BRIEF

Should kindergartners be redshirted? Costs likely outweigh academic benefits

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KEY FINDINGS

- Over the last decade, 5% of kindergarteners were redshirted on average. The rate peaked in fall 2021 at 6.4%.
- White students and boys were most likely to be redshirted. Redshirting was also more common in low-poverty and rural schools.
- The academic advantages of redshirting fade quickly. By third grade, redshirters were scoring equivalent to their peers who entered school on time.

Introduction

Every year, parents whose children turn five just before their state's kindergarten age cut off must decide whether to enroll their children in kindergarten on time or delay their child's entry into kindergarten for a year (a practice known as "redshirting"). While discussions of redshirting in popular media have grown in the last two decades (particularly following Malcolm Gladwell's 2008 book *Outliers* that promoted redshirting), our best available data show redshirting rates have been fairly stable and tend to range from 5% to 7% between the 1990s and 2010s. Rates of redshirting have historically been highest among boys, white students, and those with highly educated parents. There is some evidence that the practice increased during COVID-19 (as parents tried to avoid the disruptions of the 2020–21 school year) but little national data to confirm this perception.

Additionally, there has been growing debate about the benefits of redshirting. Many parents eager to give their child any advantage see redshirting as a "gift of time" (e.g., an extra year to get their child academically and socially prepared for kindergarten). However, there are real downsides to delaying the start of kindergarten, including parents being on the hook for an additional year of paid childcare. Research on the academic benefits of redshirting are mixed, with studies showing a clear advantage of being older at school entry but that the advantage fades out over time.

Definitions

On-time entrants: We classify children as on-time entrants if their fifth birthday falls in the 12 months before their state's cutoff and enroll in kindergarten in year *y*. They are between the age of 5.00 and 5.99 years at the cutoff in the year of enrollment.

Redshirters: We classify children as redshirters if their fifth birthday falls before their state's cutoff date for kindergarten enrollment in year *y-1*, but they do not enroll in kindergarten until year *y* (a year after they are eligible). These students are 6 years old or older at the cut off date in the year of their enrollment (and do not have an enrollment record in year *y-1*).

K Repeaters: Students with kindergarten enrollment records in both year *y-1* and year *y*.

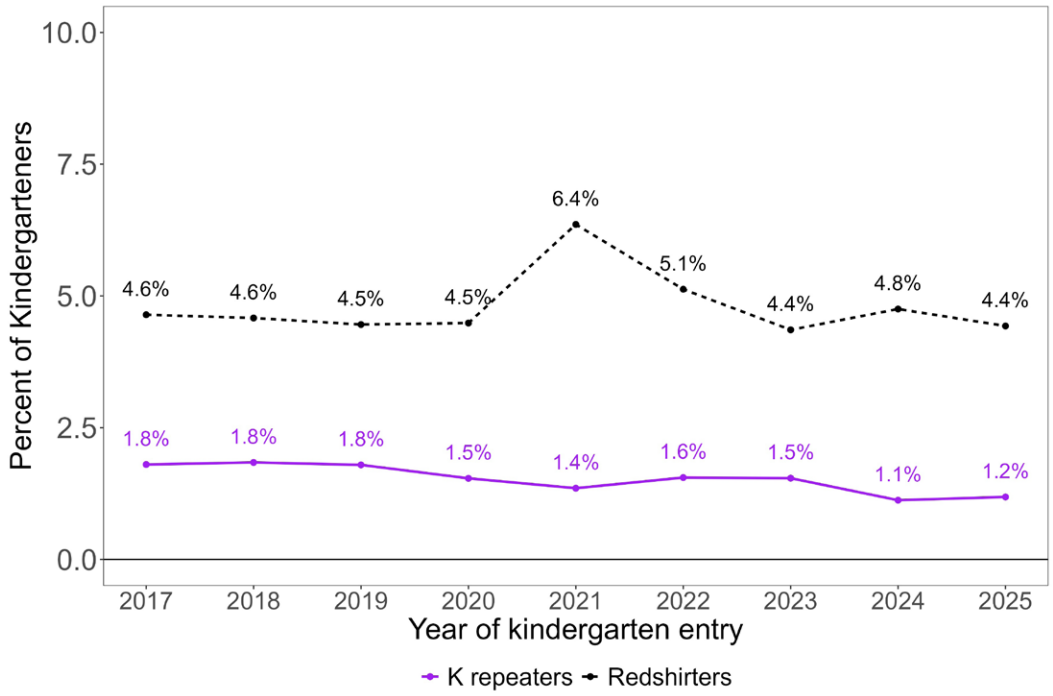
In this article, we describe redshirting trends from fall 2017 to 2025 using national data from over three million kindergarteners from NWEA®'s MAP® Growth™ K–2 assessments[1]. We also follow a recent kindergarten cohort (the kindergarten class of 2021–22) through third grade to examine whether the initial test score advantage for redshirters at school entry is maintained over early elementary grades. We conclude with recommendations for parents making the decision about whether to redshirt their children.

