



**Public Hearing on Substitute Amendment 1 to SB 89  
Before the Wisconsin Senate Education Committee  
Thursday, April 2, 2009, 1:30 PM**

**Testimony Presented by Larry Kaseman  
Executive Director, Wisconsin Parents Association**

Mr. Chair and Members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on Senate Substitute Amendment 1 to SB 89.

My name is Larry Kaseman, and I am the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Parents Association, a statewide, inclusive, nonprofit, grassroots homeschooling organization. Let me state clearly at the outset that I realize this bill does NOT affect homeschooling directly. Nevertheless, WPA is opposed to the bill for reasons I will explain briefly in a minute. But first let me say that if the bill does pass, WPA wants it to pass without any mention of homeschooling and without special exemptions for homeschoolers. It currently contains no such provisions, and none is necessary or wanted since homeschooled students should not be given a free pass or treated differently from other students.

Also, the substitute amendment to SB 89 favorably addresses two of the specific provisions of the bill that were of particular concern to us. First, the bill now requires school boards to allow exemptions to the requirement for satisfactory completion of kindergarten before entering first grade. Second, the amended version no longer requires that children demonstrate "the social, emotional, and cognitive skills necessary for admission to the first grade" in order to gain an exemption from the kindergarten requirement.

WPA opposes this bill both in general and for specific reasons. I will briefly explain one of the key reasons for our opposition and then discuss our concerns with the bill's truancy provisions and the costs to taxpayers, children, and families of the increased screening and labeling that would inevitably follow if this bill were passed. My testimony is supported by many studies and the thinking of many experts in child development. Please see the printed copy of my testimony for specific references.

**Problems with Increasing Emphasis on Early Childhood Education**

WPA is opposed to the increasing attempts to institutionalize children at earlier ages by requiring that they attend school. Our mission includes providing support and information for parents who want to take responsibility for raising their own children instead of turning them over to the state. We work for parents' right to choose for their children an education consistent with their principles and beliefs, not one mandated by the state. Much research supports our contention that the most important factor in determining the success of children's educations is their family background, including the relationships they develop with their parents.<sup>1</sup> Young children need time at home with their families to develop these relationships and to benefit from the multitude of learning opportunities that everyday life offers them. I am NOT saying that WPA thinks everyone should homeschool. I am simply saying that young children benefit from spending as much time as possible with their families before they enter first grade. Therefore, WPA opposes the widespread increasing pressure to institutionalize younger children, including four-year-old and even three-year-old kindergarten. While this bill does not mention three and four year olds, it still represents another step in increasing early childhood education.

In addition, when young children spend time with their families, families are strengthened. Family bonds are forged. Parents understand their children better and are in a better position to make good decisions. Parents take responsibility for their children, reducing the need for social service agencies. Because the family is the basic unit of all known societies, strong families play a vital role in our nation's present and future. When children are institutionalized at young ages instead of spending most of their time with their families, the results are harmful to both children and families.<sup>2</sup>

But, some people argue, we need early childhood education for the benefit of children who don't have strong homes and families, who are victims of poverty and other social ills. I agree that these serious and tragic problems should be addressed. But if that is really our goal, let's address those problems directly. Let's not try to solve them by requiring all children attend school at earlier ages.

Support for addressing social problems directly rather than through increased early childhood education comes from a study done at the University of California in Santa Barbara. This study indicates that the most significant gains experienced by children who attend kindergarten occur among students from low income families, but those gains are attributed not to kindergarten classes but to supplemental programs to assist low income families. The researcher concludes that tax dollars are better spent by providing support to poor families than by providing or requiring kindergarten for all children.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the opportunities that children who attend school before age 6 miss with their families, WPA is concerned about the effects that institutionalization has on them. Institutionalization is by its very nature challenging for people, whether they are in a large workplace, a hospital, a prison, or a school. People simply function better in small groups where they have more freedom and more control. Given their understandable lack of maturity, institutionalization is especially hard on young children. Adjusting to being away from home and family, among a large group of strangers who (except for the teacher) are all the same age, in an unfamiliar setting, poses difficulties for them and leaves them less energy to focus on learning. When children can spend more time at home with their families, they have a chance to grow and mature in their own ways, according to their own timetables. They are better prepared for school and have a much easier time adjusting. In countries such as Finland and Denmark, children begin learning to read and write in school at age seven and soon score well on tests.

If the US spent the money that is currently funding early childhood education on increased tax deductions and tax credits for dependent children, more parents would be able to be home with their young children rather than being forced to work and send their children to daycare or school.

For these reasons and more, WPA opposes increased early childhood education and opposes this bill because it represents yet another step in that direction.

In case this bill is not defeated in its entirety, I would like to address several specific points in it.

