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**More Queensland parents are delaying their children's start at primary school to allow them an extra year of maturity. It's a trend which may educational experts applaud but the Queensland Government says such parents are flouting the law and are liable for prosecution. Jane Milburn reports.**

## Late starters

Rebecca is a smart girl but next year she will repeat Year 4. Rose is a bright girl who has been near the top of her class throughout her primary years but next year she will repeat Year 7. Peter is a clever boy who won a number of secondary school scholarship but he repeated Year 7 last year before taking up the scholarship of his choice.

These children have birthdays that fall in the last few months of the year and they are repeating at private schools because the state system bans such practices except in rare instances at its discretion.

They have parents who diligently sent their children off to Year 1 at the age of five – to turn six late in the year – but who subsequently found their children were disadvantaged because they were young relative to many of their classmates who turned six earlier in the year.

They are no less smart than their peers and were classified as "ready" for school at the time. But once in the education system, their parents discovered they were socially and emotionally – and perhaps ultimately academically – disadvantaged.

Experiences such as those of Rebecca, Rose and Peter are the reason for a trend which is bringing Queensland more into line with education practices in other Australian states.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that this year almost a quarter of Year 1 children in some Queensland schools have begun school in the year they turn seven, not six. At some other schools, 10-20 percent are "late starters". This trend appears to be more prevalent in higher socio-economic areas where families can afford to pay for an extra year of private pre-schooling, and among Catholic schools.

The percentages of older Year 1 students at Brisbane state schools contacted by The Courier-Mail were: 22 percent (Chapel Hill), 18 percent (Kenmore), 21 percent (Fig Tree Pocket), 13 percent (Ascot), and 10 percent (Wilston). Three Catholic schools contacted had 23 percent (St Anthony's), 14 percent (St Ignatius) and 25 percent (Holy Family) of their Year 1 students turning seven this year.

But according to the Queensland education department, the parents of almost all these children are breaking the law and are liable for prosecution. The Education Act (1989) states that the age of compulsory school attendance is "not less than" six years or more than 15. Education Queensland's legal interpretation of this is that children must be in Year 1 in the year they turn six except where all parties agree there is a special case.

Sherrard Blemings, the department's senior education officer for the early childhood area, says "if a child is not attending a state or approved non-state school when he/she turns six, then the child's parents are breaching the compulsory attendance

provision of the legislation and are liable for prosecution". Queensland police have no record of any such convictions.

Not everyone sees it this way. The Early Education Reform Group has been beavering away in Queensland since 1981, spreading what it considers to be accurate information regarding school entry age. The group interprets the "not less than six years" phrase to mean that if a child has not had his or her sixth birthday before school starts, then he or she need not enter school until the following year.

Education Queensland's interpretation means that if a child turns five on December 31, he or she must be at school four weeks later, rubbing shoulders with January-born children up to 12 months older, unless a special case can be proved to the Education Minister.

Teachers say children who are more mature in their year are better equipped, more independent and more able to deal with school expectations.

Queensland Association of State School Principals president Tom Hardy believes we are putting children into school too young. Saying "you're five; it's time to go to school" is a tragedy because some children are just not ready to go, Hardy says.

In keeping with Education Queensland's hard line on school-starting age is its extreme reluctance to allow children to repeat a year at a state-funded preschool. Almost 65 percent of school starters have attended a state pre-school, yet the number of children who did a second year there was a mere 2.3 percent last year – 800 out of 34,000.

If parents wish to give their child an extra year at pre-school to help their maturity, they must do so outside the state system in a privately funded preschool centre. By doing so, they risk prosecution, according to Bleming's rhetoric. But in fact the Government turns a blind eye to delayed entry from private pre-schools while rigidly enforcing what Education Queensland sees as the prescribed starting age for children from state pre-schools.

The result is a double standard which may educationally disadvantage children using the state pre-school system.

