

February 2, 2015

Dear

I am writing to express serious concerns with HB 100, Age of Eligibility. City Schools of Decatur has been a leader in embracing Early Childhood Education. When the CSD Board of Education implemented the Strategic Plan, which included an Early Childhood Center, the focus was on preparing our children for entrance into Kindergarten. Our Early Childhood Program was visited by the President of the United States, President Barack Obama.

At the College Heights Early Childhood Learning Center, there are currently 350 children ranging in age from a few months to 4 years old. City Schools of Decatur houses nine prekindergarten classes within the Early Childhood Center. 180 children are currently receiving a quality, high standard, and prekindergarten program. In addition, we have merged and partnered with Head Start and Early Head Start (both federally-funded programs; to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged children. We have numbers upward of 70 parents waiting for a spot in the preK program.

Our programs and registration is structured around Bright from the Start requirements and current state law relative to age of eligibility. The proposed bill, as written, does not take a number of issues and important information into consideration.

Issue One: Parents have read about this bill and are enraged. At least twenty of our current Prekindergarten students, who are completing the PreK program with CSD this school year, will be kept from entering kindergarten under this proposed law. These children are ready to enter Kindergarten but have birthdays between the HB 100 start date of August 1 and the current law, which we are under, of September 1. What provisions will be made for these students? Bright from the Start will not let students repeat in the PreK program. The school system will not be able to enroll them in Kindergarten because they will not meet state law birthdate requirements. How should we send a group of students ready to move on, home to spend a year without continuing their educational progress? The gap of students will only widen if the June date is implemented the following year.

Issue Two: Most systems are registering for PreK (under the lottery method) and kindergarten now. The legislature will not end until the end of spring and the Governor must sign off. This puts school systems and perhaps private providers who are receiving BFTS funding in a quandary in terms of planning appropriately to meet the upcoming needs.

Issue Three: We must consider the federal programs (Head Start and Early Head Start) which are meshing with our state early childhood programs. As school systems, we are always encouraged to provide services seamlessly for children. However, has this bill considered what the federal age requirements are for children to be served in 3 year old or 4 year old programs?

I am unclear about the purpose of this bill. If it is to address concerns that children are not ready to enter kindergarten and limiting the age requirement by backing up the dates, will eventually ease this problem; then I respectfully request that school systems be given time to implement changes proposed by the state. I would argue that arbitrarily setting another date for entry to school will not automatically be the best fit for all students.

It appears to me that the state and the nation should be finding ways to implement universal quality programs that address the needs of 3 and 4 year olds so they can be ready to enter kindergarten.

Implementing this change for the 2015-2016 school year causes havoc for school systems that are planning now for their kindergarten staffing. Please know that registration and hiring decisions are being made now and not after the legislative session.

Finally, I am asking that more research be done and more thought given to how to implement such a sweeping change so that our young students are not left with a break in their schooling. Our students are ready for kindergarten and should be allowed to move on.

Sincerely,

Dr. Phyllis Edwards, Superintendent