



Age of Enrolling to Kindergarten and First Grade in Canada: The Québec Exception



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Submission: 📅 October 13, 2017; Published: 📅 February 22, 2018

Introduction

The present study lies in the field of education. More specifically, we are inquiring into whether there is uniformity regarding the applicable age eligibility deadlines for kindergarten and first grade admission at the provincial level, and we are examining the main consequences of the presence and the absence of uniformity.

Education in Canada lies in the field of provincial jurisdiction. The power to regulate in this field is enshrined in the Canadian Constitution. Sections 91 to 95 of the 1867 Constitution lay out the different areas of legislative authority at the federal and provincial levels as well as areas of shared jurisdiction. Natural riches (mines, minerals, natural gas, and oil), property rights, hospital administration, and social services are examples of areas that are regulated at the provincial level. Article 93 of the 1867 Constitution explicitly provides that subject to few strictly defined exceptions, 'in and for each Province the Legislature may exclusively make Laws in relation to Education'.

Canadian provinces have regulated in the field of education. The services provided for in this field are usually well described and readily available to the public. With five million children or more attending elementary school in Canada, one can easily understand the importance of regulating in this area and making the information accessible to the public. All children in Canada have access to preschool and elementary school education. Preschool education includes kindergarten-the year that precedes admission to first grade-while.

Some provinces may offer preschool education two or three years prior to first grade-usually referred to as pre-kindergarten. First grade generally marks the start of elementary school education (primary school). Contrary to kindergarten which is not mandatory in most provinces, first grade-and elementary school in general-are compulsory at the provincial level.

In the present study, we will examine the ages of admission to kindergarten (not pre-kindergarten) and first grade at the provincial level. More specifically, we will comment on the age eligibility deadlines that determine admission to kindergarten and first grade in order to establish whether uniformity in the applicable

dates exists. We will also focus on the advantages of uniformity in this area and the main consequences of its absence. Since, as we are going to confirm, the province of Québec constitutes the most notable exception in Canada regarding the application of a uniform age eligibility date for kindergarten and first grade admission, our analysis will put emphasis on the applicable rules in Québec and their consequences when compared to the ones present in the rest of the Canadian provinces.

In employing the word uniform we are conscious of the fact that the term has made the object of various definitions. For some authors uniformity implies a 'line-to-line' identity of the applicable laws (unification). For others, the notion allows variations in the applicable rules in the endeavour of making them similar. In all cases, uniformity involves reduction or elimination of the plethora of diversified standards present at the local level. For the purposes of the present study, the term will denote the presence of identical age eligibility dates for kindergarten and first graded mission based on present or proposed provincial laws.

The following two sections will form the basis of our study:

Section I

Age eligibility deadlines for enrolling to kindergarten and first grade at the provincial level.

Section II

Analysis of findings - the Québec exception.

Section I

Age Eligibility Deadlines for Enrolling to Kindergarten and First Grade at the Provincial Level In Québec kindergarten is optional. Parents may, therefore, elect not to enrol their children although they rarely do so. On the contrary, elementary school is compulsory. Following long-standing provincial regulations, a child must be five and six years old on or before September 30th of the year of enrolment to kindergarten and primary school respectively. This means that a child whose fifth or sixth birthday falls on or before September 30th of the year of enrolment will be able to attend kindergarten and grade one respectively during the same year. On the contrary, a

child whose fifth or sixth birthday falls after September 30th of the year of enrollment (i.e. in October, November or December of the enrolling year) will have to enrol to kindergarten and grade one the following year.

An exception to this general rule exists. It is called school derogation (*la dérogationscolaire*). The exception allows children to attend kindergarten or primary school before they reach the prescribed age due to family, residence, or social reasons or because the child's intellectual, social, emotional and psychomotor skills are placed well above average compared to other children in his/her age group. Although much less

frequent or popular in Québec, school derogation for late admission is also possible. Derogation for late admission allows children to delay their schooling by one year even if they are born before September 30th of the year of enrolment. In general, it is hard for a child to meet the requirements of school derogation. It is meant to be the exception rather than the rule. The situation is quite different in the rest of Canada. The vast majority of the Canadian provinces and schools apply the end of the calendar year as the age eligibility deadline for enrolment to kindergarten or grade one. Let us take a closer look at the applicable rules in the rest of the provinces.

In the province of Ontario children who are five years old on or before December 31st of the year of enrollment can register to kindergarten. Frequenting kindergarten is voluntary rather than mandatory. However, a child who turns six by the end of a calendar year must start primary school during the same year. The latter is an obligation rather than a choice. The same rules apply in British Columbia. A child who turns five by the end of the year may register to kindergarten. Although kindergarten is optional, elementary school is mandatory. A child who turns six by the end of the calendar year will frequent grade one during the same school year. The same age eligibility deadline (end of the calendar year) applies in Newfoundland, Manitoba, and the three territories (North Western Territories, Nunavut and Yukon). In the case of Yukon, a kindergarten student has to be four years and eight months by September 1st of the year of enrolment, that is, five years old by the end of the calendar year. Corresponding ages and dates apply for grade one.