Five percent of students redshirt in an average year, but the rate peaked in fall 2021

Before weighing the benefits of redshirting, we examined how many families choose to redshirt and whether those rates shifted during the pandemic. In the years prior to the pandemic, approximately 5% of students in each kindergarten class were redshirted (see Figure 1). These observed rates are slightly lower than the 6.2% rate of redshirting reported by the most recent data from a nationally representative survey of kindergarteners (the kindergarten class of 2010–11). Additionally, 1–2% of kindergarten students repeated kindergarten each year. In total, approximately 6% of students in each kindergarten class were six years or older at their state entry cut-off in each year.

Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a small surge in redshirting. An increased number of parents whose children were scheduled to enter kindergarten in fall 2020 chose to redshirt (most likely to avoid the pandemic-related disruptions and remote learning of the 2020–21 school year). The rate of redshirted students (6.4%) in the 2021–22 school year was significantly higher than the pre-COVID rates (more than 10,000 additional students redshirted than the prior year). In the years since then, redshirting rates have dropped back to slightly below the pre-pandemic trends.

Figure 1. Approximately 5% of kindergartners redshirted in most years between 2017–2025

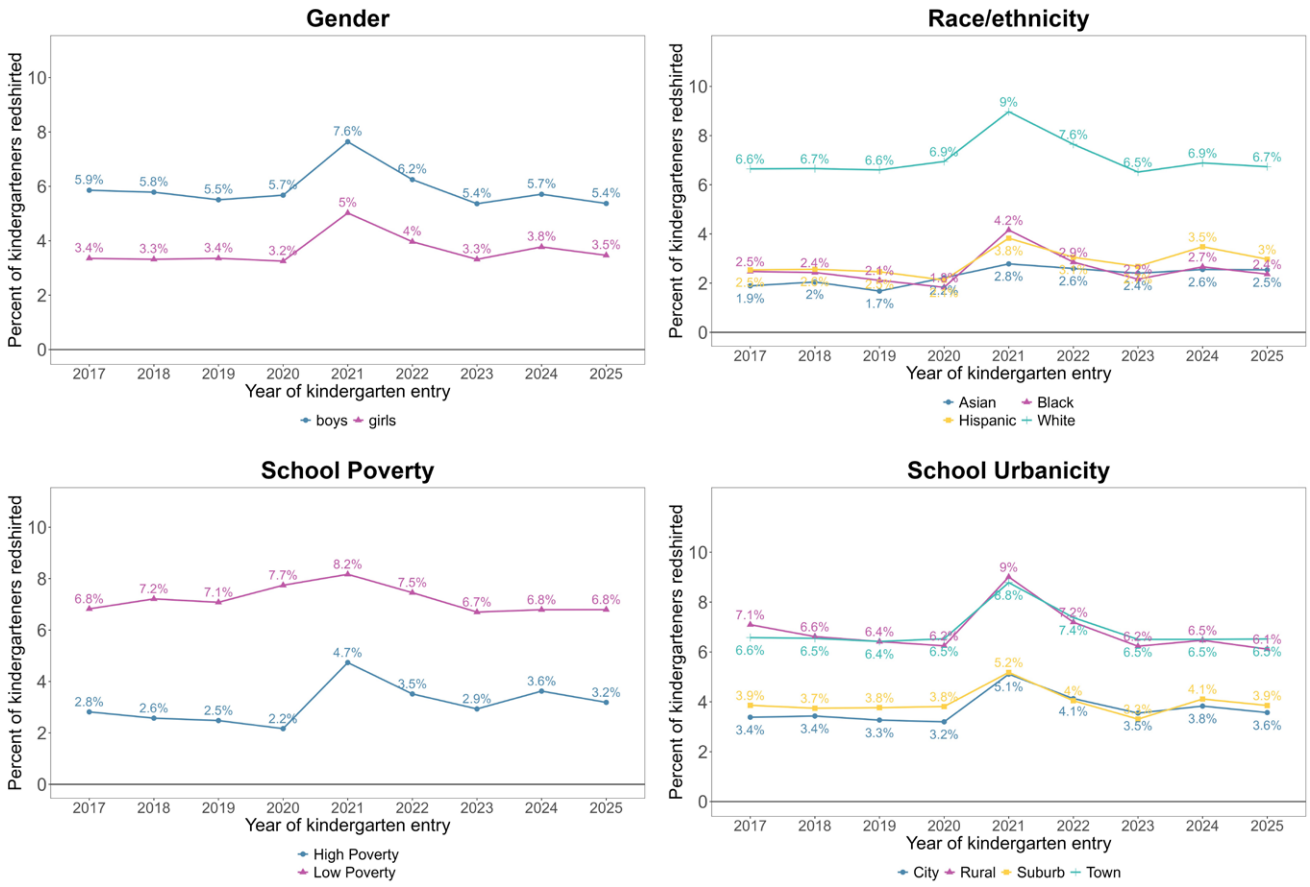


