

The Paradox Of Redshirting: A View From Inside The Classroom by Anne Simon

Description



“Redshirting” refers to the athletic practice of holding a player back a year to give them time to grow and develop skills

I applaud the wisdom of parents (my own children included) who pay close attention to their child’s development and make the decision for when they should enter kindergarten based on an assessment of not only the academic, but the social and emotional readiness of that individual child. This is often a great gift to the long-term happiness and wellbeing of a child in school. This practice does contain, however, the potential for unintended consequences that may sabotage the sincere efforts made to help the child succeed.

I have been an educator observing and participating in the private school admissions process for almost 40 years, I am concerned about the impact of “Redshirting” (keeping a student in preschool an extra year) on the kindergarten curriculum and consequently, that of every other grade. It can go something like this: parents and school officials make individual decisions that skew the age of the kindergarten class toward 5½ to 6 years of age instead of late 4s and 5s. Ambitious teachers see and act on the ability to move this new age group along the curricular continuum more quickly that they might with a younger group. Voila! Kindergarten becomes the new 1st grade!

Most private elementary schools, and many public school districts around the country, have added a new entry-level class to their program “ Jr. K, DK, Pre-K ” it goes by many names. This is the place where children are prepared to begin the process of being in school and taking on the challenges of whatever style curriculum the school offers. This is not restricted to any particular style of school. The progressive schools are as likely to do this as the more traditional academic schools. In this first year children learn to follow a routine, listen to instruction, take turns, help your friend, and work together. Hmm’sound familiar? Everything we learned in kindergarten is now what children are learning in Pre-K.

While this works well for many children, and it makes schools feel good because their students seem so accomplished in earlier grades, there are some unintended consequences of this shift. For those who are not older but are fully ready to handle the program of kindergarten, there may be as much as 18 months difference between the age of that child and the oldest child in the class. There can be huge size differences between the children in

the same class. *Most importantly, if the curriculum continues to accelerate, there will come a time when it does not fit the development of the students and the whole purpose is defeated.*

In the last few years of my tenure as Head Of The Lower School of an independent school in Virginia, I too established a wonderful Pre-K program. We rehabbed a donated construction modular office into a colorful “Cottage” complete with deck and ramp. The younger siblings of our enrolled students flocked to the program, delighted in the options offered: ½ day, full-day, extended day. We could really pay attention to what each 4-year-old needed and even tailor that need throughout the year. Several students started the year as ½ day and graduated to full day students around January of their Pre-K year.

In the second year of the program I needed to hire a new teacher for the class. Guess what? I hired a talented veteran kindergarten teacher from a nearby public school district. She was delighted to be in an environment that allowed her to attend to the developmental needs of her students and not primarily to the concerns of state tests and benchmarks. I was happy that she understood both where the students were currently, as well as where they needed to go to be ready for our more academically focused kindergarten program.

Somewhere in all of this is a warning “be careful what you wish for! While I agree completely with the need to make sure your child is ready for the kindergarten experience, it is equally important that the schools you are applying to that are accelerating their curriculum as a result of having classes with slightly older students be mindful of the potential pitfalls of this practice over time. Schools must adjust their programs to fit the new profile of their students” larger age spans and greater differences in size and capability perhaps. This can be done well if the school and its teachers resist the temptation to simply accelerate their program and truly reframe their curriculum and methodologies to fit the needs of the students they have. If this is accomplished, students can have the best of all possible worlds.

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Category

1. Beyond The Brochure

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