The rules are not substantially different in New Brunswick except for the fact that both primary school and kindergarten are mandatory in this province. For the rest, the age of eligibility for kindergarten and grade one are the same: a child of five and six years of age by the end of the calendar year will frequent kindergarten and grade one respectively in the same year. In Saskatchewan, kindergarten is not compulsory. School divisions are responsible for the operation, programming and age of entry to kindergarten. As a result, there is no provincial kindergarten eligibility age. In most school divisions, children must be five years old by December 31st of the year in which they begin kindergarten. Some schools allow children who turn five by the end of January of a given year (i.e. 2017) to register to kindergarten in September

of the previous year (i.e. 2016 following our example), while fewer schools apply an earlier than December age eligibility date. For grade one (compulsory attendance), a child must be six years of age by the end of December or January the latter for certain schools.

In Alberta, the age of admission to kindergarten and primary school is undergoing change. Under the current regime, school boards set the age eligibility date for kindergarten and grade one. Many of them allow children to start kindergarten in September of a given year (i.e. 2017) if they are five years old on or before March 1 of the following year (in our example, 2018). However, since different school boards may apply different cut-off dates for age eligibility, these may vary (from December 31st to January 31st, February 28th, or September). The variety in the dates of entry has created discomfort with parents and a competition at the school board level. Although attendance to kindergarten in Alberta is voluntary, most children frequent kindergarten one year before starting first grade. Elementary school is compulsory in this province and starts at the age of six. Given the rules described above, school boards may allow children to register at five and a half years of age.

In 2008, the Ministry of Education of Alberta launched a wide array of consultations with a view to transform Alberta's education system to meet the needs of today's students. As a result of these consultations, the government proposed the Education Actin 2012, accompanied by 16 regulations which are expected to change the currently applicable rules regarding age eligibility. Following the proposed rules, beginning with the 2018-2019 school year, children must be five and six years old by December 31st, 2018 in order to start kindergarten and grade one respectively in September of the same year. If adopted, the proposed change will align Alberta with the cut-off age eligibility dates maintained by most Canadian provinces and will put an end to the multiplicity of age eligibility deadlines currently applied in different schools at the provincial level.

At the time of the present writing the new rules have not yet been adopted by legislature. Kindergarten is called grade primary in Nova Scotia. Children turning five on or before December 31st of a given year must attend grade primary in September of the same year. Since grade primary is the first year of schooling and is mandatory in this province, no separate enrolment procedure is present for grade one. It follows that a child turning six by December of a given year will be attending grade one from September of the same year.

The application of the calendar year as the deadline for determining the age for kindergarten entry in Nova Scotia is a relatively new one. Before 2008, only children turning five on or before October 1st could enroll to kindergarten in the same year. This cut-off date resembles the one currently applicable in Québec (September 30th). The change of the eligibility age in 2008 allowed 2,100 additional students to be eligible to start school in September 2008 in Nova Scotia. The reform brought the province's eligibility date in line with the majority of the Canadian provinces and was welcomed by the military community whose members are subject to frequent relocation.

Prince Edward Island is another province where laws have evolved in this area. Prior to 2010 different age eligibility deadlines applied for enrolment to kindergarten and first grade. Following widespread consultations, a reform of the early childhood education took place in 2008 and was completed in 2010.

Today, a child who turns five years of age by December 31st of a given year may enroll to kindergarten the same year. Kindergarten is mandatory: a child must complete kindergarten before entering grade one.

It follows that a child who reaches the age of six years on or before December 31st of the year following kindergarten will be able to enrol to grade one in September of that year. The relatively recent change of the age eligibility deadline for kindergarten brought this province's laws in line with the rest of the Canadian provinces.