### **Problems with Requiring Kindergarten Attendance and Charging Kindergarteners with Truancy**

The main purpose of this bill seems to be to ensure that children attend kindergarten regularly by making it a prerequisite for first grade and requiring that truancy laws currently covering children six and over be enforced for children enrolled in kindergarten.

However, there is little evidence that truancy in kindergarten is a major problem. Kindergarten teachers who testified at the hearing before the Assembly Education Committee on March 17 said that only a few students miss enough classes to cause a problem.

This bill would subject kindergarteners who miss five or more days or partial days of school in one semester to the same penalties for truancy as are currently being applied to children six and older. This would be a big mistake. Since there is little evidence that truancy in kindergarten is a problem for very many children, and since the importance of regular attendance could be reduced by reducing

academic requirements, penalties for truancy are unnecessary and likely to be harmful. These penalties are clearly not working for older children. Since new, harsher definitions of truancy and penalties took effect in 1998-1999, the number of habitual truants has increased from 74,569 to 84,713 in 2007-2008. During this time, the truancy rate has increased from 8.7% to 10.1%.

In addition to not working, harsh truancy laws often increase the antagonism between parents and students on one hand and teachers and school administrators on the other. Children's educations suffer as a result.

Another way to solve the supposed problem of truancy in kindergarten is to reduce academic requirements so children can cover the required material without needing to attend every single day. The idea that children need to learn more at younger ages so the US can compete in the global economy is wrongheaded. To be sure, with considerable effort, five year olds can be taught to count to 100 and perform similar measurable tasks. But this does not mean that such activities increase their overall education. In fact, it is generally much easier for children to learn such tasks at older ages, something they often do on their own without being taught. Such experiences increase children's confidence in their ability to learn and their enjoyment of learning, something that is vital to their future educations. Since almost all children can count to 100 by age eight, does it matter if they learned when they were three, or four, or five, or even six or seven? In fact, given the stress that accompanies forced learning at earlier ages, allowing children to learn when they are ready is clearly the best approach, especially since the forced gains made in kindergarten are lost by third grade.<sup>4</sup>

Reducing the pressure on both kindergarten teachers and students would remove the need to impose penalties for truancy, allowing kindergarten to be a helpful, gradual transition from home to first grade. I realize that kindergarten teachers, understandably, would like each student to come to school every day, ready to learn. Since human frailty, especially when coupled with the young ages of kindergarteners, makes this impossible, isn't everyone better off if kids who are not ready to learn on a given day simply do not come to school, disrupt the class, and take up the teacher's time? Some people argue that allowing reasonable absences would give children the idea that they only have to attend school on days when they feel like it. On the contrary, not being forced to go to kindergarten every day would make school a more positive experience for children and enhance their learning. It is more important for children to have a positive experience in school and look forward to future attendance and learning than for them to master certain rote tasks like counting to 100 that they may simply not be ready to learn. We need to remember that children grow and develop as they get older. What they do as five year olds is not what they will do as eighteen year olds, or even as six year olds.

If our real goal is to help the children who are missing many days of kindergarten because they come from homes that lack the resources to get them to school regularly, let's figure out a better way to do it than requiring that ALL children attend kindergarten. An old legal maxim states that "Hard cases make bad law." In other words, a law designed to take care of the worst case is almost certain to be long, difficult to enforce, and more likely to prevent good people from doing good than bad people from doing bad. This bill is an example of a bad law based on a few hard cases.

In sum, WPA is strongly opposed to making kindergarten a prerequisite for first grade and applying Wisconsin's current harsh and ineffective truancy laws to children enrolled in kindergarten.

### **Cost to Taxpayers of Increased Screening and Labeling of Children**

WPA's second major concern with this bill is its cost to taxpayers and to young children and their families. To be sure, because almost all five year olds currently attend kindergarten voluntarily, should this bill pass, the increase in the total number of kindergarteners would be small. However, making the completion of kindergarten a prerequisite for first grade would inevitably lead to more preschool screenings, more children being diagnosed as having "learning disabilities" and other disorders, and more special education classes. Because costs of special education are so much greater than those of standard education, the cost to taxpayers would be great very large and on-going.

