menet, Fiona et al. ‘Month of Birth and Effect on Literacy, Behaviour and Referral to Psychological Service’ in Educational Psychology in Practice, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2000. Menet et al. found that children in Northern Ireland with May and June birthdays were significantly more likely than average to be referred to the Educational Psychology Service. Their study also found that primary school teachers in Northern Ireland were more likely to identify behaviour problems in children with May and June birthdays, and that this group’s attainment in literacy was poorer than average.

12 DHSSPS, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Department of Health Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity for health from the four home countries’ Chief Medical Officers, July 2011.


14 op. cit., p. 22.

15 Looked after children are those in the care of a Health and Social Care Trust or provided with accommodation by a Trust. Children can either be looked after as a result of voluntary agreement by their parents or as the result of a care order. Children may be placed with kinship carers (family), with foster carers or in a residential setting, or may occasionally remain with their parents at home, depending on individual circumstances.

16 See top of p7 of guidance booklet on Writing at: http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/foundation_stage/areas_of_learning/language_and_literacy/LL_Writing.pdf An overview of the guidance on literacy at Foundation Stage can be found at: http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/foundation_stage/areas_of_learning/language_and_literacy/

17 Percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.

18 Percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number, and relate to the most recent year for which figures are available. The figures for the Scottish Borders Council are shown as a proportion of the relevant pre-school year cohort.

19 In Assembly Written Answer AQW 10672, dated 25th April 2012, the Education Minister stated that the only provision in Northern Ireland education legislation which currently allows for a child to be retained in a nursery school, and not commence primary school upon reaching compulsory school age, is under Article 16 of the Education (NI) Order 1996 which relates to young children of compulsory school age with Statements of Special Educational Needs. Thus, those with non-statemented additional needs are excluded. Many children with additional or special needs do not receive a statement prior to reaching compulsory school starting age.