Section II

Analysis of Findings: the Québec Exception From the foregoing, it is evident that the vast majority of the Canadian provinces and schools apply the end of the calendar year as the cut-off time for age eligibility to kindergarten (usually targeting five year old students) and first grade (usually targeting six year old students), or have proposed legislation to this effect. The exceptions constitute Québec, which applies the September 30th deadline for five year old (kindergarten) and six year old (grade one) students, Alberta and the minority schools in Saskatchewan that apply different dates of age eligibility as well as Yukon, that requires kindergarten students to be four years and eight months by September 1st of the year of enrolment a corresponding date applies for admission to grade one. Out of all these provinces that lie in the exception to the end of the calendar year age eligibility rule, we will concentrate on Québec. At this point in time, we do not deem it necessary to comment further on the applicable rules in Alberta since the province has proposed legislation aligning its standards with those applied by most provinces. However, for reasons that we will explain below, we cannot but stress the need to follow through with the reform of the age eligibility dates in Alberta. For the rest, Yukon and the minority of Saskatchewan schools may deviate from the end of the calendar year age eligibility rule. However, the applicable rule in Yukon does not really differ from the one present in the vast majority of schools in Canada since a child turning five and six years old by the end of the calendar year will be able to attend kindergarten and grade one respectively during that year based on the presently applicable rules in the province. In effect, if a child in Yukon needs to be four years and eight months by September 1st of the year of enrolment to kindergarten, it follows that by the end of the calendar year he/she will be five years old, as is the case in the vast majority of the Canadian provinces. As far as Saskatchewan is concerned, it is the minority not the majority of schools that apply other deadlines than the end of the calendar year in order to determine age eligibility for kindergarten and grade one. Although the need to bring uniformity to the age eligibility dates applied by the minority of Saskatchewan schools should not be undermined -an alignment of the dates to the end of the calendar year should actively be pursued by these schools or the province-it is Québec that maintains a province-wide

standard that is clearly different from the one maintained by the vast majority of schools in the country. For this reason, Québec rules will be the main focus of the present analysis.

As explained previously, Québec requires kindergarten students to be five years old and primary school students to be six years old by September 30th of the enrolment year. In practice, this means that children turning five and six years old in October, November or December of a given year in Québec will have, in principle, to wait a year in order to enroll to kindergarten and primary school - contrary to the applicable rule in most Canadian schools allowing their enrollment in the same year. With over seven thousand births per month taking place in Québec during October, November and December of each year for the last ten years, it is normal to conclude that a good number of children will have to delay kindergarten and primary school admission by a year in Québec, contrary to what occurs in most Canadian schools. At the present date, Québec has not proposed legislation for modifying the kindergarten and primary school age eligibility deadlines. Since most of the schools in Canada apply the end of the calendar year as the cut off time in determining age eligibility for kindergarten and primary school students or have proposed legislation to this effect, we cannot but wonder why Québec is insisting on the September 30th cut-off date.

One could argue that since article 93 of the Canadian Constitution attributes to the provinces the power to regulate in the field of education, each province is entitled to choose its own criteria for early education admission, including age eligibility. This is absolutely true. The Canadian Constitution is the supreme law of the land that provides the fundamental rules and principles which govern our country. It maintains a division of powers between the federal and the provincial governments and allows every province to regulate education without any interference from other provinces or from the federal government.

However, despite or rather due to the provincial freedom to regulate education, most of the provinces in Canada (except Québec) have adopted or have proposed laws and regulations mandating the end of the calendar year as the cut-off date for kindergarten and primary school age eligibility. In other words, in exercising their freedom to regulate kindergarten and primary school age eligibility, the vast majority of the Canadian provinces seek to apply a uniform standard. This is particularly true for the provinces of Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia that formerly applied kindergarten and grade one age eligibility cut-off dates similar to the one present in Québec today but which relatively recently aligned their dates to the one applied by the vast majority of Canadian provinces (end of the calendar year) in order to achieve uniformity. Uniformity of the early education entry ages has the beneficial effect of simplifying admission procedures at the provincial and the interprovincial levels. It applies one standard for admission throughout the provinces. In this regard, December 31st a cut-off date for kindergarten and primary school age eligibility is a logical deadline to adopt compared to the September 30th one applied in Québec or similar dates formerly Applied by Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. It marks the end of the calendar year and

constitutes a cut-off time for many activities at the provincial and the national levels.

The ever increasing interprovincial mobility of Canadians also favors the application of a uniform standard in this area. According to statistics Canada interprovincial migration in recent years has been increasing compared to previous years with some provinces gaining and other provinces losing migrants. With a view to facilitating and enhancing interprovincial mobility, efforts and suggestions to standardize provincial educational, professional, legal or other requirements have been made in different areas of activity at the provincial level. Following this trend, it makes sense that provinces seek to apply one standard for age eligibility for kindergarten and primary school entry.

To illustrate the advantages of uniform cut-off deadlines for age eligibility for kindergarten and first graders we will take the example of a Québec family that moves to Ontario or British Columbia for work-related purposes. This family has a child turning five in October, November or December during the year of the move. Due to the move and the end of December cut-off age eligibility date applied in the receiving provinces, their five year old child will be able to enroll to kindergarten in the receiving province following the move and will enroll to primary school before reaching the age of six the following year. On the contrary, if the family remains in Québec the child will not, in principle, be able to register to kindergarten the same year since he-she will turn five after September 30th. However, if Québec applied the calendar year as a cut-off date for kindergarten entry, the move would not have created a disparity in the kindergarten admission of the child. Both the receiving province and the province of origin would have applied the same standard.