Let me make it very clear that I am not talking about special education programs for children whose needs are obvious and clearly detectable without screenings, including children who are visually impaired, have severe hearing loss, etc. Our concern is that with increased pressure in kindergarten, many normal children who simply need more time to mature physically, neurologically, mentally, emotionally, and/or socially will be incorrectly and unnecessarily labeled at great cost to taxpayers, children, families, and society. Several reasons support this concern:

- An enormous natural variation exists among children whose age makes them eligible for five-year-old kindergarten. Their ages span a full year, from September 2<sup>nd</sup> of one year to September 1<sup>st</sup> of the following year. While this age span exists in every grade, the younger children are, the larger the proportion of children's lives it covers and thus the more serious a problem it becomes. Studies show that well-educated parents of children born during June, July, and August often delay their entry into school for a year so they can enjoy the advantages of being among the oldest rather than suffering the disadvantages of being the youngest.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, this bill deliberately does not lower the compulsory school age to five to allow parents this choice, a thoughtful provision that WPA appreciates. Unfortunately, children who have summer birthdays and come from low income homes are more likely to be enrolled in school as soon as they are eligible because their parents are under so much pressure to work. These children suffer the double disadvantages of low incomes and being young. Because there are fewer advantaged children their ages in school to provide a point of comparison, the lower income children are more likely to be labeled as disabled when in fact they are simply appropriately mature for their ages but immature compared to older children.

- We need to provide schools that meet children's needs, not try to force children into behaviors that meet the needs of schools. Current attempts to get kids to do things they are not yet physically, mentally, or socially mature enough to do results in increased labeling and destruction of young children.

- Boys are far more likely to be labeled than girls.<sup>6</sup> Of course, there are individual variations, and stereotyping based on gender or sex is risky. But schools are designed to require and reward compliant children who sit quietly, do as they are told, and learn well through reading and writing. This behavior is more typical of girls than boys, especially when they are young. A much larger proportion of boys than girls are labeled, placed in special education, and drugged. By definition, one cannot claim that a large proportion of boys are abnormal. Isn't it obvious that there is something wrong with our current definition of normal, especially as it applies to boys?

- Screening, diagnosis, and treatment of so-called learning disabilities is far from an exact science. In fact, books, article, and websites document the many problems associated with current diagnosis and treatment.<sup>7</sup> In addition, many parents have watched their children fail to perform tasks during a screening that they regularly do at home, perhaps because they are overwhelmed by the unfamiliar setting and pressure.

- Drugging often accompanies labeling. Despite strong evidence of the dangers of drugs like Ritalin, their use is increasing. Drug use often results more from clever propaganda and lobbying by the drug companies than children's needs.<sup>8</sup>

- WPA's greatest concern about labeling is the cost in human terms to children who are incorrectly labeled and stigmatized and to their families. Many of these incorrect diagnoses become self-fulfilling prophecies from which children and their families do not recover. The loss of confidence alone makes learning more difficult for children who have been labeled. Drugging these children with Ritalin and other substances compounds these problems.

Finally, an additional potential cost to taxpayers comes from the probability that parents will sue school boards that decide to retain their children in kindergarten.

This situation would be especially difficult if one school district decided one way and, under open enrollment, another district decided differently. In addition, subjective claims and decisions like these make lawyers wealthy.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, since at present most parents voluntarily enroll their children in kindergarten and send them to school regularly, this bill is at best unnecessary. Worse, it will undoubtedly create problems for children, their families, and schools and cost taxpayers a great deal of money in the long run. The problem it is apparently trying to solve, that is, educating children from unstable, low income homes, certainly needs to be addressed. But requiring that all children attend kindergarten regularly is not an effective way to do so.

Instead of spending more money on early childhood education, labeling, special education, and drugs, let's put more money into supporting families by increasing tax deductions and tax credits for dependent children so more parents can afford to stay home with their children. Let's inform parents of what researchers are saying about the critical importance of parents to children's ability to learn. Parents can then give their children the kind of solid start in life that is only possible within a strong and stable family. Children will be more ready for school at appropriate ages and will receive better educations. Families will be stronger, and, as a result, so will our nation.

## **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> For examples, see the following research that covers a span of over 40 years.

In 1966, James Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity* reported that the difference in academic achievement between black and white students is much more strongly influenced by their family background than by the quality of the schools they attend.

Since Coleman's study, many others have attempted to determine whether school variables such as per pupil expenditure, teacher training, etc. correlate positively with student achievement. Those that are statistically significant have consistently been shown not to demonstrate a positive correlation. For example, in 1986, Eric Hanushek compared the results of 147 studies of academic achievement. He showed that any number of school related variables cannot be shown to correlate positively with student achievement. Variables included teacher/pupil ratio, teacher education, teacher experience, teacher salary, time on task, and expenditure per pupil. He also concluded that, "Family background is clearly very important in explaining differences in achievement. Virtually regardless of how measured, more educated and more wealthy parents have children who perform better on average." This important and highly regarded article continues to be cited by both liberals and conservatives. See "The Economics of Schooling: Production and Efficiency in Public Schools," *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 24, Issue 3 (Sept. 1986), pp. 1141-1177. To download, go to <http://www.caldercenter.org/about/HanushekPubs.cfm> and click on title of article.

