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'Transitional Kindergarten' planned for 'early' 5-year-olds

By Theresa Harrington

When Candy Duperroir's son was 4 years old, she put him in kindergarten.

He would turn 5 in November, before California's cutoff date of Dec. 2. But Duperroir saw when she volunteered in his class that he hadn't developed the social and academic skills he needed to keep up with his classmates. So she pulled him out of kindergarten and placed him in preschool, before sending him to kindergarten the next year.

"Now, he's doing great in the eighth grade," the Brentwood mom said proudly during a Friday hearing of the Assembly Select Committee on High Quality Early Childhood Education. It was led by Assemblywoman Susan Bonilla, D-Concord, at Concord City Hall.

A new law sponsored by state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, will move the date by which children must turn 5 to start kindergarten in California from Sept. 1 to Dec. 1. It will be phased in over three years, pushing the date back one month each year from 2012 to 2015.

The law also creates a new Transitional Kindergarten, or "TK," that school districts are required to offer starting in fall 2012 for children who turn 5 between Sept. 2 and Dec. 2. These children, called "early fives," would be able to enroll in a two-year kindergarten program.

Simitian, Bonilla and supporters of the bill said these new classes would better prepare the youngsters for the academic rigors of kindergarten.

The younger 5-year-olds, several education experts said, would also benefit from an extra year to develop socially and emotionally, with extra

time to play with their peers in a more relaxed setting without report cards. Instead of focusing on "mastering" curriculum standards, children in TK would spend more time experiencing new concepts, with progress reported less formally.

Although the governor approved the law in September, many school districts are still scrambling to figure out how they will create Transitional Kindergartens. A few, however, have begun pilot programs, on which others could be based.

Thirty-six Los Angeles schools are offering TK programs this year, emphasizing "personalized oral language learning," said Whit Hayslip, retired assistant superintendent of early childhood education for the Los Angeles school district.

"Our families that may have been hesitant are starting to realize the benefits of it," he said.

He stressed the need for teacher training in early child development. In these tight financial times, Hayslip urged districts to seek grants from philanthropists or companies interested in contributing to education.

In Santa Clara County, the Franklin-McKinley and Gilroy districts plan to launch TK in the fall, said Lisa Kaufman, director of Early Learning Services for the Santa Clara County Office of Education.

"I think the reality is we don't know all the answers," she said, "but we're working really hard on getting them."

The law is prompting some districts to reach out to early childhood education providers in their

communities to create cohesive preschool-through-12th-grade educational strategies. The state hasn't provided districts with instructional guidelines, so many pilot programs are melding kindergarten curriculum standards with those for preschool.

Bonilla and Simitian praised these efforts.

"If we're willing to learn from each other, then I think local districts will make wise choices about what's best for their kids," Simitian said.

Kaufman said communicating the benefits to parents is key, "so they see this as opportunity and not retention."

Duperroir, a member of the Parent Voices advocacy group, supports the new law and wishes the state had offered TK when her son started school.

"If it had been there," she said, "I would have put my son in."

The bill SB 1381, the Kindergarten Readiness Act, changes the date children must turn 5 to enter kindergarten, from Dec. 2 to Sept. 1, over three years starting in 2012. It creates Transitional Kindergarten for students who turn 5 from Sept. 2 to Dec. 2.

Details are available at www.preschoolcalifornia.org.