

STATES OF JERSEY



SCHOOL STARTING AGE (S.R.5/2017): RESPONSE OF THE MINISTER FOR EDUCATION

**Presented to the States on 15th June 2017
by the Minister for Education**

STATES GREFFE

SCHOOL STARTING AGE (S.R.5/2017): RESPONSE OF THE MINISTER FOR
EDUCATION

Ministerial Response to: S.R.5/2017

Ministerial Response required by: 13th June 2017

Review title: School Starting Age

Scrutiny Panel: Education and Home Affairs

INTRODUCTION

The Panel undertook the review into school starting age. The following Key Findings and recommendations are made within the report [S.R.5/2017](#) and are directed to the Minister for Education.

FINDINGS

	Findings	Comments
1	Article 2 of the Education (Jersey) Law 1999 allows children to start school at the beginning of the term they turn five years old. The Minister is starting children in September when some have only just turned four years old. (Page 12)	<p>The Minister is concerned that there appears to be an erroneous underlying assumption in this Finding that starting school is a negative event. It is widely recognised in various pieces of research that a child's brain is developing at its most rapid pace in the early years and children are naturally receptive to learning at this stage. Providing a high-quality, enjoyable environment, based on learning through play and led by trained, caring professionals, is of immense benefit to young children. This is precisely what modern Reception classes provide. The environment is nurturing and welcoming, with each child's individual needs taken into account. The main areas of focus at this stage are personal, social and emotional development, physical development and communication and language – the essential building blocks of a good start in life. It's also an opportunity to start introducing key concepts that underpin learning in maths and literacy so that children become confident and successful in these key areas as they progress through school later on.</p> <p>The practice in primary schools has evolved over a number of years to meet the concerns of parents, many of whom do not want to hold their child back from starting school at the same time as their contemporaries in the class because of the lost learning and shared experiences with the group. This is a positive choice for the majority of parents. Only one to two queries are received per year regarding delayed school start, and these are usually related to specific issues, including medical or cognitive conditions.</p>

	Findings	Comments
		The Scrutiny report states (page 13, point 16): ‘The Panel is aware that in most cases parents appear content with children starting in the September and actually, the Minister is providing something extra for the Island’s children that he is not required to do in law, which in many cases provides significant benefits to the child and family.’
2	No developed country on the UNESCO list of school starting ages requires children to begin school (formal education) at the age of four as is the practice in Jersey. (Page 14)	<p>The term ‘formal education’ appears to be used in a pejorative sense in this Finding, and carries an implication that learning in primary school Reception classes is undesirable. This is not the case at all.</p> <p>We would contend that children of this age need stimulation, a wide variety of activities and the opportunity to explore, create and develop their own ideas and understanding of the world. At times there is a place for different types of learning, some guided by qualified staff and other times facilitated by open-ended exploration led by the child.</p> <p>In countries where children start school at a slightly later age they are usually at a provision, such as a nursery or pre-school, that is very similar to the environment found in Jersey’s school nurseries and reception classes, where the emphasis is on child-centred learning through play.</p>
3	Some professionals believe that areas such as the home environment, socio-economic background and gender have as much or more impact on the achievement of children than being the youngest in the class. (Page 16)	This is agreed. It is widely recognised by education professionals that the factors contributing to a child’s progress in school and life are many and complex. The UK Pupil Premium and, now, the Jersey Premium, are based on statistical evidence that shows children are more likely to under-achieve if they are socially disadvantaged, come from less affluent backgrounds, experience difficulties in their home environment, including deprivation or safeguarding issues. As a direct result, the current Education Department Business Plan has ‘Supporting Families’ as one of its 4 key objectives. In comparison, date of birth is not necessarily an indicator of progress. As the Scrutiny Panel were advised during their school visits, there are summer-born children among the highest attainers in many classes. It is important to avoid generalisations and to look at each specific child in a holistic way.
4	Information from Article 2 of the Education (Jersey) Law 1999, relating to the term in which a child may start school, is not available on the Education Department web page. (Page 17)	This has now been made clear on the www.gov.je page.