With hindsight, Rebecca's, Rose's and Peter's parents wish they had kept them at home or in private pre-schools for another year instead of having to deal with the baggage of "repeating" at primary school. But they are now committed to the premise that older is wiser.

They have looked at the spectre of their children finishing school at the tender age of 16 while some of their peers in Queensland, and certainly most of their peers interstate and around the world, finished their schooling aged 17 or 18.

There is no flexible intake in Queensland as is the case in some other states, such as South Australia, which has four intakes annually, with children starting reception – the year before Year 1 – after their fifth birthday. In Queensland, children either start when they are five – as Blemings says they must under the law – or wait another whole year and start school when they are already six.

Many pre-school and primary school educators are supportive of delaying entry, not just for children whose age places them at the younger end of the intake year but

also for children who are just not “rearing to go” – even if these children are academically ready in the year they turn six.

Such educators believe, and this is particularly so for boys, that the additional social and emotional maturity and skills gained while playing in pre-school for another year will stand these children in good stead throughout their schooling.

In 1994, the Wiltshire review of education in Queensland recommended a move to a more flexible arrangement for early childhood classes that takes account of differences in children’s development and home background.

Dr Ken Wiltshire recommended a move away from the lock-step approach based on chronological age to a multi-level approach to Years 1, 2 and 3 in which some children may take four years to complete the first three years of schooling. This sparked a review of flexible schooling by Education Queensland which supported the concept of a more flexible progression through the early years of schooling and beyond but basically handed the ball to the schools. With the transition to school-based management, Blemings says it is up to parents to raise such issues and for the school to respond to what parents are saying.

Queensland Council of Parents and Citizens Associations president Sarah Nelson says meeting the needs of students in the short and long-term is the aim of the education system. If there was an advantage for children in starting later, this flexible option should be allowed. “Ultimately it is what best suits the needs of the students that is important and the system needs to follow this,” Nelson says.

Indooroopilly Montessori pre-school director Carmel Ellis believes there is a need to get away from the idea that children are being “held back” and focus more on sending children when they are developmentally ready.

Ellis believes the benefits of starting later become more obvious at secondary level, where these children have an added year of maturity when facing peer pressures as well as future life and career decisions.

However, one trade-off parents have to accept when choosing a delayed start is in the area of sport. Ellis says fathers are sometimes concerned that all team sports are age-based – where teams are selected according to age – and children have to pay in teams of children who are in the year above them at school, not with their classroom friends. However, as an increasing number of children are out of their chronological year, Ellis says this is much less of an issue than it once may have been.

Indooroopilly’s Holy Family School learning support teacher, Julianne Wray, has found that children who are more mature are better able to cope with the demands of school.

Wray says there is a culture in her area which encourages children to start school later to set them up for success. This culture is influenced by the large proportion of families from southern states where parents are used to children having an additional year of schooling and used to children leaving at 18.

Many children at Holy Family School, between 20 and 30 percent, are a year older in their grade because they have had what Wray describes as a “growing year”.

“The feedback we get from private schools is that our children cope very well in Year 8,” she said. “We believe in setting children up for success. It’s further down the line in secondary school that we find that these children who are more mature are less likely to get caught up in adolescent problems.”

Some private primary schools on the Gold Coast are actually creating their own rules and have initiated a more formal prep year before Year 1. They have brought the cut-off forward by six months and insist that children going into prep, which is effectively their pre-school year, must have turned five by the end of June.

Founding member of the Early Education Reform Group Jane Hely says the introduction of the prep year is bringing these schools more into line with what is happening in the rest of the country and supports the philosophy that, if children are older, they are more mature and better able to cope with formal schooling.

As director of Moana Park community kindergarten at Broadbeach Waters, Hely says up to 20 percent of her students do a second year of pre-school. They are mostly boys, because boys often need more time to develop emotionally and socially.

“Life is so challenging and so much faster now and if children can be helped to be as ready as possible, then it is a job well done,” Hely said. “What’s an extra year in a whole life when 12 years are taken up with schooling?”