1 Our data come from schools all over the country but are not inherently nationally representative. See the technical appendix for a description of the methods and sample used.

Boys and white students are most likely to redshirt

Next, we examined whether some groups of students are more likely than others to be redshirted. Consistent with findings from older data, we see that boys and white students were more likely to be redshirted throughout the course of the study. However, there are some notable differences between groups in the trends over the last decade. For example, Asian students consistently had the lowest rates of redshirting and did not see a large COVID bump in the rate comparable to the increases observed for white, Black, and Hispanic students. Looking across school poverty levels, students in high-poverty schools had consistently lower rates of redshirting. However, this group saw some of the largest increases in rates of redshirting due to COVID-19. Finally, redshirting rates were highest in schools located in rural areas and towns, with the largest redshirting increase during COVID-19 occurring in rural schools.

Figure 2. Redshirting rates were highest among boys, white students, low-poverty schools, and schools in rural/town areas



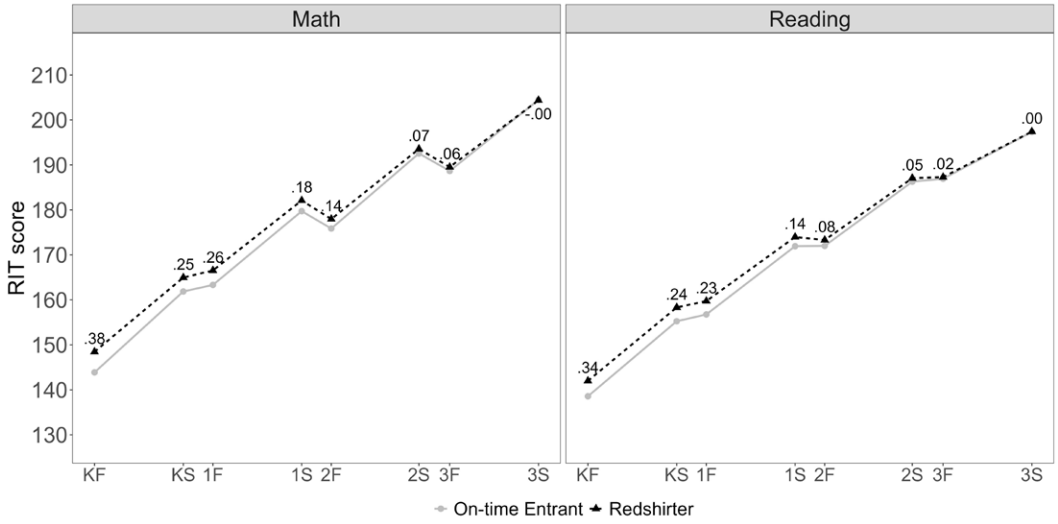
Note. Low-poverty schools had less than or equal to 25% FRPL eligibility, while high-poverty schools had greater than 75% FRPL eligibility.