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5	<p>Before their children start school, parents do not have enough information about the type of learning children will engage with. (Page 23)</p>	<p>This opinion is likely to vary greatly between schools and families and how ‘enough information’ is defined. However, as a starting point, the Education Department and schools aim to provide as much as possible and in a parent-friendly way. There are always efforts to improve and update this, particularly as technology evolves. Teachers recognise that the start of school can be an anxious time, often more so for parents than the children themselves, so every effort is made to address any concerns. Steps are in place to ensure a smooth transition into Reception. The home-school partnership is seen as absolutely critical to how well a child settles in to the new environment and it needs to be mutually supportive.</p> <p>Currently, there is an all-Island transition event every year where schools and staff from private sector nurseries meet together to pass on information about children, particularly if there are vulnerabilities or issues that need to be addressed. All children have an opportunity to visit their Reception class, usually with their parents or nursery staff. Schools hold parent sessions and open evenings for all parents, so that they can ask questions about the curriculum, which is hands-on and experiential, and focused on the needs of the child.</p> <p>Parents can find information about the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum in the ‘Your Child’s Learning’ section on www.gov.je. Many schools also have additional information on their websites, including an increasing range of formats such as short films, to help explain what children will experience in Reception.</p> <p>The Education Department has also introduced the ‘REAL’ project (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy), which is specifically aimed at parents in the home, and helps them understand how they can informally help and support their own children in early learning. In the next phase, parents will become facilitators and help other parents.</p> <p>The Early Years Childhood Partnership (‘EYCP’) includes parent representatives, and this enables them to have a voice in how information is produced, and to help ensure it is jargon-free and provides what they find useful.</p>
6	<p>Teachers in Jersey strive to provide education appropriate to each child’s age and stage of development. (Page 25)</p>	<p>Agreed. Adjusting and adapting teaching for different types of learners is a core part of the work of professional teachers and is central to the ethos of education. The concept of ‘A Unique Child’ is central to Development Matters, the guidance which is used by professionals across the early years foundation stage. It is the first key theme that underpins practice and states: ‘Children are born ready, able and eager to learn. They actively reach out to interact with other people, and in the world around</p>

	Findings	Comments
		<p>them. Development is not an automatic process, however. It depends on each unique child having opportunities to interact in positive relationships and enabling environments. Playing and Exploring, Active Learning, and Creating and Thinking Critically support children’s learning across all areas.’ While it does set out characteristics for effective learning at different ages, it also states: ‘Children develop at their own rates, and in their own ways. The development statements and their order should not be taken as necessary steps for individual children. They should not be used as checklists. The age/stage bands overlap because these are not fixed age boundaries but suggest a typical range of development.’</p>
7	<p>There is not complete consensus across the teaching profession as to what is best practice in the early years. It remains a subjective judgement amongst numerous parties including parents, teachers, policy makers and professionals in the field. (Page 27)</p>	<p>Ongoing professional discussion about best practice is a healthy, necessary part of a modern education system at all stages, and ensures that practice remains responsive and has the scope to adapt if necessary to suit the needs of an individual child.</p> <p>There is, however, consensus on certain key points: that there should not be a one-size-fits-all approach to children in our care; that safeguarding and well-being of children are an absolute priority; that our children should be able to make the same progress as children in other parts of Britain or the world; and that they should have the same opportunities to develop their abilities and learn to a high standard.</p>
8	<p>Children need individual provision at any age commensurate to their stage of development. The early years, in particular, require a specialised teaching approach. (Page 28)</p>	<p>Agreed. This is the starting point for all education activities in Jersey schools. In the case of early years, teaching candidates with specific qualifications or experience in this area are preferred. There is a wide range of activities available during the school day, from unstructured, and child-initiated play to more adult-guided, playful learning, particularly in mathematics and literacy, to introduce children to the concepts and language that will underpin their education higher up the school. One-to-one or small group assistance is available if needed.</p> <p>The Children’s Workforce Training Directory is a comprehensive offer of development opportunities for staff in the States and private sector. It has been produced by the Education Department’s Childcare and Early Years Service (‘CEYS’) working with the Jersey Child Care Trust (‘JCCT’), Parenting Service at The Bridge, the Education Support team and Virtual College, and has become a useful collaborative resource covering a range of relevant areas. The directory includes 3 levels of training to ensure leaders, middle-managers and all staff have an appropriate level of CPD to ensure leadership development.</p>