Inversely, if the same family moves from the province of Ontario or British Columbia to Québec, their child will not be able to make the Québec September 30th age eligibility requirement for kindergarten entry in the same year, contrary to what would happen in the province of origin. Therefore, in principle, the enrollment of the child to kindergarten in Québec will only take place in the following school year. The child may, however, be exceptionally admitted to kindergarten under the Québec Regulation respecting exceptional cases for admission to preschool and elementary school education if he-she falls under any one of the categories therein stated. For example, if while domiciled outside Québec the child began or completed his-her preschool education (i.e. junior kindergarten in Ontario) in an official education system, he-she may be able to attend kindergarten in Québec. This exception may also be possible if school derogation is applied for and obtained in Québec following the same regulation.

Nonetheless, these categories remain the exception to the rule of the September 30th cut-off age eligibility requirement and their application depends on whether the child 'began or completed his preschool or elementary school education in an official education system outside Québec' or whether derogation is granted. If the December 31st cut-off age eligibility date was applied to kindergarten

entry in Québec, the transfer of the child would proceed easily since the same rules would apply in the province of origin and in the receiving province. The simplification of the admission procedures would have facilitated interprovincial mobility. Considering this, it would be logical for Québec to apply the end of the calendar year as the kindergarten and primary school age eligibility deadline as other provinces do.

An argument favoring an earlier cut-off date for age eligibility maintained by the province of Québec is the one usually forwarded by the proponents of delayed kindergarten and primary school admission. According to them, a child who is admitted later to kindergarten and to primary school is more mature and more likely to succeed in academics than children who are admitted at an earlier age. As a result, one could argue that it is just and fair for a child turning five in October, November and December to wait for another year before he-she starts his-her studies in Québec. By doing so, the child will be more prepared to tackle kindergarten and school life and will probably achieve better success in academics.

However, this position is not unanimous among authors. There are studies that stress the advantages of early age schooling. Perhaps the best proof that the December 31st cut-off date for kindergarten and primary school admission is not necessarily detrimental to a student's learning compared to the September 30th deadline applied by Québec is the fact that the vast majority of the Canadian provinces maintain the end of the calendar year as the deadline for kindergarten and primary school age eligibility. Ironically, France—a country whose culture has marked the history of the province of Québec applies the December 31st cut-off

date for primary school (age of six years by December 31st of the enrolling year) and kindergarten (starting age of three years by December 31st of the enrolling year) age eligibility. Wouldn't it therefore make sense for Québec to adopt the same age eligibility deadline (end of the calendar year) for kindergarten (five year old children) and grade one (six year old children)?

Continuing to emphasize the end of September cut-off age eligibility date for kindergarten and primary school admission in Québec may ultimately give the false impression that some Québec children are less mature or ready to start school than children of corresponding ages in other provinces. In effect, a child who turns five or six years old in October, November or December of a given year in Québec is, in principle, deemed not ready or mature enough to enroll to kindergarten contrary to children of corresponding ages in other provinces who are able to do so. Clearly this isn't because such a child living in Québec is less bright or mature academically and socially than children of the same age living in other provinces. Logically speaking, there is no valid reason to think that some children living in Québec are less mature than children of corresponding ages living in other provinces. However, the different age eligibility requirements present in Québec compared to the vast majority of the Canadian provinces may provide adequate basis to defy logic and argue otherwise.

For different reasons, therefore, the Québec kindergarten (targeting five year old children) and primary school (targeting six year old children) age eligibility cut-off date needs to be aligned to December 31st. There is no adequate justification for insisting on the September 30th deadline for kindergarten and elementary school age eligibility in Québec. On the contrary, the provincial rules and interprovincial realities mandate for a change of the applicable date.

Conclusion

Québec laws that make it difficult for children turning five or six years old in October, November or December of a given year to access kindergarten and primary school respectively during the same year constitute the exception to the age eligibility rule (end of the calendar year) applied by the vast majority of Canadian schools. The status quo is not satisfactory since it may create the impression that children in Quebec are less capable of starting their schooling when compared to children of corresponding ages residing in other provinces. The applicable laws in Québec may also create an obstacle to the interprovincial mobility of families.

It is uncertain that such obstacles or problems are adequately justified by the freedom to regulate education at the provincial level. If the few provinces that formerly applied similar rules to the ones present in Québec for kindergarten and primary school age eligibility have modified them, achieving in this way uniformity with the vast majority of provinces, it is high time for Québec to do the same.

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