Students who redshirt enter kindergarten ahead on average, but that advantage is gone by third grade

Finally, we examined whether redshirting confers lasting advantages. Figure 3 displays test score averages from fall kindergarten to spring of third grade for students who entered kindergarten in the 2021–22 school year.[2] On-time entrants' scores are shown in gray solid lines, while redshirters are shown in the black dashed line. In the fall of kindergarten, redshirters had a sizable advantage in test scores over on-time entrants (0.38 standard deviations [SDs] in math, 0.34 SDs in reading). Benchmarked against the expected average growth for students in kindergarten, these gaps represent between 20-30% of a year of learning. However, this advantage quickly fades as students move through school. By the end of third grade, on-time entrant peers have caught up to redshirters on average.

It is important to note that students who are redshirted differ across a number of dimensions from on-time entrants (as seen in Figure 2). Figure 3 shows descriptive differences between redshirted students and on-time entrants in one cohort; it does not establish that redshirting caused those differences. However, more rigorous studies that better isolate the effects of age at school entry show a similar pattern: early academic advantages tend to fade over time.

Figure 3. Redshirters enter school with a sizable test score advantage, but it fades by third grade



Note. Average RIT scores are presented for on-time entrants (solid line) and redshirters (dashed line) for kindergarten (2021–22 school year) through third grade (2024–25 school year). Standardized mean differences are shown next to each grade/term (with positive values indicating redshirters scoring above on-time entrants).

2 The 2021–22 school year had a higher rate of redshirters on average due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To see if results were sensitive to the year of school entry, we also replicated this analysis with the 2022–23 and 2023–24 kindergarten classes. Results are consistent (see the supplemental materials).

Recommendations for parents and educators

So what does all of this mean for families and the educators who advise them?

On the one hand, children who are redshirted tend to enter kindergarten with a noticeable academic edge. They are older, often more socially mature, and they score higher on math and reading tests at the start of school. For some children (particularly those with significant developmental delays or challenges with emotional regulation) an extra year may provide meaningful breathing room.

On the other hand, those early academic advantages[3] are short-lived. By third grade, on average, classmates who started on time have caught up. Meanwhile, delaying kindergarten can carry real costs, including an additional year of child care expenses and potential longer-term risks documented in other research, such as higher risks of dropout in high school and potentially lower lifetime earnings.

In short, redshirting is unlikely to produce lasting academic gains for most children. But it is also not a one-size-fits-all decision. The right choice depends on the child. Educators can play an important role by helping families weigh the evidence alongside what they know about a child's readiness, temperament, and specific needs. Decisions about kindergarten entry are rarely about test scores alone. They are about fit, timing, and the broader context of a child's development.

3 Some parents redshirt their students for reasons outside of academics, such as wanting to give their children an advantage in sports at a later age or more time to develop additional social or non-cognitive skills before school entry. This study cannot evaluate the potential effects of redshirting on these other domains.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Megan Kuhfeld is the director of growth modeling and analytics at NWEA. Her research seeks to understand students' academic and social-emotional trajectories and the school and neighborhood influences that promote optimal growth. Prior to joining NWEA, Megan also worked at Child Trends, the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and UCLA CRESST. Dr. Kuhfeld completed a doctorate in quantitative methods in education and a master's degree in statistics from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

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