	Findings	Comments
9	Some parents want the choice of <u>when</u> to start their child in school and <u>what type</u> of schooling they receive. (Page 30)	It is not clear from the Scrutiny Report what level of parental concern had been expressed, and the use of ‘some’ does not give a clear indication. More detail of parents’ comments would help the Department to understand and address specific parental concerns, but these have so far not been available from Scrutiny. There is no compelling argument in terms of numbers. Of a cohort of around 1,000 children in every year-group, a very small number of queries is received each year regarding a delayed school start, and these usually relate to an existing medical condition or developmental delay due to, for instance, a premature birth. For 2016–2017 there were 2 such cases. When these arise, the individual circumstances are always taken into account. A range of additional support can be put in place if required. It is acknowledged that many parents have concerns or questions about their child’s start at school, but parents are usually reassured once they have seen the school and spoken to the staff who will be caring for their child. Teachers routinely support classes where their student have differing levels of maturity, confidence or skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE MINISTER FOR EDUCATION

	Recommendations	Accept/Reject	Comments
1	The Minister for Education should provide a genuine option to the public for their children to start school in the term in which they turn five, including giving thought to extending the provision of high-quality nursery provision to cover any gaps. (Page 12)	Accept	<p>Parents do have a genuine option for their children to start school in the term in which they turn 5. This is enshrined in the current education legislation. However, the majority of parents prefer their children to start in September so that they receive the same educational experiences as their peers in the class and have the same social opportunities.</p> <p>Parents sign up for nursery classes in advance and with an expectation that their child will have a place at a certain time. A decision for one child to delay their school start cannot be allowed to have an adverse impact on another child or their family in the year behind them. In the interests of fairness, school nursery places have to be prioritised for the children in the correct year group. It would be neither appropriate nor fair for a child who is delaying their school start to displace a younger child from a nursery place they were expecting to take up.</p> <p>Current capacity means that school nursery places cannot be guaranteed for children who delay a year. Similarly, there is currently no additional funding available for extending the Nursery Education Fund payment for private nurseries beyond the full year currently funded by the Education Department.</p>

	Recommendations	Accept/ Reject	Comments
2	The Minister for Education should consider evidence relating to the benefits and disadvantages of a later school starting age in the context of Jersey's culture and education system as part of the Early Years Review. (Page 13)	Acknowledged	The review is already under way with a broad terms of reference. It is an independent review led by the Early Years Childhood Partnership that is free to consider a range of evidence as it feels appropriate. Any recommendations it makes relating to school starting age would, of course, be taken into consideration by the Minister in due course.
3	The Minister for Education should partner with other relevant Ministers to ensure that parents of all new-born children are provided with information that explains school catchment areas, school starting age, the type of education that is available to children and all other relevant information about the Jersey education system. (Page 18)	Accept	A piece of work is already under way to provide an overview for parents of the 'Education Journey' in Jersey. The aim is to assist new parents, but also parents with older children contemplating the move to secondary school and then options after G.C.S.E.s. One of the Department's aims is to keep improving its communications, particularly to parents. A map that shows school catchment areas is available at www.gov.je and there is a great deal of school-specific information online. Schools and the Education Department are always happy to help if parents have queries.
4	The Minister for Education should ensure that the Education website contains easy to navigate, up-to-date and correct information, providing parents with the information they need to make appropriate decisions for their child starting school. (Page 18)	Accept	The gov.je website pages are updated regularly and now contain more education information than they have previously. The information is targeted to be most useful to the majority of parents. Queries regarding specific cases or complex issues are always welcome, and can be raised in confidence with schools or staff at the Education Department.
5	The Minister for Education should ensure that all parents know that they are welcome in schools, not the other way around where parents have to seek contact under their own initiative. (Page 23)	Accept	Schools already make significant efforts, from the nursery class onward, to involve parents in their child's learning and education journey. The family-school partnership is regarded as vital to a child's success and well-being in all schools. Good two-way communication is recognised as essential. Parents in all schools are regularly invited to speak to teachers at parent evenings, and also at the start or end of the school-day if necessary. Primary schools involve parents in a number of ways, including through performances, social or fund-raising events or as volunteers. Most schools also have a P.T.A. or similar parent group. Parents are also welcome to approach their