As recently as July 17, 2008, the *Christian Science Monitor* published an op ed piece by Walt Gardner titled, "Do better schools help the poor?" <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0717/p09s02-coop.html> It cites a report released in June, 2008 by the Economic Policy Institute that demonstrates that schools are limited in what they can accomplish. According to the report, what is needed for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed is investment in health care, parental support, and community involvement.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Baker, Jonathan Gruber, and Kevin Milligan. "Universal childcare, maternal labor supply, and family well-being" NBER Working Paper No. 11832, 2005.

<http://www.nber.org/papers/w11832>

From the abstract: "Finally, we uncover striking evidence that children [who were cared for at young ages through state supported childcare] are worse off in a variety of behavioral and health dimensions,

ranging from aggression to motor-social skills to illness. Our analysis also suggests that the new childcare program led to more hostile, less consistent parenting, worse parental health, and lower-quality parental relationships.”

Jay Belsky. “Emanuel Miller Lecture: Developmental Risks (Still) Associated with Early Child Care.” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2001), 42:7:845-859 Cambridge University Press

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Dhuey. “Who Benefits from Kindergarten? Evidence from the Introduction of State Subsidization.” Department of Economics, University of California, Santa Barbara, January, 2007. <http://web.uvic.ca/econ/Dhuey.pdf>

From the Conclusion: “Overall, the finding that only the select groupings of children gain from kindergarten attendance is important because it suggests that targeting early childhood interventions for the most affected children would yield significantly more benefits per tax dollar spent than providing publicly funded schooling for all.”

<sup>4</sup> Jill Cannon, Alison Jackowitz, and Gary Painter. “Is Full Better than Half? Examining the Longitudinal Effects of Full-Day Kindergarten Attendance” RAND Working Paper Series No. WR-266, 2005. Source: *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, v25 n2 p299-321, Spr 2006. [http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?\\_nfpb=true&&ERICExtSearch\\_SearchValue\\_0=EJ759360&ERICExtSearch\\_SearchType\\_0=no&accno=EJ759360](http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ759360&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ759360)

Abstract: “Kindergarten policy varies widely both across and within states. Over the past decade, a number of states have instituted a full-day kindergarten requirement and others are considering it as a way to increase educational achievement. Many parents also support full-day kindergarten as a source of child care. This paper uses the Early Child Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999 to evaluate the efficacy of this policy. In ordinary least squares, probit, county fixed effects, and instrumental variables models, we find that there are initial benefits for students and the mothers of students who attend full-day kindergarten, but that these differences largely evaporate by third grade. Contrary to claims by some advocates, attending full-day kindergarten is found to have no additional benefit for students in families with income below the poverty threshold.”

<sup>5</sup> Kelly Bedard and Elizabeth Dhuey. “The Persistence of Early Childhood Maturity: International Evidence of Long-Run Age Effects.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121(4), February 2006. [http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~edhuey/maturity\\_feb06.pdf](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~edhuey/maturity_feb06.pdf)

Abstract: “A continuum of ages exists within each starting class due to the use of a single school cut-off date – making the “oldest” children approximately twenty percent older than the “youngest” children at school entry. We provide substantial evidence that these initial maturity differences have long lasting effects on student performance across OECD countries. In particular, the youngest members of each cohort score 4-12 percentiles lower than the oldest members in grade four, and 2-9 percentiles lower in grade eight, depending upon the country. In fact, data from Canada and the United States shows that the youngest members of a cohort are even less likely to enroll in pre-university academic track courses and high-end academic universities. Taken together, these findings point to important early relative maturity effects that propagate themselves into adulthood through the structure of education systems.”

<sup>6</sup> Bedard and Dhuey, op cit.

Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson. *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. Ballantine Books, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Armstrong. *In Their Own Way: Discovering and Encouraging Your Child's Multiple Intelligences*. Rev ed. J. P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000. Criticisms of special education by a former teacher of “learning disabled” children.

Gerald Coles. *The Learning Mystique: A Critical Look at “Learning Disabilities.”* Pantheon Books, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Marcia Angell. “Drug Companies and Doctors: A Story of Corruption.” *The New York Review of Books*,

Volume 56, Number 1, January 15, 2009.

Benedict Carey and Gardiner Harris, "Psychiatric Group Faces Scrutiny Over Drug Industry Ties." NYTimes.com, July 12, 2007.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/12/washington/12psych.html?pagewanted=1&r=2>

From the article: "An analysis of Minnesota data by *The New York Times* last year found that on average, psychiatrists who received at least \$5,000 from makers of newer-generation antipsychotic drugs appear to have written three times as many prescriptions to children for the drugs as psychiatrists who received less money or none. The drugs are not approved for most uses in children, who appear to be especially susceptible to the side effects, including rapid weight gain."