	Recommendations	Accept/ Reject	Comments
			school at any time if they wish to raise a concern. A new initiative called 'Parentscope' is also being trialled in a number of schools as an informal way of giving parents a voice, an opportunity to ask questions, and a way of finding support across a range of issues.
6	The Minister for Education must allow Jersey schools and teachers the flexibility to approach each child as an individual and encourage the use of professional judgement in their teaching. (Page 25)	Reject	This is an unnecessary suggestion. Not only is this an existing expectation of staff, but it is already an embedded part of teaching practice as the Scrutiny Report itself states (paragraph 50): 'It was explained by staff in each of the schools visited by the Panel that it was a professional requirement to provide the appropriate learning experience for each individual child. In other words, the school needed to be ready for the child ... These visits provided clear evidence to the Panel that teachers spoken to generally met individual requirements of children, that there was flexibility in the approach and that in some schools the option existed to move between classes during the day.'
7	The Minister for Education should gather views from all those involved in early years in Jersey, perhaps via a conference or similar event where all professionals discuss and debate together and produce an agreed Jersey framework. (Page 27)	Reject	Professional discussions are already under way and ongoing in a number of forums, including the 'Early Years Childhood Partnership'. An Early Years Conference organised by the Education Department's Childcare and early Years Service ('CEYS') is taking place on 26th June 2017. It brings together States and private sector professionals to consider 'how the scales for well-being and involvement can be used to make care and education more effective'. Emeritus Professor Ferre Laevers of Leuven University in Belgium will give a keynote speech on 'Experiential Education'. In addition, planning began last year for a Jersey education conference to bring together teaching professionals to discuss recent developments, (including the curriculum and a number of other very significant changes) and current challenges. The aim is to celebrate and share good practice taking place in the Island and consolidate all the recent changes. 'Early Years' will be a part of this major event, but not separate from it, because early years must be seen as important and integral first step in a child's overall educational journey. In the meantime, we await the outcome of the EYCP early years review and will respond to this accordingly.

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8	The Minister for Education should consider providing more variety as to the types of schooling available, as currently, only those who can afford to pay for private schools have a real choice relating to their child's education. (Page 31)	Reject	There is currently very limited scope in terms of funding or capacity within the States' education system to provide a variety of new forms of education, and there is no evidence in this report of the need or demand for the kinds of provision mentioned. However, the Department is researching the feasibility of bilingual education in some form, and has received initial expressions of interest from private businesses wishing to set up alternative types of school provision. They are welcome to seek registration, but would be required to meet the requirements of the Education (Jersey) Law 1999.
9	The Minister for Education should make provision for schools to take children when they are ready for school even if this takes the child outside their currently planned starting year, particularly if the child's birthday falls close to the cut-off date. (Page 31)	Reject	<p>Where there is a genuine recognised reason for a delayed school start, there is an existing mechanism for a child's particular circumstances to be considered and for an out-of-year place to be offered. However, in general terms it is a child's right to start school when they are aged 4 to 5, and this should be protected unless there are exceptional circumstances to delay their learning. Professional teachers have the expertise to support children appropriately, and should be trusted to treat each pupil as an individual. Age should not be the only factor taken into account.</p> <p>Primary school head-teachers were unanimous in wishing to retain the current practice and structure.</p> <p>The small size and finite capacity of the Jersey system means there is not sufficient flexibility in terms of places available to accommodate a significant number of delayed school starts because of the potential impact on other children in terms of school places available.</p> <p>For example, if the cohort were to be extended to 17 months (April to 31st August the following year) then potentially 40% of the cohort would be eligible to delay starting school a year. This would mean larger/smaller class sizes and would have a serious impact on capacity planning for Reception classes.</p> <p>On average, 85% of parents are currently able to have their first choice primary school. However, if 40% of the cohort are able to delay, then this will significantly reduce parental choice due to availability of places. The impact on one form entry primary schools is of particular concern. It is a serious issue if some children would have to lose out at the expense of others in the year ahead. The ramifications of this proposal are far more complex than the Panel allow for, and fairness and equity have to be taken into consideration.</p>

	Recommendations	Accept/ Reject	Comments
10	The Minister for Education should consider changes in legislation in order to facilitate changes in recommendation nine and ensure all children are required to attend school through to the end of their GCSE year. (Page 31)	Reject	<p>There is no plan to make this change at present. Over the past 3 years, Jersey schools and the teachers working in them have undergone a series of unprecedented changes to major elements of the system, with the introduction of a new curriculum, new assessment system, update exams, and new management information system.</p> <p>A period of consolidation is now required to enable these significant changes to become embedded and fine-tuned so that they work in the best way possible for our students – of all ages. There is no compelling argument for making this change at this time and no available resources, funding or staffing with which to implement it.</p> <p>The Education Department is firmly focused on delivering the actions in the current business plan, and this has not been identified as a priority or even a necessity.</p>